

In the eye of the eagle

From strict Catholic school to adventures in rainforests

"A slow, tacking flight: float then flap. Then a pirouette and it has swung on to a different tack, following another seam through the moor as if it is tracking a scent. It is like a disembodied spirit searching for its host..." — description of the strongest of all harriers, the goshawk, by James Macdonald Lockhart in his book, "Raptor: A Journey Through Birds"

We're watching a female red-tail hawk rejecting the smaller male's romantic overtures barely 50 yards overhead.

"There it is. Ahh, the male has full extension. So does his girlfriend. I see this every day from here. This courting ritual . . . testing each other's loyalty. Watching them in a talon lock, spiraling down, now that's an amazing sight."

I'm with Chris Hatten on his 10 acres overlooking the Siletz ecosystem on a gravel road. Saying he lives for that typical red-tail hawk behavior would be an

understatement. His passion for raptors has taken him to many parts of the globe, and those trips involved exhilaration, danger, risks to his life and the trials and tribulations of living primitively in tropical zones which Westerners sometimes deridingly call undeveloped countries or third world nations.

We are traipsing around his property where Chris is 90 percent finished with a two-story 1,400-square-foot home, a modern efficient house he has been building for two years from a kit out of Lynnwood, Washington.

He told me he'll never do that again — building a full-sized house.

The 42-year-old Hatten got a hold of my name when he found out I write about Oregon coastal people with compellingly interesting lives. He is in the midst of witnessing adjoining land (more than a hundred acres) to his property about to be clear-cut — forested hillside owned by Hancock Timber Resource Group, part of John Hancock Insurance (now owned by a Canadian group, Manulife Financial).

When he first bought the land eight

years ago, representatives of Hancock told him that the company had so much timberland it would take years, maybe a decade, to get to this piece of property.

We discuss how Lincoln City and Lincoln County might prevent a clear cut from the side of the hill all the way down to Highway 101. "It's amazing to witness in this coastal area — that depends on tourism — all this land clear-cut as far as the eye can see."

The red-tail hawk pair circles above us again, while a Merlin flits about alighting on a big Doug fir.

When he first saw the property — an old homestead which was once a producing dairy farm — Chris said two eagles cawed above where he was standing, which for a birdman is a positive omen and spiritual sign of good health. He calls his place "The Double-Eagle."

Non-traditional student backpacks into jungles

He's not living in the house per se, but rather he has a tent he calls home. "I feel suffocated inside four walls. I want to hear animals, hear the wind, be on the ground." He's hoping to rent out the house.

His current kip is setup near a black bear den, where mother bruin and her two cubs share an area he is willing to stay away from. "The mother bear and I have an understanding. We don't bother each other."

He's part Doctor Dolittle, part Jim Fowler (from Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom) and part John Muir. My own intersections with blokes and women around the world like him have put me eye-to-eye with pygmy elephants in Vietnam, great hammerheads off Baja, king cobras in Thailand, schools of barracudas off Honduras, and a pack of 20 javelina chasing me along the Arizona-Mexico border.

Hatten's wildlife adventures indeed take it up a few notches.

"When I finished high school, I wanted to follow my dreams." That was at Saint Mary's in Salem, a school that was so constricting to Chris he had already been saving up dollars for a one-way ticket out of the country.

He had started working young — aged eight — picking zucchini and broccoli in fields near where his family of six lived.



UNKNOWN

Chris in Panama with a harpy eagle, blind in one eye, that could not be released back into the wild.

"You feel invincible when you are young. You're also more adaptable and more resilient."

He ended up in Malaysia, which then turned into trekking throughout Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, East Timor and even down south to Darwin, Australia.

Those two years, from age 17 to 19, are enough to fill two thick memoirs. Upon returning to Salem, he applied to the National Park Service and bought a one-way ticket to Alaska, working the trails in small groups who lived in tents and cleared trails with 19-Century equipment — saws, shovels, picks, pry bars.

With his cash stake growing, he headed back south, by mountain bike, along the Prudhoe-Dalton Highway. He hit Prince George, Vancouver Island and stopped in the Olympics.

He then worked summers and attended Chemeketa College in Salem.

Homeless-but-inspired at Evergreen State College

He wanted to study temperate rainforests, so he showed up unannounced hoping for an audience with a well-known scientist and faculty member — Dr. Nalini Nadkarni, who is an expert in temperate forests and sap maples. Chris had read the book she co-authored, "Forest Canopies."

Before showing up to Evergreen, Chris had developed a sling-shot contraption to propel ropes into forest canopy. He

barged into Nadkarni's office with his invention. She was surprised Chris wasn't already student, but she quickly made sure he enrolled in the environmental studies program.

Spending his last dollar on tuition, Chris resorted to sleeping in a tent and inside his 1988 Honda Civic while using campus rec department showers. He told me he received free produce on Tuesdays when the farmers market would pass out vegetables and fruit after a day's sales.

Another faculty member, Dr. Steve Herman, motivated Chris to really delve into ornithology. He recalls coastal dune ecology trips, from Olympia in motor pool vans, all the way into the southern reaches of Baja. "We looked at every dune system from Baja all the way back north to Florence."

The ornithologist Herman was also a tango aficionado, and Chris recalled the professor announcing to his students many times, in the middle of dunes in Mexico, it was time for some tango lessons. "He told us there was more to life than just science."

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Paul Haeder is a writer living and working in Lincoln County. He has two books coming out, one a short story collection, "Wide Open Eyes: Surfacing from Vietnam," and a non-fiction book, "No More Messing Around: The Good, Bad and Ugly of America's Education System."

