

**5** Adventurous *Winter Getaways*

# northwest

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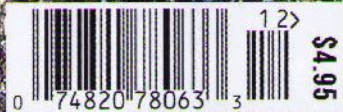
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## EAGLE-WATCHING ON THE NOOKSACK

by Allen Cox

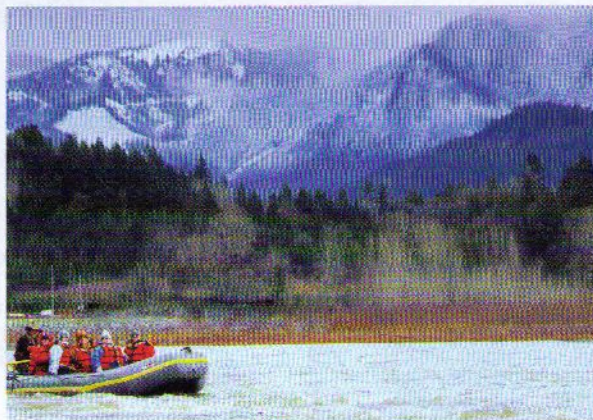
*Take a winter rafting trip down northwestern Washington's Nooksack River, where eagles gather to dine on spawning salmon.*

**B**eneath a bridge crossing on rural Whatcom County's Highway 9, where I and other eagle-spotting hopefuls lined up to take our positions in a pair of rafts, the Nooksack flowed like a wide, swift ribbon of molten steel. An occasional snag or boulder broke the otherwise smooth surface, but overall, the river promised a safe ride perfect for a rafting novice like me. David Button, our guide and the owner of Pacific NW Float Trips, has been a rafting guide on the Nooksack and the Skagit for decades—he's nearly as common a sight as the bald eagles we hoped to spot. Button instructed us on how to climb into the rafts without tumbling into the river and eyeballed each of us to make sure our life vests were snugly and properly strapped on. He boasts a perfect safety record and was not about to let us ruin it. The low December sky threatened rain, but we were layered, geared up, and ready to let the worst weather rip.

# EAGLE-WATCHING ON THE NOOKSACK

The frigid Nooksack springs from Mt. Baker glaciers and flows west on its short, serpentine route through Northern Washington before it becomes part of the Salish Sea. In summer, it's a playground for swimmers, tubers, and fishermen, but in winter it becomes a flood-swollen, storm-ravaged buffet for hungry eagles that flock here to pick off migrating salmon. With Button rowing one boat and veteran guide Shane Turnbull of Chinook Expeditions rowing the other, we quickly glided downstream, the valley floor climbing to foothills on each side and, above that, snow-capped Cascade peaks. We floated past deep forests, old homesteads, and devastating landslides from an autumn of near-record rainfall. Just past the first bend in the Nooksack, Button pointed up to the trees on the right bank. In a treetop perched a juvenile, not yet adorned with the bald eagle's characteristic white head. "It takes five years for an eagle to mature and get its adult plumage," Button explained. Soon we were all spotting eagles, left and right. We had floated right into a thick of them. Their tolerance level of humans proved to be about 50 feet, giving us close-up views of their immense size and fierce expressions. Then they'd take off, displaying their six- to seven-foot wingspans. Wild doesn't get much wilder than Western Washington's

northernmost river. Button has called the rivers of Northwest Washington home all his life. He began rafting as a youth, and over time, has acquired an insider's knowledge of navigating the rivers in every season, as well as the flora, fauna, and history



of the area. He was the first commercial rafting operator in Washington, and has since gone on to train and mentor many of the state's rafting guides. As a naturalist, he thrives on eco-touring rather than whitewater thrills, sharing his knowledge along the way and answering any questions inquisitive guests toss across the raft.

We attempted an eagle count, a difficult task given that they were flying downriver once we got too close. We were never sure whether we were spotting the same eagles multiple times, but estimated we ended the trip having spotted approximately 100 eagles.

Near the end of the tour, our guides rowed the rafts to a wide rock beach. We climbed out to stretch our legs while Button

and Turnbull tended to riverside hospitality. Sooner than you could skip a rock, they built a roaring fire out of driftwood. We enjoyed a campfire snack of hot chocolate, apple cider, home-smoked salmon, and cheese and crackers. Light sprinkles began to fall and the warmth of a fireside never felt so good.

"It was a good day for eagles," Button said, "but there have been days when I've seen many more in a short stretch of this river." That's one way to keep your guests coming back. The Nooksack has been set aside as an eagle sanctuary.

In the winter feeding season, restrictions limit the number of float tour operators, so crowds are never a problem. This magnificent corner of Washington belongs to the eagles and those who come here to marvel at and respect their presence. ■

## WHEN YOU GO

**Tour:** To reserve your spot on a Nooksack or Skagit River eagle-watching tour, contact:  
**Pacific NW Float Trips**  
866-967-8555  
[www.pacificnwfloattrips.com](http://www.pacificnwfloattrips.com)

**Lodging:** Silver Reef Casino, Hotel and Spa  
in Ferndale is the best bet for lodging near the float trip rendezvous point at Nugent's Corner on Mt. Baker Hwy.  
866-383-0775  
[www.silverreefcasino.com](http://www.silverreefcasino.com)

**Travel Tips:** For more information about visiting Whatcom County, visit  
[www.bellingham.org](http://www.bellingham.org)