

## Return of the Eagles by Roger Urbaniak

A group of five eagles circled far overhead near the entrance of the Yakima Canyon near Ellensburg. Thermals coming from the canyon made their ascent effortless and their flight seemed driven more from the pleasure of flight than the business of finding food this day. Traveling further into the canyon revealed seven more eagles circling overhead, surveying the Yakima River below. On this day nine were bald eagles and three were golden. At various points during our canyon trip, we would pull off to the shoulder just to observe and enjoy their almost effortless, yet seemingly joyous, flight.

Eagle numbers in the Canyon have been steadily increasing over the last ten years as salmon populating the Yakima River have increased. Occasionally we now see them nesting there. This was not always the case. In 1939 Yakima businessmen decided a diversion dam could help irrigate hundreds of farmable County land. After a few years of study, the diversion dam, now known as Rosa Dam was constructed along with miles of irrigation canals allowing farmers to tap into the precious water resource. As a result, both farming and orchards prospered throughout the County. Due to what is now considered a design oversight, the dam builders neglected to include a fish ladder in their plans. The Chinook salmon which once prospered in the Yakima River had to make do with spawning in the less desirable parts of the river below the dam, and the food chain of several birds and animals upstream of the dam suffered. Eagles began to migrate to other areas and a strange quiet descended over the Canyon.

In 1999 the Yakama Nation noticed that a few fish still returned to the base of Rosa Dam and decided to become involved in bringing the mighty King salmon back to the upper Yakima River. This was consistent with their heritage and designed to benefit of future generations. A major fish hatchery was constructed along the river in Cle Elum with satellite hatcheries at Jack Creek off the Teanaway River, Thorpe Creek, and the Cle Elum River. Surviving Chinook still with the instinct to go further up the river, were captured at the base of Rosa dam. Their eggs were used as the nucleus at the Cle Elum hatchery to develop future generations. Each year the fish were captured, studied, tagged, coded, and then ½ released above the dam and ½ used for reproductive purposes. After a few years, returning fish began laying their own eggs in chosen upstream locations where satellite hatcheries existed. Each fall dozens of returning salmon began digging redds in gravel river beds and producing their own offspring.

A few eagles began noticing the spent salmon floating down the river and feasted on them. The extra nourishment allowed eagles and osprey to raise more young. Today the canyon resonates with sound as both eagle and osprey bounce their joyous notes off the canyon walls. So successful has the reintroduction of the Chinook to the upper river been, that the Yakima Nation has recently embarked upon a program to bring Sockeye salmon back. Today a few of these fish are already starting to return.

Those who float the river in drift boats or just on inner tubes and rafts are happy for the new influx of life. A canyon that boasts bighorn sheep, wild turkey, plus abundant deer, now has both eagle and osprey circling overhead to show off nature's resilience and bounty. Mark taking a drive through the canyon on your calendar in late fall or winter when eagles are most abundant. A good dose of nature, now in balance with the environment, will be your reward.