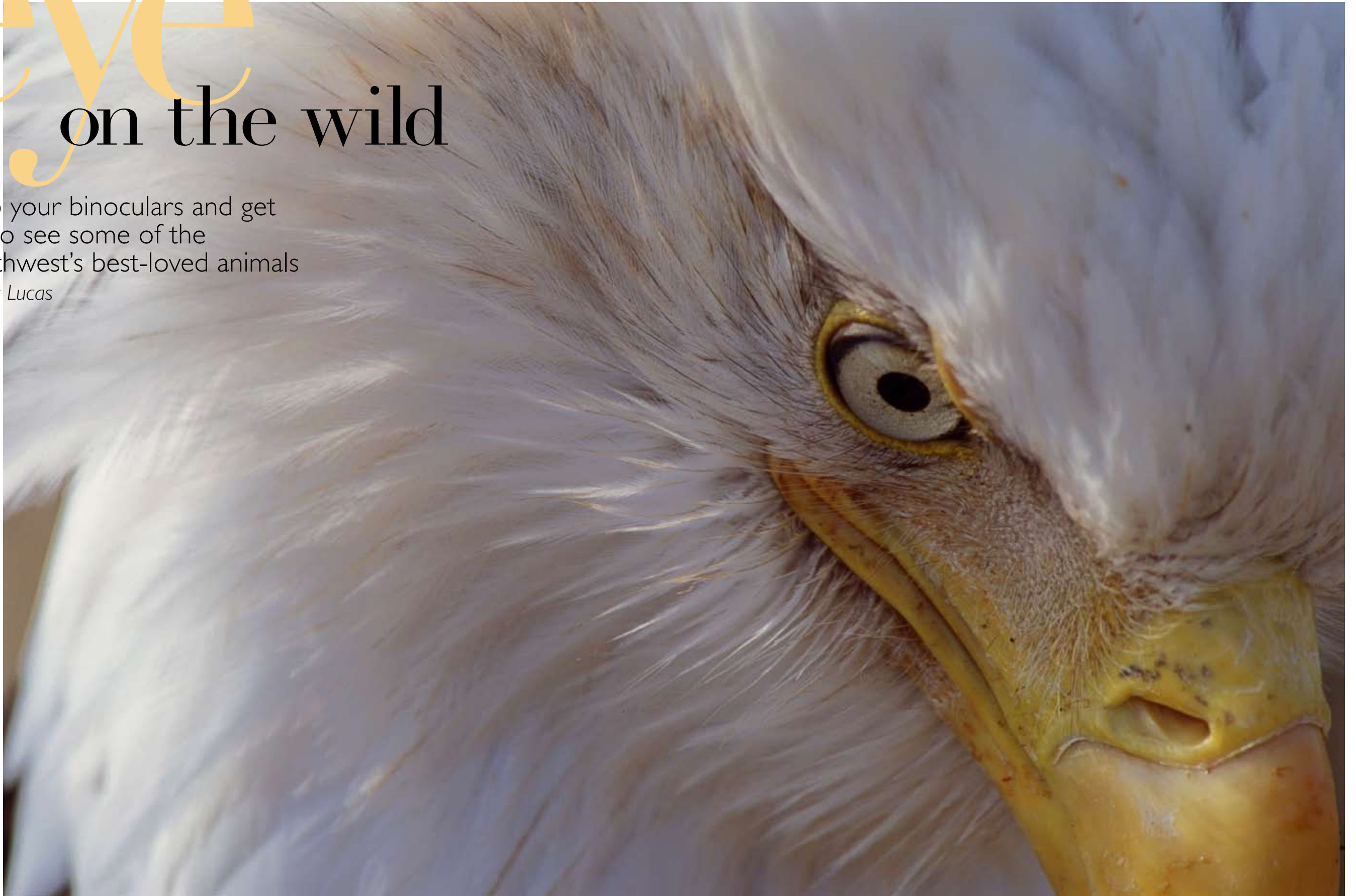


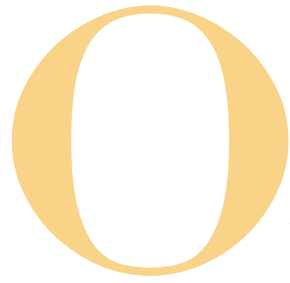
eye on the wild

Grab your binoculars and get out to see some of the Northwest's best-loved animals

By Eric Lucas



The American bald eagle: breathtaking in all its splendor.



ur safari's progress was blocked by wildlife. Pronghorn antelope, to be exact. We were departing a streamside picnic site at Hart Mountain, Ore., and the sandy track through the sagebrush was occupied by a pair of pronghorn bucks not inclined to cede the way. So we did just what safari tour guides in Africa do: put the truck in park, popped open the sunroof, and spent a few minutes gawking at the animals that were simultaneously, well, gawking at us.

The three of us—my wife, Leslie, stepdaughter Kirsten and I—took turns poking our heads through the roof to watch the antelope. They were close enough (less than 20 feet) that we could hear the chuffing snorts that expressed their opinion of our presence. The afternoon breeze sighed through the sage, lifting the dusty spice of its scent into the truck windows. Each of us took turns with the camera, and the memory of those moments will be with us all for a lifetime.

Wildlife watching is a national pastime that, according to advocacy groups, draws more than 71 million Americans each year. Northwest residents enjoy arguably better opportunities than people in any other region to see wild animals in their natural environment—we inhabit a diverse landscape with every temperate-latitude habitat possible, from desert to rainforest to alpine.

You don't even have to depart the city; Seattle residents, for instance, can easily see bald eagles, wild salmon, waterfowl, harbor seals and sea lions.

But the very best wildlife experiences take place out in the countryside where the animals are most at home, the environment enhances the experience considerably, and you can do yourself some good while you're at it. Please, get out of the car, go for a walk or paddle a kayak, have a picnic, camp by a mountain lake. The more that you do outdoors, whatever it is, the more animals you will see.



The Northwest offers wildlife watchers myriad opportunities to spy on animals (above)—just don't get too close. Roosevelt elk cows spar in the midst of a wintering herd (below).



PREVIOUS SPREAD: THOMAS D. MANGELSEN; TOP: THOMAS BARNICK/DIGITAL VISION/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: THAO SAMUELS/ABEL/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY IMAGES

While our car-borne encounter at Hart Mountain brought us remarkably close to those two pronghorns, we had also gone walking in the sage and saw them at a greater distance. After lunch, we strolled through the creekside aspens and saw a pair of Western tanager, the vivid crimson-yellow birds that are the most colorful avian species in the Northwest. Walking to a hot spring later in the day, we had seen bluebirds in the mountain meadow and deer grazing at the edge of the aspens. And before Kirsten took an afternoon nap in the grass by the campground stream, I showed her the rare, native redband rainbow trout

that inhabit it. "Cool," she said, and then dozed as soundly as any fawn, shaded by willows and serenaded by songbirds and creek-splash.

ANTELOPE: Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge in southeastern Oregon is home to the most notable U.S. herd of these remarkable, elegant creatures, which are the second-fastest on earth. They can reach up to 40 mph, easily matching speeds with visitors' cars, a sport they seem to like.

Hart Mountain is also an excellent place to see deer, rattlesnakes, coyotes, sage grouse and raptors ranging from majestic golden eagles to tiny, jetlike kites (falcons). Though it's open year-round, the refuge is cold and harsh in midwinter, and hot and dry in late summer. The best antelope viewing is in spring (late March and June; the latter month is also peak wildflower season) and September, when the aspens change color. It's a trek to reach this remote place, but visitors usually see antelope, not to mention the spectacular vistas of this corner of the Great Basin. Travel the region in June and you're bound to come upon a cattle drive along the highway—an iconic Western experience memorable in its own right.

ELK: When Mount St. Helens blew its top in 1980, it leveled the forest for miles around—thus creating an ideal habitat for Roosevelt elk, the magisterial ungulates that inhabit high-country parkland where meadows provide ample grazing. The herd is now the largest in Washington, at 10,000 animals, and visitors marvel at their numbers, size and apparent indifference to humans. Though simply driving the road into the national volcanic monument

DON'T SLAM THE DOOR: Tips for wildlife viewing

⇒ **Get a good wildlife guidebook.** Getting outdoors in the Northwest is certain to bring sightings of rarer creatures than deer, elk and the like. You'll need a guide to identify them: Was that a river otter or sea otter in the water near Port Angeles? Recommended guides: *Audubon Society's Pacific Coast* and *Western Forest* books. Each is comprehensive, from lichens to redwoods and insects to animals.

⇒ **Early morning and evening are best.** That's when animals are most active, though you can certainly see wild creatures at any time throughout the day.

⇒ **Start a life list.** Bird-watchers do this, of course, but why not maintain a list of all the animals you've seen? It heightens interest in wildlife watching, spurs greater research into wildlife ecology, and, well, it's fun.

⇒ **Silence is golden.** Don't slam the car door, turn the stereo off, talk in low tones and (unless you're in grizzly bear country) hike quietly. When wildlife watching from your car on a road, stay in the car when you first see animals; they usually tend to regard cars as nonthreatening.

⇒ **Don't feed them.** This bears repeating: Do not feed wild animals anything, ever. It's bad for them (their diets should not include people food) and it habituates them to people.

⇒ **Don't feed yourself to them.** Wild animals can be dangerous. Do not approach bears, deer, elk, coyotes, raccoons, rattlesnakes or anything of the sort—all of which injure numerous airheaded humans every year because the humans harass the animals. A respectful distance is not only the safe approach, it's the right approach. —E.L.

is bound to bring elk in view, keep your eye on the Toutle River Valley below. A hike into the valley also exposes you to the remarkable recovery nature has made in the quarter-century since the blast. Jasper National Park in Alberta, especially the road leading into Jasper, and Olympic National Park in western Washington, are also good places to see elk. Spring and late summer are the best viewing seasons; in September, the experience is magnified when bull elk begin bugling prior to their mating battles.

SALMON: Though almost every Pacific river north of San Francisco has a native salmon run, one of the very best places to watch migrating fish return from the ocean is at Seattle's Ballard Locks. The fish ladder at the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks (their formal name) has an underground viewing room that invariably shows king, coho and sockeye salmon from June through October. Visitors can also watch blue herons and

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(Start a life list. Bird-watchers do this, of course, but why not maintain a list of all the animals you've seen?)

the occasional raccoon just below the locks. That's an incontrovertibly urban experience; it's far more impressive to watch the salmon spawn once they reach their upriver birthing grounds. The best place for this in the Northwest—maybe the world—is the Adams River in British Columbia, near Kamloops, where a huge sockeye run returns every four years during the second and third weeks of October. With as many as 1 million crimson-and-green salmon quite visible, courting and mating in the clear, amber waters of the river, it's an experience that compels deep wonder at the miracle of life. Migrating and spawning salmon can also be seen in summer and fall at various viewing points along Issaquah Creek, the Soleduck River in Olympic National Park, and many tributaries of Washington's Skagit River.

WHALES: A visit to the western shore of San Juan Island in May, June, July or August is quite likely to yield a sighting of the orcas that inhabit the waters offshore. Stay on dry land and you'll not only save the steep cost of a whale-watching boat, you'll avoid disrupting the whales. Whales are often sighted from Washington State Ferry crossings to the San Juan Islands, and the BC

Ferries Inside Passage cruise from Port Hardy to Bella Coola or Prince Rupert almost always encounters humpback and killer whales, as well as dolphins.

BALD EAGLES: The sight of an eagle soaring high in the sky is iconic to the Northwest. It's also both breathtaking and heartening: America's national symbol has recovered from near extinction in the lower 48 states to very healthy status. Although eagles can be seen almost anywhere in Washington, Oregon and Idaho, the premier viewing experience takes place each winter when they gather by the hundreds at favored feeding grounds along the Skagit River in Washington; the Squamish River north of Vancouver, British Columbia; and in the Klamath basin in south-central Oregon near Klamath Falls. Each of these locales celebrates a winter eagle festival; peak season is December to February on the Skagit and Squamish, and January to March in the Klamath. Midmorning is the best time to see eagles along Northwest rivers, where they gather to feed on spawned-out salmon. Numerous tour operators offer float trips to see this, an experience that blends thrills and chills—dress warmly.

WILD HORSES: Wild horses are the epitome of the historic West, and the Yakama Nation near Toppenish, Wash., has one of the largest and healthiest herds in the Northwest. They can be easily seen on the east side of U.S. Highway 97 between Toppenish and Goldendale, grazing along the flanks of the ridge above the road. In fact, that's the only place to see them, as most of the Yakama Nation's land is closed to public access.

Wild horses are also a common sight on the southwest flanks of Steens Mountain, near Frenchglen, Ore.; and along the Bella Coola Road in British Columbia, west of Williams Lake. **■**

Eric Lucas is a widely published travel, natural history and business writer based in Seattle. His life list includes virtually every major North American mammal, except for wolverines and cougars.