

***THE GIRL WHO TALKS TO EAGLES***

**By Brian Wrixon**

It was July and the great Naadam Festival was drawing to a close in Mongolia's capital Ulaanbaatar. The winners had been determined in the three national level sports – wrestling, archery and horse racing. All that remained now for the thousands of excited spectators was the elaborate closing ceremony. One more event and the annual party would be over, though its effects would no doubt be felt by many for days. Special meals and gallons of vodka had been the order of the day while everyone took a week off to celebrate Naadam.

Jaran was looking forward to getting back to her office at the National University of Mongolia when it reopened after the holiday. The newly minted PhD was an undergraduate lecturer and researcher in the Department of Biology at the university. She had done her dissertation on the effects of modernization and industrialization on Mongolia's golden eagle population. Desertification caused by climate change and the loss of habitat caused by the encroachment of the mining and forestry industries were playing havoc with the country's eagles efforts to thrive and survive. Jaran was dedicated to the task and was already making quite a name for herself as one of the country's leading experts on golden eagles.

The relationship between Mongols and their eagles went back for centuries. Young eaglets were taken from their nests at an early age and raised in captivity by nomadic herdsman. Usually it was the females that were taken because they grew much larger than their male counterparts, often weighing over 15 pounds with a wingspan of up to eight feet. The eagles were trained to be hunters and it was always a magnificent sight to see a fully grown bird perched on a mounted nomad's well-protected arm. The regal bird was allowed to fly freely and in due course returned to its keeper with its prey clutched firmly in its talons. When the eagle reached four years old the herdsman released it back into the wild so that it would mate and raise its own offspring. A butchered sheep would be left for it on a hillside as a final farewell. Jaran's father had raised a number of eagles over the years. Eagles had always been a part of her growing up and this is where she got the initial motivation to pursue her line of study as a scientist.

Jaran checked back at her office when the university reopened and since she had no classes to teach during the summer break, she decided to make another field visit to follow up on one of the eagle families that she was studying. This particular family was nesting in the crossbars of a transmission tower along the highway not far from the capital Ulaanbaatar. The female was raising two eaglets in the nest. Sadly the male had been killed accidentally when it dove into some power lines chasing a pigeon. Just one more example of the devastating effects that modernization can have on wildlife Jaran had noted. She parked the university's 4x4 at the side of the road and made the short hike to the tower. From a distance she could hear the two eaglets screaming in the nest high overhead. There at the foot of the tower she discovered the body of the mother bird. A quick examination showed that the eagle had been shot, most likely by a drunken Naadam reveler. Who else could have done such a nasty deed? Jaran wept as she gazed upon the bird's magnificence, now cold and still in death.

She returned to the 4x4 and secured two small cages and a long length of rope. Back at the foot of the transmission tower she tied one end of the rope to the handle of one of the cages and then started to climb up the ladder of the tower. It was a long and difficult climb but Jaran knew what had to be done. When she reached the nest she hauled the cage up to where she stood on the ladder. She put on a thick protective leather glove, and bracing herself against the cross-tree, she reached inside the nest to grab one of the eaglets. Thankfully they were both remarkably still because otherwise Jaran could picture herself losing her balance while struggling with the eaglets and falling from a great height. She successfully transferred the first eaglet to the cage and carefully lowered it to the ground. When it was safely below, she tied her end of the rope to the tower near the nest and then descended the ladder. At the bottom of the tower she untied the rope from the first cage and attached it to the second one. She then started back up the ladder to repeat the same process all over again. Finally she had both eaglets safely caged and back on the ground and then returned to where the mother's body lay. She folded its wings around its body and carried it to a rocky outcropping nearby. She laid the eagle's body on a large rock and said a short prayer, asking Tenger to welcome the bird's spirit back into the heavens. It was better to

leave the eagle's body out in the open for the elements to take care of, rather than to bury it. Mongolian tradition dictated that digging a hole in the ground would be a violation of the sacredness of the land. Jaran could think of only one place to take the two orphaned eaglets – to her father at the family's ger. She stopped at her apartment in Ulaanbaatar to pick up a few things and called the university to tell them what she had found and where she was going. It was an hour's drive to her family's summer encampment, which had been chosen because of the richness of its pasturage. Their livestock holdings consisted of a considerable stock of sheep and cattle as well as a number of horses.

Though Jaran had moved to the city a number of years before for school and work, her family, like almost 50% of the country's population, still preferred the nomadic way of life. But just like the eagles, climate and environmental changes were affecting humans as well. More and more people were leaving the land for various reasons and flocking to the city in search of better lives. Rarely were they successful however. Ulaanbaatar itself was now home to a sprawling and dangerous ger district that did not have the infrastructure to cope with its huge influx of new inhabitants. The lack of policing, water, sewage and garbage disposal and electricity made conditions deplorable and most people soon came to the realization that they may have been better off had they stayed on the land. But having previously disposed of their flocks, their rush to the city had been a one way journey.

Jaran's parents were delighted and surprised to see her drive up. Her thirteen year old sister Taban was on horseback about a mile away and galloped back to the ger when she saw the 4x4 making its way along the rutted road in the distance. She arrived not long after her sister and leaped from her horse into Jaran's arms. Her big sister was her special hero and she loved her dearly. She vowed to one day follow in her footsteps, to study at the university and also to become a scientist. Jaran explained why she was there and opened the back hatch of the vehicle to reveal the two cages that had been tied down for safety. She undid the ropes and removed the cages from the truck. Jaran's father put on a pair of thick leather gloves and opened one of the cages. He very expertly reached in and removed the first eaglet. He held its talons with one hand

and with the other he gently held the back of the young bird's head. The eagle squirmed and tried to bite his fingers but they were protected by the thick glove. He laughed and turning the eagle over, declared that the bird was a feisty female. That brought a hearty laugh from the two girls and their mother. He placed the eaglet back in its cage and then opened the other one.

The second bird was smaller and much more docile and the experienced eagle trainer looked at it carefully. He turned to his daughter and spoke, "Jaran, I am sorry to tell you but this eaglet is blind. Its eyes are completely clouded over and it will never survive. It is a miracle that it lasted this long." Jaran had not noticed the bird's condition when she rescued it from the tower. She had been more concerned about getting it into the cage without falling from the nesting site. She had noticed that the one bird was smaller than the other but had not examined it closely. She realized now that the blind bird had not been as capable of demanding food from its mother as its much healthier sibling. The girl's father said that the only right thing to do would be to return the eaglet's spirit to Tenger. With tears in their eyes they both nodded approval. Their father took the bird to a spot behind the ger and returned in a few moments saying, "It is done. Later I will take the young one to the hillside where its spirit can soar to the heavens to join its mother and father. From there they will together watch over this last member of their family."

Young Taban begged her father that she be allowed to play a role in raising and training the eaglet. "I will call her Wind because she will fly like the wind," said Taban. "Please father, let me help you care for Wind! She is all alone now and I will be like a big sister to her, just as Jaran is a big sister to me." Jaran glowed with pride as she heard her sister speak and nodded her head to her father. He quickly agreed with the idea and so started a wonderful relationship between the young girl and the young eagle. Taban took on the full responsibility of caring for the bird. When it got old enough her father started to train Wind how to hunt. She learned to obey his commands but it was always to Taban that she paid the most attention. Sometimes we humans read more into a relationship between man and beast than what actually exists. However, anyone who has ever experienced the loving face slobber of a loyal dog will quickly put to rest the notion that the animal is simply drawn to the smell of food on its master's face. Many believe that their pets

understand both their master's moods and their words. Sometimes the bonds between the two worlds are just too strong to deny. Such bonds are truly based on a special love and understanding. Such was the case with the relationship that developed between Taban and Wind. In fact, Taban became known as "the girl who talks to eagles". Wind was always attached to an eagle perch near the ger and secured with a long tether. Whenever Taban approached her perch, the eagle bobbed her head up and down and made clucking noises, almost like a chicken. Taban would stand in front of the perch and imitate the bird's sounds and the dialogue went back and forth between them. When Taban approached the perch with food and water, Wind would make a different set of sounds that Taban would then repeat back to her. When Taban emerged from the ger in the morning, Wind would let out a great 'skree'. Taban imitated her call perfectly and answered back with her own 'skree'. It was plain and obvious that the girl was talking to the eagle and that the eagle was talking back.

Taban cared deeply for nature and for all animals. Her plan was to follow her hero Jaran and to also study biology at the university. Jaran encouraged her and in fact had committed to her parents that she would personally fund Taban's schooling costs from her salary as a teacher and from her savings. As a relative of a faculty member, Taban's tuition would be substantially reduced and this would be a definite benefit for the family. Getting a good education was vitally important for the girls because the family's livestock herds would be inherited by their brothers, as was the Mongolian tradition. Taban loved Wind and the relationship that they had together but her first passion was horses. Horsemanship is an integral part of a Mongol's DNA and Taban was living proof of this fact. There is an old saying that "a Mongol without a horse is like a bird without the wings". Taban was on a horse every chance she got and her mother often scolded her for neglecting her chores in favour of riding. She was small for her age but could easily handle any horse that she set her mind to ride.

Mongolian horses are smaller and stockier than most other breeds and have not changed substantially since the time of the Great Khan. It is estimated that there are more horses than people in modern day Mongolia. Riding a horse was one thing, but racing was quite another and

a sport in which Taban excelled. Children learn to ride and to race at a very young age in Mongolia, and because of their small size, are often chosen to serve as jockeys in many races. Usually their racing days are over by the time they hit their teenage years, but Taban continued in the sport because of her diminutive size.

Every time that Taban mounted a horse, Wind let out a huge shriek and became restless on her perch. She remained agitated the whole time that Taban was out riding. One day the father took Wind out on a hunt. Sitting astride his horse, he carried the hooded eagle on his well-protected wrist and wrapped the tether between his fingers. He unmasked the eagle and released her for the hunt. In the distance, Taban could be seen racing back towards the ger on horseback. Wind abandoned the hunt and ignored her keeper's commands. She flew straight toward Taban and took up a flying position directly ahead of the girl and her horse. Taban struggled to keep up as the eagle appeared to be guiding her to home like a beacon in the sky. When Taban dismounted, Wind was sitting calmly on her perch beside the ger. She and Taban engaged in their usual conversation of chirps and clucks. Afterwards, Taban's father just scratched his head in wonderment. The 'girl who talks to eagles' now had a racing partner.

When the following summer came, it was time again for the great Naadam Festival. The major national events and competitions in archery, wrestling and horse racing all took place in Ulaanbaatar, but local communities and nomad families also held such events in the regions where they had camped for the summer pasturage. A Naadam celebration was planned for Taban's area and she was entered as a rider in the featured horse race event. In fact she was the only girl racer among the twenty youngsters who were riding that year. The cross country course was some three miles in length, with its starting point at a sacred ovoo along the roadside. It was customary for travellers to stop at this rough altar of stones and wood and to circle it three times in a clockwise direction in order to secure a safe journey. Those travelling would add a stone or other offering to the pile or tie a blue ribbon to the ovoo. Everyone agreed that it would be an ideal starting point for the race. Before the race started, the riders would circle the ovoo and, in

true Mongolian fashion, chant motivational songs to their mounts to encourage them to run quickly.

As was always the case, Wind started to create a noisy fuss when Taban began preparing her horse for the race. They talked together for a few moments but Wind was almost frantic when Taban left with the others for the distant starting point. Taban's father was concerned that Wind would hurt herself as she jumped around on her perch and strained at her tether. Finally he released her and the eagle flew off into the distance. People were scattered along the race course and a large crowd had gathered near the gers to witness the end of the race. Taban's family had high hopes for her success but they knew that she was up against a field of some very skilled boy riders. In due course a cloud of dust could be seen far off as the riders raced across the steppe towards the finish. The most remarkable sight that they witnessed was Taban well out in front and riding like the wind. She was being led by Wind as the eagle flew swiftly ahead of her and her horse. Taban was first over the finish line, assuming that you don't count Wind who got there ahead of her.

The bond between Wind and Taban continued to grow and to strengthen. One is reluctant to assign human emotions and feelings to animals, but it is indeed difficult to use any word other than love for the relationship that Wind had with her 'big sister' Taban and vice versa. Their conversations became more animated over time and one really got the impression that each of them understood completely what the other was saying. But there finally came the time when Wind reached four years of age and had to be released to the wild. By this time she was fully grown and ready to seek a mate and to begin raising her own young. Taban's father butchered a sheep and the two of them brought Wind and the sheep carcass to a rocky hillside. The herdsman carried the eagle on his wrist because the adult bird was much too heavy for the girl. The dead sheep was left on the rocks and Taban's father carefully removed the bird's hood and tether. Wind and Taban clucked and cooed with each other for a few moments and then the eagle was launched into the air. It flew in a circle overhead and then let out a great 'skree'. Taban answered in reply and then she and her father mounted their horses and left the hill. Wind continued to

circle above and then settled on the sheep carcass. This time she did not lead or follow the girl home. It was as if she knew that the time had come to make her own way under the gaze of Tenger.

Taban was sorry to leave Wind but the timing worked out well because she was about to move to the city to begin her studies and live with her sister. Jaran was now a full professor at the university and had continued her study of Mongolia's golden eagles. She had taken a particular interest in her little sister's experiences with Wind, but as a scientist was puzzled about the nature of the relationship that had developed between the two of them. It was just one of those things that had happened and their story would certainly have been scoffed at if it had ever been written up in a scientific journal. At the end of her first year at the National University of Mongolia, Taban prepared to join her family at their summer encampment. Jaran decided to drive her home and to spend a week vacationing with her family. The two girls set off across the country and some hours later were reunited with their parents. It was good to be out of the city and back under Mongolia's blue sky.

Early in the morning after their arrival, Taban came out of the ger and was greeted with a loud 'skree'. She recognized the call and answered it back. Much to her amazement she discovered Wind sitting on her father's eagle perch. The eagle was now fully grown and resplendent in her magnificence. She began to bob her head and started her normal clucking and cooing. Taban spoke softly to her and mimicked her sounds. It was as if the two of them had never been apart. Suddenly Wind took to the air and was gone. Taban watched her as she disappeared into the distance and was sad that the eagle had come and gone so quickly. Thirty minutes later she was helping her mother with the milking and heard the eagle cry from above. Wind returned and again took up her position on the perch. Taban joined her there and suddenly from above came another call. Taban looked up and saw two juvenile eagles circling above. Wind called and the two eagles answered. Wind had brought her two babies to show off to her big sister Taban, 'the girl who talks to eagles'.

**Bio**

**Brian Wrixon** is a poet, author, publisher, humourist and business consultant and is the founder of the almost 1,500 member international writers' group "Poets with Voices Strong", as well as the advocacy group N♀W – Needs of Women International. He is also a founding principal of *CLASP* – Community Lending Aid Support Program, a group providing micro-loans and Self Help Group assistance to entrepreneurs in disadvantaged areas. He is a member of the advisory boards of "Writing for Peace" in Colorado USA, and "Express Journal" in Moradabad (U.P.) India. He is a member of the senior editorial board of Bharat College of Commerce and Science in Kulgaon Badlapur, India, and serves on the editorial board of The World Peace Mission in Kankerghera, Meerut (U.P.) India. Brian is also Chair of the Advisory Board of Reflection Magazine and likewise functions as an editor and reviewer for the independent publisher MCI Writer's House. Brian is also a member of the City of Burlington Inclusivity Advisory Committee, a citizen's group that advises local civic government on inclusion and equity issues. He provides business consultancy services in supply chain management and business development on a volunteer basis internationally. In addition to writing over 25 books of his own, Brian has contributed to several journals, scholarly texts, anthologies and other publications around the globe and operates his own not-for-profit publishing house, Brian Wrixon Books (Canada).