



# The eagle huntress

**Director:** Otto Bell

**Country:** Mongolia/Germany/France

**Date:** 2016

A review by Geoffrey McNab for *The Independent*:

Executive produced and narrated by Star Wars actress Daisy Ridley, *The Eagle Huntress* is a remarkable documentary, one that combines superb National Geographic-style photography with a storyline that plays out like a real-life folktale with a feminist undertow.

Its main character is Aisholpan, a 13-year-old girl from a remote Mongolian community who yearns to become an eagle hunter, just like her father and her grandfather before him. The tradition stretches back over 1,000 years to beyond the time of Genghis Khan.

The nomadic tribes rely on the fur and food they catch with the eagles to sustain them through the very brutal winters. The hitch for Aisholpan is that the village elders grumble that women are too “fragile” for such an arduous business and they should stay at home, milking the cows and making the tea while their menfolk head off on expeditions. Aisholpan’s dreams risk being dashed at the outset but she fervently believes girls can do anything that boys can.

This certainly isn’t a purist documentary – but nor was Robert Flaherty’s famous 1922 film *Nanook Of The North*. There are times here when director Otto Bell (making his feature debut) appears to be staging scenes and moulding events so that the narrative unfolds in just the way that he wants.

A late sequence in which an eagle, under Aisholpan’s control, kills a fox marks a spectacular finale but Bell provides very little context. He doesn’t explain how the fox dies or how long it took Aisholpan and her father to track it down.

The cinematography here is stunning. Bell (presumably by placing his camera on a drone) often gives us an eagle eye view of the landscapes below. He also provides a ground-eye insight into everyday life in Aisholpan’s village.

This seems to be a traditional community, unchanged over the years, and yet the 13-year-old is at school in a nearby town where the other kids in the classroom play handball and modernity has long since intruded. There are hints that the family’s way of life may soon come under threat.

Bell isn’t above foregrounding the exoticism of the nomads’ lives. Occasionally, Aisholpan will be seen in a tracksuit, looking like any other girl of her age. More often, the film shows her and her father in their traditional clothes. They wear elaborate furs and beautifully brocaded jackets and trousers.



The eagles themselves are huge birds with enormous wingspans. They're not pets. You fear for Aisholpan when one soars down from the mountaintop to land with a crunch on her heavily padded arm, drawn in part by the meat she is holding. As Ridley's voiceover tells us, the hunters only keep the eagles for seven years. The birds are then returned to the wilderness "to continue the circle of life".

Aisholpan makes a thoroughly engaging protagonist, a mischievous teenage girl with a well-nigh permanent smile on her face who just happens to have a near genius for working with the eagles. Gratifyingly for the filmmakers, when she and her father ride many miles to compete in an eagle hunting competition, she is by far the best.

Aisholpan's eagle does exactly as she bids it and catches the animals being dragged as its quarry. The judges all give her top marks but even that isn't enough to convince the conservative old timers. They insist that only when she goes out into the wilds will she really prove herself.

Daisy Ridley's narration is used sparingly. Bell's approach is observational rather than polemical. He touches on the tensions within the nomadic community. Aisholpan has a dream of becoming a doctor as well as of becoming an eagle huntress. Her father is an expert horseman but also rides a motorbike.

Rather than bemoan the community's vanishing way of life, the director simply shows us Aisholpan and her father as they go about the business of eagle hunting. It's painstaking work that requires finding a baby "eaglet" that is strong enough to survive without its mother but not yet strong enough to fly away.

To do this, they have to clamber up cliffs. Then they have to train the little creature. The hunting expeditions themselves are perilous affairs, requiring them to ride on horseback across very icy terrain.

The director's achievement is not only to have discovered his subjects but to have won their trust and affection. He has persuaded them to allow him to film them at every stage of the process as Aisholpan tries to prove herself as a hunter. At times, the filmmaking can feel contrived. Bell uses eerie music to heighten the sense of exoticism and danger surrounding the eagle hunting.

His editing is also sometimes manipulative. Nonetheless, he and his crew have obviously gone to extreme lengths themselves, clambering up mountains and venturing into very forbidding terrain, to capture their footage. In doing so, they've managed to make a documentary that belies its obviously modest budget both in its epic quality and in its rugged beauty.



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