

Eagle Eye of the Northern Shoshone

Lawrence A. Kingsbury
Updated by Kelly Martin 2022
Heritage Resources Program
USDA Payette National Forest, Idaho

Eagle Eye was probably the last non-reservation chief of the Northern Shoshone speaking Native Americans. Euro-American immigrants knew these Northern Shoshone as the "Sheepeaters" (Wells 1980:1). Anthropologists have referred to the Sheepeaters in the literature by their Native American name "Dukudeka," meaning "eaters of mountain sheep" (Dominick 1964:131 and Davis 2022). (Dominick 1964:131) suggests that "Dukudeka" can probably be interpreted to mean "eaters of meat." Eagle Eye and his people have also been referred to as "Weiser Shoshoni," (Corless 1990:24). Corless states that the Weiser Shoshoni were isolated in the mountain valleys and that there is no record of the group living elsewhere. He goes on to say that Native Americans were free to travel, hunt and fish along the tributaries of the Payette and Weiser Rivers. They visited their favorite hunting and fishing places at the Payette Lakes and on the South Fork of the Salmon River (Corless 1990:24).

The story of Eagle Eye and his people is significant because they were able to live free in the Idaho Territory long after most other Native Americans were forced onto reservations. They were also one of the only tribes able to avoid conflict with the United States military during General George Crook's Snake War campaigns, and to avoid capture during the 1879 Sheepeater Campaign.

As early as January of 1868, Eagle Eye and his band were wintering in close proximity to the Little Weiser River of Indian Valley, in west-central Idaho. His band consisted of about 10 men and 18 women and children. Colonel James B. Sinclair, commander of Fort Boise, recognized Eagle Eye as the chief of his band of people. During January of 1869, Sinclair sent Thomas Singleton, Interpreter and Chief of Scouts, with two soldiers and three Native American scouts to search for Eagle Eye and his people. They were located at "South East Creek and the Weiser River, about forty miles from Crain Creek," (National Archives, Letter dated January 31, 1869).

The area of the Little Weiser River was rich in animal and plant food resources which could be easily secured. Salmon, now extinct, were then abundant in the Little Weiser River. There were reports of "dog salmon" seen in the Little Weiser River each fall (Evermann 1895:276). Evermann, an early biologist in the area, said this of the Little Weiser River:

The upper portion of the Weiser River and its tributaries appear to have excellent water and all suitable conditions for salmon spawning-grounds (Evermann 1895:276)

In addition, Evermann reported that throughout the 1890's "regular salmon, salmon trout and dog salmon, "were caught in the Weiser River of the Council Valley (Evermann 1895:276).

According to Dr. David Burns, Fisheries Biologist for the USDA Payette National Forest, Idaho, the reference to "salmon trout" actually refers to steelhead. He also stated that:

Virtually all references to "dog salmon" in Idaho, included in Evermann's reports, are for spawning chinook. Usually, the reference is to fall chinook, but some are likely to be spawning summer chinook (personal communication 2-25-98).

With the seasonal availability of chinook and steelhead, procuring fish protein and processing and preserving it, provided Eagle Eye's band with a dependable food source for the winter. Besides fish, fur bearing animals provided additional food protein as well as clothing for Native Americans. In the spring and early summer, wild roots, bulbs, and greens were utilized as vegetable food sources. As the season warmed up, these edible plants ripened later in the higher elevations in the West Mountains and would be utilized well into summer. Payette National Forest archaeologists have found prehistoric archaeological sites associated with the edible plants including camas, lily bulbs, sego, bitterroot, and kows, also called bisquit root. These plants are still gathered and eaten by Native Americans today. It is assumed that the early archaeological sites associated with edible plants are root digging areas where Native Americans have camped for thousands of years.

In order to obtain these food sources as they matured and became available, Eagle Eye's people had to follow a seasonal subsistence cycle. This hunter-gather lifestyle led them to the lower river valleys during the spring and early summer to gather plants and roots. In the summer they would begin to travel up to higher country following spawning fish species and plant availability. In the fall they would hunt large game animals and gather fall plants in the mountains. By late fall they would be moving back into the lower elevations to fish for salmon and chinook. When winter moved in, they would gather into the lower river valleys where there was less snow and live on surpluses they had stockpiled and animals that migrated to the lower elevations as well. This seasonal migration resulted in an overall home range of hundreds of square miles.

In 1881, an article in the Nez Perce News mentions Native American people "peeling bark from trees and living on the soft portions of it," and these scarred ponderosa pine trees have been found at a number of locations on the Payette National Forest. They have been located near the East Fork of the Weiser River, on the southwest edge of Payette Lake, and along the South Fork of the Salmon River. Also called "cambium peeled trees," some stand alone, whereas in some places there are whole groves of these culturally modified trees (Reddy 1993:2).

Sometime in the 1880's, Eagle Eye's people settled in the Dry Buck Valley. This is an isolated valley located about 5 miles west of Banks, Idaho. Here Eagle Eye and his band continued living quiet, isolated lives. They constructed log homes and planted gardens and an orchard. Anthropologist Sven Liljeblad, (1972) wrote of Eagle Eye and his people:

As far back in time as their memories reached, the valley from the bend of the [Payette] river to Payette Lake had been their summer range where they gathered food, fished, and hunted deer...As long as their headman [Eagle Eye] had lived,

highly esteemed by both settlers and officials, the Native Americans had stubbornly refused to leave their village. After his death [in 1896], the intimidated people, rather to be safe than sorry, decided to move to Fort Lemhi where they had relatives. One day in early summer sometime about the turn of the century, they left their little farmsteads where the apple trees had just shed their blossoms, never to be seen again. As they wanted to avoid traveling over public roads and much frequented trails, it took them the whole summer to cross the mountains. Although the loss these immigrants had suffered in having to give up their native ground...must have been appalling to them all, some of them and their children in time became citizens with great prestige in their new community."

Idaho historian Merle Wells told of visiting Eagle Eye's farm in Dry Buck basin in 1963 with Dr. Liljeblad and members of Eagle Eye's family. The trip was taken in response to a request to visit the area by Josephine Thorpe, Eagle Eye's granddaughter:

This group [on the expedition] included a number of Eagle Eye's descendants: his great grandson (and Mrs. Thorp's son) Frank, as well as some great-great-grand children. Mrs. Thorpe who had attended Eagle Eye's funeral on top of Timber Butte, wished to return to her grandfather's grave, and I promised to find them a practical route to the site. On the way, we toured Dry Buck basin, where Eagle Eye and his people had worked in a sawmill when Mrs. Thorpe was a child. There we found some of Eagle Eye's apple trees (or their descendants) that Mrs. Thorpe remembered (Wells 1980).

Dry Buck provided a secluded home for the last of Idaho's non-reservation Native Americans. Eagle Eye led a prominent group of Northern Shoshone from at least the time of the Snake War of 1866 - 1868 through the remainder of the 19th century. After Eagle Eye's death and burial, his band relocated to Fort Lemhi, and later to Fort Hall where his granddaughter [Josephine Thorpe] became a successful rancher on Lincoln Creek. Today, descendants of Eagle Eye reside with the Shoshone Bannock Tribes at Fort Hall, Idaho and with the Shoshone Paiute Tribes at Duck Valley, Owyhee, Nevada.

CITED REFERENCES:

Burns, David

1998 Personal communication on February 25, 1998.

Corless, Hank

1990 The Weiser Indians, Shoshoni Peacemakers. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.

Davis, Cleve Shoshone Bannock Researcher and Archaeologist

Dominick, David

1964 The Sheepeaters. *Annals of Wyoming*, Vol. 36, No. 2, PP.131-168.

Evermann, Barton W.

1895 Salmon Investigations in Idaho in 1894, A Preliminary Report.

US Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.

National Archives

1869 Letter addressed to the Post Adjutant of Fort Boise, authored by Thomas Singleton, Interpreter and Chief of Scouts, in the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Wells, Merle

1980 Ethnohistory and Timber Butte Obsidian, Idaho Archaeologist, 4 (2): 1-3.

Willey, Norman B.

1881 By-line article, Indians in...The Nez Perce News, June 9, 1881 edition, Vol. 1, page 1, Lewiston, Idaho Territory.