



RAPTORS REIGN OVER KING TIDES ON PENINSULA



Madeline Kalbach
This bald eagle was
on the hunt for an
injured or slow bird.

When the fields flood, predators and prey meet

By MADELINE KALBACH
For Chinook Observer

This has been the first year I have been able to witness the phenomenon known as “king tides” and the possible effects on birds.

King tides are higher than our average high tides. According to University of Washington researchers, tidal height is determined by various factors, such as astronomical circumstances, weather and topography. (For more details, see tinyurl.com/King-Tides-Calendar.)

It seems we had weather for a week or so in December that contributed to higher-than-normal tides in our area. The northern end of the Long Beach Peninsula on Willapa Bay experienced tides that were in the 12-plus-foot range for several days. Many of us were living on the edge of a lake.

The high tides caused the wetlands and fields along the shore of Willapa Bay to flood, and with the high water came waterfowl, shorebirds and raptors. Four bald eagles took up residence out front in the tall conifers, from which they focused on the waterfowl, shorebirds and in some cases gulls.

For several days, ducks — such as green-winged teal, northern pintail, American wigeon and mallards — were busy feeding in the high water of the wetlands and fields. Shorebirds were resting and feeding, too. Northern harriers, bald eagles, red-tailed hawks, a peregrine falcon and American kestrels patrolled one particular field, often scaring the flocks into flying up in a frenzy.

A peregrine falcon and one bald eagle succeeded in grabbing a Christmas treat. The bald eagle came out of nowhere, flying low and swiftly, and then dropped quickly out of sight. In a mere moment it rose up carrying a male northern pintail in its sharp talons. It settled on a piling some distance away to enjoy the results of its successful hunt.

On another day, a young peregrine falcon tried its luck. It must have been the same bird I wrote about recently that tried unsuccessfully to snag a rock pigeon out of the air at the Port of Peninsula. After several attempts, it succeeded in plucking a gull from the wet, lake-like area of a field. It was simply too slow for the speedy falcon. Raptors aren't always successful in their quest for a meal, but perhaps practice makes perfect, as I am sure it did for the juvenile falcon.

Now that the tides have become lower, the wetlands and fields of the north end of the Peninsula have returned to their usual state at this time of year. The raptors are still patrolling, but the large numbers of ducks, shorebirds and gulls are gone from the wetlands and fields. They are not congregating in large numbers like they did when the tide was high. They have gone elsewhere to feed.

This has been an exciting few weeks for observing bird behavior. For raptors, it is speed, agility and accuracy that helps determine its next meal. Keep an eye on the fields when they flood. Look for the waterfowl, shorebirds and gulls there. They may come in to feed and rest. You may witness firsthand the raptors of the Peninsula in action.



Madeline Kalbach
Nearly finished.
Good to the last bite!



Susan Stauffer
Dinner is served! It's a northern pintail — a bird that appeared to be slow on the draw.



The chase is on: A peregrine falcon hunts along the shore.

Susan Stauffer