



# RIDING WITH THE EAGLE HUNTERS

By Geoff Young | Photography by Bonnie Folkins





Edayat

**B**onnie Folkins is in the early stages of living her “second life.” This isn’t to say that she has cheated death to get another chance at living. No, according to Bonnie, her life has been divided into two stages. The life she had before she met and rode with the eagle hunters, and the life she has now.

Canadian born, Folkins is an accomplished artist with over 50 solo exhibitions in Canada, the US and Portugal, as well as hundreds of paintings in permanent collections all over North America. She has painted on location all over the world, but a visit to Western Mongolia in 2007, changed her life and the medium of her artistic work.

Shortly before leaving on her first trip to Mongolia in 2007, Bonnie came upon a series of photographs online depicting the Kazakh eagle hunters. Their red hats, black coats, and the Golden Eagles

balancing on their arms mesmerized her. She quickly made some changes in her itinerary and traveled to Olgii, a small town within the Buyan-Olgii province of Mongolia, and home to the Kazakh eagle hunters.

Buyan-Olgii is nestled in Mongolia’s Altai Mountains bordering China, Kazakhstan, and Russia. It is home to the Kazakh people who fled the Russian Empire’s army over 200 years ago from their native Kazakhstan, and it is where they have remained isolated, holding onto their sacred traditions and culture.

The Soviet Union took over their homeland, confiscating their pastureland, imposing taxes, and forcing many Kazakhs into labor camps. Under Stalin, Kazakhs were forbidden from following their cultural heritage and systematically starved, resulting in the deaths of more than two million people and the migration of a million more to Mongolia, China,

Iran, Afghanistan and Turkey. Those that escaped continue the traditions of their culture to this day.

Bonnie’s first trip to Olgii took her to the village of Bugat Sum where she met Adai, a nomadic herder and eagle hunter. Adai and his family hosted Bonnie in their home and a friendship developed. The kind and generous Adai would go on to introduce Bonnie to eagle hunters and their families in the region, and that is when Bonnie knew she had to tell their stories and preserve their endangered and disappearing culture through photography.

*“Unless one has continuously ridden a horse for weeks or months, there is no way to relate to the transformation that takes place in the saddle during a long ride.”*



Adai sits and watches with his companion.



Bonnie rides with eagle hunter Edayat, friend Bahat, and hagushi – Dannibek.

**H**olding a camera instead of a paintbrush, Bonnie set out on a mission to document and photograph nomads and shoot portraits of the eagle hunters. And during the course of this photographic odyssey, Bonnie joined the ranks of the very few in this world who are called “Long Riders.”

In 2009, Bonnie, with encouragement and mentoring from CuChullaine and Basha O’Reilly, the founders of The Long Riders Guild, set out on an 1,100 mile horseback ride across Mongolia to photograph the nomadic people. She completed two more “Long Rides” in 2010 and 2011, traveling by horse over 2,000 miles across Kazakhstan. Riding with nomads, it was on these long rides that Bonnie’s life changed forever.

Unless one has continuously ridden a horse for weeks or months, there is no way to relate to the transformation that takes place in the saddle during a long ride. The emotional depths that are reached, the introspection of one's thoughts and memories, and the unbelievable physical connection that develops between rider and horse produces a dream-like state, a trance if you will, that is unobtainable in any other sort of endeavor. As Bonnie put it, "You cover great expanses at this perfect speed that allows you to take in everything. The pace allows you to absorb it all, so your mind and body are like a sensory sponge. You have the time to think things out like you never have before in your life, and you wonder how you can ever give it up."

Indeed, the hardest part of the long rides for Bonnie was the despair she felt when it

was over. "I had this overwhelming desire to go on indefinitely," she explained. "I could only focus on how badly I missed the animals and the empty feeling of looking around at a modern society that had lost relevance."

It was in 2010, between two of the long rides, that Bonnie made her way into the high Altai Mountains to the village of Altai, where she met Dalaikhan Boshai, a famous eagle hunter who makes his winter home there.

Dalaikhan is a nomadic herder who follows his cattle, sheep, cashmere goats, camels and horses to historical pasturelands that have been used by his ancestors for generations. He rides with his eagle almost every day and travels with his friends Amantai and Tugelbai, and his son Alpamys.

Bonnie was so impressed with Alpamys' horsemanship that she invited him on her

first long ride across Kazakhstan where he served as veterinarian (self-taught), farrier, and vigilant night watchman. When she returned in 2011, Dalaikhan wanted to make a long ride with her, so they rode across the western half of Kazakhstan the following summer, and Dalaikhan officially joined the ranks of the Long Riders Guild.

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Dalaikhan receives his eagle.



The famous eagle hunter Dalaikhan.



Emen with his eagle.

*“There are three things a real man should have:  
a fast horse, a hound, and a golden eagle.”*

— Kazakhstan proverb



The affection between an eagle and his hunter-master is almost childlike.

**M**an has used birds of prey to hunt for food and fur in Mongolia since the 13th century. Chinggis Khan is said to have had over 5,000 eagle hunters in his personal guard. The eagles are trained to hunt marmots and rabbits, and eventually foxes and even wolves. The hunt remains a noble tradition and a rite of passage for Kazakh men, but it is threatened by the encroachment of globalization. Because of this threat, Bonnie is determined to photograph the eagle hunters and their families before their traditions are lost forever.

What is striking about the culture of the eagle hunters is the complete trust, loyalty, and love Golden Eagles show their hunter-masters. When Bonnie asked Dalaikhan what he loves most about owning an eagle, he said it is an incomparable experience when he is galloping on his horse with his eagle flying at his side.

The methods for training eagles are passed from father to son, from generation to generation, and the techniques are a highly guarded secret. Because of the difficulty and sacrifice a trainer, called a Berkutchi, must make to train an eagle, they are believed to possess high spiritual powers and are held in high esteem. Eagles are obtained from either taking an eaglet from a nest, or trapping an older bird with bait and a net. The training process involves rendering the eagle helpless so it is totally dependant on its master for survival. The eagle is not given food or allowed to sleep for two or more days and the trainer must continuously stay close, forgoing sleep as well, to care for the bird. The Berkutchi keeps the birds attention by talking to it and singing to it. In the end, when the eagle finally takes food from the Berkutchi's hand, the bonding process takes hold.

The relationship between the eagle and its hunter-master is truly one of the most

astonishing partnerships between man and animal, and the affection between the eagle and its human partner is almost child-like. There is an old Kazakh saying that goes; as the man trains the eagle, so the eagle trains the man. When looking at Bonnie's photos of the eagle hunters, you can see the pride they have as they pose with their eagles. This unique partnership only lasts about eight to eleven years before the eagle is released back into the wild to live out the rest of its life. The eagle lifespan is upwards of 30 years, with some living to 50 and beyond.

The eagles are trained to hunt by chasing down a clump of fur tied to a rope and pulled by a horse and rider. Upon capturing the prey, the eagle waits for their master to arrive and claim the bounty. As they travel together on horseback, the eagle, at almost three feet tall, becomes tame enough to balance on the hunter's arm clutching an elbow length leather glove called a biyalai, or to perch on a bardak — a wooden prop used to distribute their weight.

With a wingspan of up to seven feet, these enormous birds have been clocked at up to two hundred miles an hour at the sight of prey. They can hover and glide for hours on the thermal currents rising from the Mongolian Steppe. They have extraordinary vision during the daylight hours and can see in color. Their talons are razor sharp and powerful enough to lock onto and carry away a small deer such as the native Roe.

While riding in the high mountains during hunting season (September 15 to March 20), the hunters travel with a hagushi or hunter's assistant, who searches while letting out shrieks and yells to scare prey from their hiding places in the rocks and crags of the mountains. The eagle is released and the hunter gallops after the bird as it tracks and captures its prey.



A group of eagle hunters, high in the Altai Mountains.



Bonnie reviews photos of eagle hunter's ancestors.

## Documenting an Ancient Culture

Through her friendship with the charismatic Dalaikhan, Bonnie has been able to experience first hand, the life of these proud and independent people. Their winter homes are adobe huts called stores that are made from bricks composed of clay, straw and dung. When they travel to their summer pastures they live in gers, which are transportable felt tents. Dalaikhan, for example, spends his summers not more than 12 miles from the border of China at an altitude of 11,000 feet in the Altai Mountains.

There is no running water and the only electricity, available for a couple of hours a day, is courtesy of a solar panel. They heat their winter homes and summer tents and cook their food by burning dried dung in tiny stoves.

The Kazakhs are a most generous and hospitable people. They welcome in visitors to their homes and would gladly give the last bit of food they have to their guest. Because of this generosity, it is wise to be humble, grateful, and not overstay your welcome.

Toasting with vodka is a tradition, and singing and dancing to the gentle strains of the dombra — a two stringed lute — help pass the cold winter nights. The passion they have for their way of life and their relationship with the land and the animals is strong and fierce, as it must be in order for this culture to survive in the 21st century.

Bonnie's mission to document and record the culture of the Mongolian-Kazakh eagle hunters has spanned nine trips over five years. Her goal is to do a formal portrait of every hunter. It is estimated that there are 300 living in Buyan-Olgii. Because of the extreme isolation of the Altai Mountains, she has only photographed about 25% of them to date. She is dedicated to create this collection because she knows they are lacking in modern photographic equipment and are unable to do it themselves. When her project is completed, future generations will have a record of their ancestry and culture.



The son of Khuat Khabilkhaji.



Eagle hunter Idirish poses with his wife.

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Alpsby Ardakh

The Kazakh people that Bonnie has befriended over the years continue to be her motivation for continuing this enormous photographic project. She reflected on the impact these nomadic people have had on her.

"In Kazakhstan I had seen distressed people, exhausted even today from years of Soviet influence. Stalin robbed them of their nomadic past in the name of 'collectivization.' Their spirit has been sacrificed and their emotional landscape leveled. It then became very clear to me; fervent about the uniqueness of their way of life and passionate about conserving it, the Kazakhs of Mongolia have been successful in holding on to their identity and clinging passionately to their culture.

For this reason I call the Kazakh nomads of Buyan-Olgii, the *Soul Keepers*."

Bonnie Folkins is a remarkable woman who found a connection and a passion for a remarkable people in a faraway land. This woman who traveled alone to the Eurasian Steppe, and rode over 3,000 miles across its landscape with camera in tow, has opened a window to this culture that we will have the privilege of looking through; and in the process, she has become the keeper of the Soul Keepers.

*Bonnie's photographs will be showcased as part of FotoFest 2012 Biennial, held this year in Houston at Kingwood College. Her exhibition titled: "A Kazakh Photo Essay With Emphasis on the Golden Eagle Hunters of Mongolia," will be shown from February 13 – March 5, 2012.*

*The FotoFest Biennial is the United States' largest and longest-running international photography festival. It is one of the oldest international showcases for photography in the world today. For more information visit [www.fotofest.org](http://www.fotofest.org)*

*For more information on Bonnie Folkins or to view her photographs visit [www.bonniefolkins-photography.com](http://www.bonniefolkins-photography.com)*



A group of eagle hunters, high in the Altai Mountains.