



The nomadic life among Kazakh eagle hunters



Photos by Sara Donahue

AIKUSH, a 5-year-old Kazakh eagle huntress, with an eagle (at top); below from left are some curious camels, one of many feasts enjoyed on the journey, a milking session, and the van that was "home sweet home" during Donahue's six-month trek through Mongolia.

By **KYLE DONAHUE**
For the Hood River News

With bellies full of yak butter milk tea, boursaki (fried dough), and an assortment of fresh dairy products, my family and I followed Aikush, the 5-year-old Kazakh eagle huntress, out of the Mongolian ger.

After the warmth inside, the late summer sun didn't do much to heat the high elevation steppe, an icy wind cut down the valley with the Russian border and Siberia not far away.

Rahymbek, the father, and one of the few traditional eagle hunters left in the world followed us out. He was eager to share his lifestyle and home with anyone brave enough to venture this far into the immense countryside of the least densely populated country in the world.

Aikush ran ahead to the larger of her father's two golden eagles. The bird was sitting on a rock, the lone perch in the massive glacially carved valley. With a thin cord loosely tied around its ankle, it was totally relaxed watching

a group of strangers walk up to it.

Kazakh eagle hunters capture their birds as chicks, training them to hunt when they are young and release them after five years so that

'We took turns putting on a glove and holding the massive bird, its strength apparent as its wings swept at the air, uncomfortable beneath our trembling arms.'

they can live out the rest of their 30-year lives as free animals. Aikush fearlessly walked up to the bird and stroked its head, staring into its amber eyes.

Rahymbek, who had yet to be put off by our lack of a common language, retold

the tale of how he had captured this bird, how he had trained it and many others, and how he would soon let it go. I had heard the story a few times in the presence of a translator and was able to recall enough of it to recount it to my family, his excited gestures jogging my memory any time there was a piece missing.

It didn't take an understanding of the Kazakh language to see how proud he was of his bird, his family, his animals, and his epic, movie-worthy life on the edge of the Mongolian steppes, the Altai mountains jutting up behind us. We took turns putting on a glove and holding the massive bird, its strength apparent as its wings swept at the air, uncomfortable beneath our trembling arms.

As we continued the tour of the valley Rahymbek talked to us, while his children did chores at a pace that suggested there wouldn't be any TV-watching when

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KYLE Donahue holds a golden eagle.

BACKGROUNDER

Kyle Donahue

Kyle Donahue, a 2008 Hood River Valley High School graduate, lived and traveled in the east Asian nation of Mongolia for six months. The former communist nation was claimed by China from 1945-60; in 1960, it gained independence. The People's Republic of Mongolia ceased to exist in 1990, the year the country gained democratization. Kyle worked leading adventure/education tours for high school students from abroad and then traveled around the country on his own. He also wrote Hood River News Kaleidoscopes on his experiences in Paraguay in 2018 and Panama in 2017. His parents, Tim and Jenni Donahue, and sister Sara (who took the photos) visited him in Mongolia. Kyle is now living in Parkdale and working ski patrol at Mt. Hood Meadows. He will give a presentation of his time in Mongolia on Jan. 17 at the Mount Hood Town Hall at 6:30 p.m.