

Oregon Magazine

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Nature's Supercurious Brutality

By Stephen Shunk

A long day got longer as we headed north on the Point Reyes Peninsula. We all suffered from “scope-eye,” that strange affliction known to birders and photographers who spend inordinate amounts of time staring with one eye through a spotting scope or viewfinder. Afternoon birding can be slow, but we hoped a visit to Teal Pond would perk things up a bit. Maybe we would see Blue-winged Teal loafing at the water’s edge or Wilson’s Snipe probing the muddy shoreline.

Nature inspires awe differently for everyone. Most people experience an exaggerated jaw-drop when viewing the glacier-carved chasm of Yosemite Valley for the first time. Words like “spectacular” and “amazing” only begin to describe the scene. Some outdoor enthusiasts prefer a different type of interaction with nature, such as climbing the 3,000-foot wall of Yosemite’s El Capitan. Climbers who sleep in a cot hanging from El Capitan’s vertical face would certainly call the experience awesome. Wildlife viewing certainly offers its share of awesome spectacles. A breaching Humpback Whale or the flight of ten thousand Snow Geese definitely generates enthusiasm from fortunate onlookers. Few nature experiences, however, rival first-hand observation of a predator and its prey.

Flanked by the Pacific Ocean on one side and Tomales Bay on the other, the peninsula narrowed. The surrounding pastures glowed a rich kelly green. Birding at 50 miles-per-hour has its challenges, not the least of which is safety, but some observations, even from the corner of the eye, draw even the safest-driving birder’s fully turned head of attention. We were already edgy from too close an encounter with a California Quail that nearly ended its life on our bumper when we detected a distinctive commotion on our left. In what seemed like a split second, we realized we were in the presence of two eagles, not 100 yards from the roadside, and feathers were flying.



The predator-prey relationship may be the most brutal in nature. Small hunters take their meals largely unnoticed by humans, but the constricting force of a snake is no less impressive because of its relatively inconspicuous habits. Larger predators, on the other hand, quickly draw our attention when we enter their world. We fear the implied brutality of a bear or mountain lion, yet we are fascinated by their presence. People even pay for the experience of watching a Grizzly catch a ten-pound salmon in a waterfall and then proceed to rip it to shreds on the shoreline, brutally ending the fish's hard-fought quest to breed further

upstream. The sight of bloody salmon flesh hanging from its captor's mouth may at first seem gruesome, and yet we watch with intrigue.

We instantly pulled off the paved road and fixed our eyes on this scene of utter chaos in the adjacent pasture. Clouds of pure white feathers momentarily obscured the spectacle, but we knew immediately we had encountered the taking of some avian prey by two massive Golden Eagles. A distinctive cacophony and the agricultural setting helped paint the picture. These giant, formidable predators, which normally take rabbits and other medium-sized mammals, had hit the jackpot: a flock of unwary chickens.



One of the eagles soon flew off. We aged this individual as an immature bird by its white basal tail band and large white patches in the center of the wings. This bird launched empty-taloned from the emerald carpet, appearing to have failed in its effort to secure an easy meal. By now most of the chickens had reached their asylum, a half-cylindrical hut that served as their coop in the center of the pasture. Despite its flimsy appearance, the hut successfully served one of its primary purposes, preventing the entry of predators. Like any prey species, the chickens had to weigh the daily risk of death with the improved foraging away

from their shelter.

A single white rooster stood outside the entrance to the coop watching the remaining eagle just a few feet away. Anyone who has raised chickens knows that roosters can be very effective protectors of their flocks. This time, however, he had failed, as the predator tightly clutched one of his hens in its talons.



Most raptors, or birds of prey, are efficiency-driven opportunistic hunters. Due to its large size, the Golden Eagle in particular benefits by focussing its hunting efforts on sick, weak or inattentive prey. While a North American Golden Eagle's preferred prey species may be small mammals, such as rabbits or marmots, the species is known to predate upon game birds in Europe, such as partridge and grouse (Pfeffer 1985). Wild game birds likely have a leg up on domestic chickens in their ability to defend against predation. A curious Golden Eagle may interpret a large flock of white chickens feeding in a bright green pasture as a clear invitation.

The remaining eagle, an adult female, attempted to fly away with its prey. Encumbered by the extra weight, the bird succeeded in more of a one-legged hobble, with the chicken being held in the opposite talon. Once the eagle was about 30 feet from the initial point of contact, she decided the pasture would be an acceptable place to consume her meal. For a few minutes, white feathers again flew against the Pacific Ocean background as the eagle furiously plucked the chicken to expose its nutritious flesh. Considerable force is required for such an act, even when the bird is placed in boiling water first, as is suggested when preparing chickens for human consumption on the farm. The eagle easily exerted such force.

By now, our excitement during the initial attack had subsided and we enjoyed observing the ongoing process of prey preparation. We immersed ourselves in our nature experience. Suddenly, the eagle shifted its position, and the emboldened chicken escaped! After only a few feet of desperate running, the eagle bounced and again engaged the death grip. Amidst our gasping all we could think about was the experience of being plucked alive. We shared some empathy for the chicken.

The matriarch eagle returned to its ritual and eventually reached the chicken's flesh. Now, the rainbow of colors – the green pasture, the blue ocean and the white piles of feathers – included the bright red hue of freshly oxygenated blood. Like the grip of the eagle's talons, our morbid curiosity held us in place. At first, the eagle removed strips of what looked like skin, followed by evidence that the predator had reached the vital organs. Viscera hung from the eagle's powerful bill before being drawn up and into its crop. Almost as much noise came from our vehicle as did earlier from the chickens during the attack frenzy. We were free to leave any time. We stayed.

The ravens hopped around the scene at a safe distance, waiting their turn. Then, subject to our total disbelief, the eagle again shifted positions and the chicken took off running! After only a few more frantic feet of departure, albeit directly toward the coop, the eagle again effortlessly bounced back on its prey. By now the eagle's crop had grown quite distended, storing the meal for later digestion. We contemplated the bird's food capacity. If a single human has a hard time eating a single chicken, then a Golden Eagle must fill its crop fairly quickly. She continued to eat. Larger chunks of flesh left the now certainly deceased chicken and the eagle's crop continued to grow. It was clear that she was going to complete her meal for our pleasure rather than hauling the carcass to a more private venue.

By now, our anxiety surrounding the chicken's final cling to life had resolved into relief that the bird was finally dead. Or so we thought. One more time, like a human escaping a burning building, the chicken attempted retreat. At this point we were absolutely aghast. Everyone has heard of chickens with their heads cut off, but this was ridiculous. Was the eagle doing something wrong? Was this some sort of super-chicken? We had no answers, only open jaws. The eagle continued to indulge, and then, as quickly as it had tried to escape, the chicken's head and neck entered the spastic throws of death. With a completely distended crop, the eagle seemed to sigh (I know we did). She looked around a couple times, released her talons and flew off toward the hills below.

At least three piles of white feathers adorned the grassy pasture. The eagle now away from the scene, the ravens moved in to clean up. As we anticlimactically drove toward Teal Pond, we saw another pile of feathers down the hill. These eagles were opportunists indeed.

I have a friend who feeds birds in his yard to attract accipiters, stealthy bird-hunting raptors known as the Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks and the Northern Goshawk. Certainly this rancher raises chickens for some other purpose than feeding eagles. We would never know. Instead we would leave with a permanent memory of nature's supercurious brutality. "Spectacular" and "amazing" were words we repeated when recounting the event with each other. Despite all its gruesome detail, we were treated first-hand to one of nature's most awesome spectacles.

Source Cited *Pfeffer, Pierre, 1985. Predators and Predation: the Struggle for Life in the Animal World. Editions Balland; English translation, 1989. Facts on File, New York.*

-- Stephen Shunk

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