

## Hunters in the Sky

By Yoke DiGiorgio

Known as one of the "fish" eagles, the bald eagle preys on fish, as well as, a wide variety of other animals including: water fowl, small mammals, and some reptiles. It also steals food from other birds and scavengers for carrion and scraps. This flexibility has allowed the bald eagle to live in a wide range of habitats.

But it is the bald eagles' sharp hunting skills, which my husband, John, and I have been able to observe first hand.

### **A Summer's Mid-Afternoon Catch:**

This past summer, while on one of our kayaking river trips looking for wildlife, we came upon a bald eagle fishing. Circling above us it suddenly folded its wings and dropped into a diving glide targeting prey below. When just inches from crashing into the water, the eagle extended its feet and talons to grab its prey. This time, however, the eagle did not lift up and carry its prey away. Instead, we observed it flapping its extended wings as if swimming. Apparently unable to fly and with much effort, it reached the bank of one of the small islands in the Big Eddy. We slowed our kayaks down and beached them along a nearby bank to give the eagle a comfortable distance.

Amazed, we watched it drag up, with one foot, the largest fish we had ever seen in the river. Eagles usually kill their prey with their feet. Each foot has four toes, three pointing to the front and one to the rear, ending with razor sharp black talons up to two inches long. Each foot can close with a powerful and deadly force. Eagles also have special pads on the soles of their feet, especially designed to firmly grip a slippery wriggling fish.

The bald eagle spent several minutes standing very still along the bank, almost as if it was resting. Finally, tearing at the fish with its sharp beak, it began to eat. The fish was so large however, it was only partially consumed. The eagle ultimately abandoned it and flew down river. We were never able to identify the species of fish due to the distance. I was, however, able to video much of the event from along side the bank. I had brought my video camera with me.



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### **Team Duck Hunting:**

More recently, we observed something we have never seen before.

A pair of common mergansers landed in the water directly in front of our house. Not an uncommon occurrence, as we have observed many more mergansers in the Big Eddy this past year. Out of nowhere, a bald eagle swooped down at the pair and flew back up and out over the Big Eddy. A second eagle came in from the opposite direction. It swooped down, its feet and talons extended, and grabbed the male merganser. With the male merganser still struggling in its talons, the eagle flew low over the water to the banks of one of the islands in the Big Eddy.

Mergansers are one of the largest species of ducks, weighing up to two and a half pounds. We were surprised that the eagle was even able to get air borne. Although the eagle attempted several times to fly up to a limb in a nearby tree, it never made it and remained on the ground. The male merganser continued to struggle. Difficult to watch, it was ultimately consumed within 15 minutes.

Since that time, we've observed that this pair of eagles has regularly begun to stalk the waterfowl in the Big Eddy. Perched on limbs in different trees, we observed them look and "talk" to each another, and take turns swooping down on the waterfowl below. We noticed that the waterfowl however, are more cautious now, diving under water in all directions should an eagle be flying overhead.