



WHERE EAGLES GATHER



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THE STORY OF THE ALASKA CHILKAT BALD EAGLE PRESERVE

Haines, Alaska

JOE ORDÓÑEZ

This book is dedicated to the memory of my friend Norm Blank,
whose positive presence promoted a pure and healthy Chilkat Valley.

FRONT COVER *Two eagles lock talons in a battle over a fish. The eagle on the bottom was eating the fish. When the other eagle approached, the eagle on the fish flipped over and reached out to fend off the attack.*

PREVIOUS PAGE *Fog and clouds lift off the Chilkat Summit, exposing the peaks and valleys of the Klehini and Kelsall Rivers' headwaters.*

OPPOSITE *Fall colors enliven views from Mosquito Lake State Park and Campground, located in the preserve. Large numbers of black cottonwood, birch, and other hardwood trees give Haines and the preserve some of the best fall foliage in the State of Alaska.*

INSIDE BACK COVER *Northern lights brighten up the sky above Swan View Cabin in the preserve.*

BACK COVER *With wings flared and talons forward, an eagle prepares for a landing.*





The Takhinsha Mountains provide a stunning backdrop to a bald eagle in flight in the Bald Eagle Preserve Council Grounds.

Foreword

THE FUTURE *of the* EAGLES

Senator Gary Hart

Lupines, members of the pea family, grace the gravel bars along rivers in the preserve.

These plants have the ability to colonize areas where soil is low in nitrogen.



A phrase usually used to describe rare political leaders—"charismatic"—is sometimes applied to extraordinary animals. Lions are often described as charismatic. And in the world of birds, few would dispute the use of the word to describe the American bald eagle.

The largest congregation of bald eagles in the world occurs outside Haines, Alaska, where every November upwards of 3,600 of the magnificent creatures feed on salmon run from the Chilkat and Chilkoot Rivers. The area is the 48,000-acre Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, and the author of this book, Joe Ordóñez, knows as much about the preserve and the eagles drawn to it as anyone around.

Though not native to Alaska, I grew up enthralled by pictures and films of the bald eagle. And in 1979 and 1980, as a United States Senator representing the State of Colorado, I participated in the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act that set aside more than 100 million acres of unspoiled Alaska lands in the National Park system and National Wildlife Preserve system. As one of the principal sponsors of this legislation in the Senate and an active participant

in the debate leading up to its successful passage, my greatest focus was on the Chilkat area and the preservation of a national bald eagle sanctuary.

In the hotly contested struggle leading to the final passage of the Act in November 1980, a comprehensive compromise with State of Alaska interests led to the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve being protected by the State of Alaska and therefore excluded from the areas to be protected by the United States government.

After years of hoping one day to get to Haines and see the preserve, the opportunity arose in 2010 when my wife, Lee, and I started a tour of Alaska's Inside Passage by going to Haines to see the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve. Those who have had the opportunity to visit extraordinary areas of the world with an expert guide know the characteristics he or she must possess: knowledge of the area; knowledge of the creatures of the land, water, and air to be seen; and a love of the natural habitat. Joe Ordóñez possesses all these qualities and more—he is a world-class photographer—and it is



difficult to imagine experiencing the Chilkat region without his companionship.

As this brief but comprehensive work demonstrates, Joe has that almost spiritual relationship with nature required of those who want to introduce it to others but, even more importantly, preserve it for our children and future generations. The forces of development, and too often exploitation, have countless promoters on their payrolls. The more humble cohort of preservationists conducts their mission out of reverence for nature, not out of desire for money.

Once again, the Chilkat River watershed is under pressure from proposed mining, the kind of development that could quickly and easily deny the great eagles their unique place of assembly. There are many places to build highways

and procure minerals. Other unique places for the great eagles to collect each year may not exist.

There are countless arenas where we will determine whether irreplaceable nature and nature's wildlife or the consumer culture will prevail in the twenty-first century. The Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve is at the top of the list. And the eagles are supremely fortunate to have Joe Ordóñez on their side.

—Gary Hart

ABOVE *The contrasting white and dark plumage of the bald eagle is unmistakable.*

OPPOSITE *The setting moon silhouettes an eagle as the sun rises on a crisp November morning in the Bald Eagle Preserve Council Grounds.*







RIGHT Two trumpeter swans and a merganser float beneath the fog on the Chilkat River.

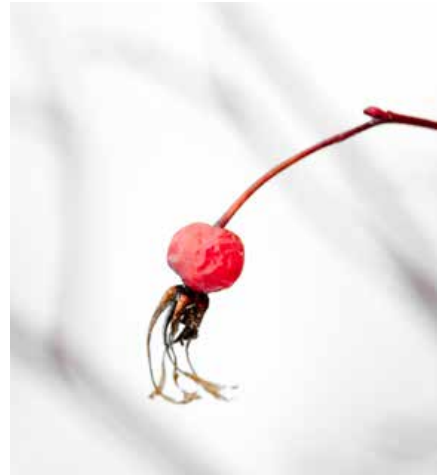
ABOVE Freeze-thaw cycles are typical in the fall in the Chilkat Valley, leading to scenes like this one of ice, water, clouds, and mountains.

OPPOSITE As the sun breaks the horizon, the ice closes in on a last remaining section of open water along the river's shore.





ABOVE LEFT The red branches of the red-osier dogwood are encased in ice during the first big freeze of the year along Chilkat Inlet.



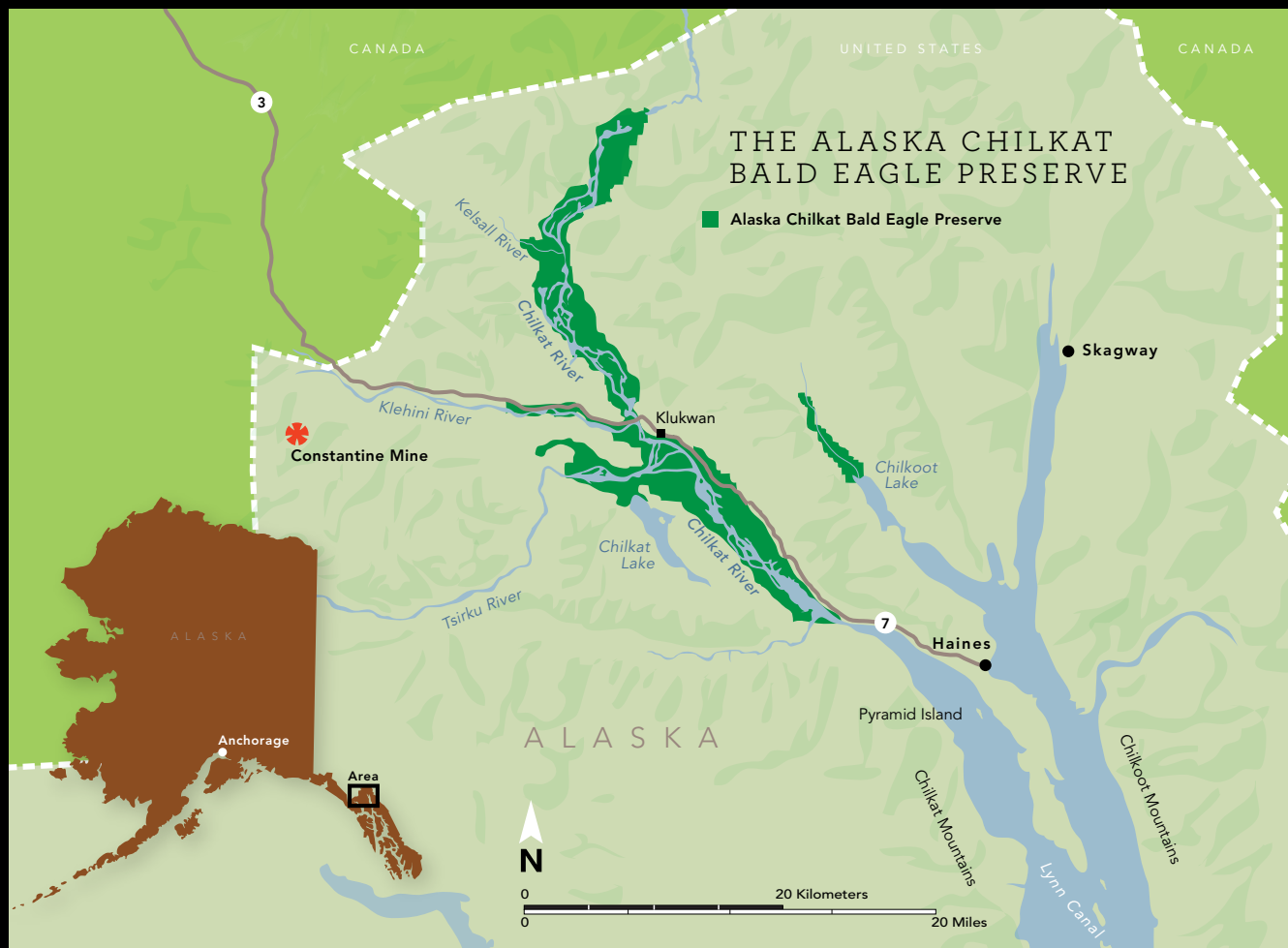
ABOVE RIGHT The rose hip, fruit of the wild rose, forms after the fragrant petals of the flowers have dropped off. This fruit is high in Vitamin C and is best harvested after the first frost.

RIGHT Hoarfrost crystals incrementally increase in size during extended periods of cold weather. This crystal formed on the tip of an alder bud.



OPPOSITE The first signs of winter are apparent as they come to Mosquito Lake: snow down to the lake level, and the start of lake ice.





The 48,000 acre (19,420 hectare) Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve is the site of the largest concentration of bald eagles in the world.

FROM FJORD *to* PHILISOPHICAL FIGHT *to* FESTIVAL

The Story of the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve

Bald eagles use a variety of vocalizations to communicate.

Described as a combination of chirp and whistle, bald eagle vocalizations have not been thoroughly studied and are little understood.



In the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, one can stand along the shores of a pristine river and watch hundreds upon hundreds of bald eagles. It's the largest gathering of these magnificent birds on earth. The combination of wildlife, rivers, valleys, mountains, and glaciers is spectacular and breathtaking.

A unique combination of natural and human forces created what is now known as the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve. Sections of the Chilkat River remain ice-free even in the most frigid winter temperatures. As an adaptation to this unique hydrologic phenomenon, an unusually large and late run of salmon spawns in these ice-free waters from November into January. Every year, bald eagles migrate from

hundreds of miles away to take advantage of this late-season food source. Where the eagles gather is also the traditional home of the Chilkat tribe of the Tlingit people. The Chilkats have lived for centuries in harmony with the land and the eagles. As new settlers arrived and industrial-scale development threatened the eagles, a broad spectrum of people worked together to set aside and protect this unique area. Conflicts continue and new chapters are being written.

Natural History

Bordering Southeast Alaska are mountains shrouded in moisture coming off the Pacific Ocean. As the moisture hits the mountains, heavy snowfall results. Year after year, more snow falls than melts away in the summer, and the snow-pack gets deeper. When the snow reaches a critical depth, tremendous pressure forces the ice crystals near the bottom