

Book review

The Bald Eagle “the improbable journey of America’s Bird” byd Jack E. Davis, Liverlight Pub. 2022

My wife gave me this book as a present because we enjoy watching the eagles on Turtle Lake. As I began reading, it became apparent that the book was much more than tracing the history of the bald eagle in the U.S. It was a journey through the history of our nation on many levels, including our regard for nature, environment and the threats that have accrued throughout that history.

That is why I’m recommending this book even though the main subject matter is not climate change or environmental issues. But they do crop up in interesting ways. The bald eagle became the national symbol early on during the Revolutionary War, but was also seen as a nuisance and threat to livestock, and therefore carried a bounty in many places, especially Alaska where thousands were shot.

As the bird became protected, such as the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940, steps continued to be taken to protect predatory birds like Eagles, from poisoning, shooting, and capture. The bald eagle came close to extinction twice, from predation, then from DDT poisoning. The author also details the relationship between the bald eagle and Native American cultures, fascinating in itself.

But for those interested in Climate change topics, there is a section of the book that outlines the near demise of eagles and the environmental damage from things like DDT. The eventually ban on DDT was hastened by Rachel Carson’s book, Silent Spring, 1962. Much of her research on the problems of the pesticide involved observing the deadly effects on migratory birds, including the bald eagle. Other evidence against DDT came when bees were dying, causing pollinating plants to die or go dormant, and finally its relationship to cancer in human beings. Davis also recounts the impetus for the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970. “A flaming river and greasy sea, the fetid and decaying environments where people lived, played and worked – they were all too much. ‘The plundered, rotting human habitat,’ writes historian, J. Brooks Flippen, turned a ‘concerned public into an activist one.”

Along the way in the book there are many personal stories of people involved in helping educate the public on the bald eagle and those who went to amazing lengths and personal sacrifice to ensure the preservation of the national symbol.

In the epilogue Davis concludes with this: “Bald eagles have become a guide, as Telia Hann’s mother described to her son, for paying attention to the physical world, it nuances, its sublimity, and the history within it, to see the world as a moral universe and to form an ethical and emotional tie with it – to move beyond a purely sensory awareness to live, from deep within, in kinship with bald eagles, as native people have.” Amen to that.

Pastor John Hanson