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Flight and sight

*'Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength
They will soar on wings like eagles'*

Isaiah 40: 31.

Eagles and soaring are one of those word associations that are inextricably linked in our minds and imaginations. Eagles soar with such visibility, ease and majesty that humans have long given the behaviour spiritual and metaphorical significance. The eagles themselves have much more earthly intentions, they are on the move, prospecting for food, claiming ownership of territory, or perhaps simply keeping cool.

Once the air warms and thermals form the eagle can stay aloft almost effortlessly, reading the wind, soaring from thermal to thermal with nary a wingbeat. It also hangs on updrafts created by wind, moving only its tail to maintain balance. Nearer the ground, say, in pursuit of prey, it must actively flap to move forward in the air, but it is energetically expensive to keep such a large body airborne by flapping.

Unless it leaps off a high branch or pinnacle, on take-off the eagle struggles to stay in the air, particularly when there is no wind to fly into for lift. In still conditions, it takes flight heavily, skipping clumsily across the ground to get some forward momentum, in a two-legged hop, one foot leading, then labouring with deep powerful flaps. Grounded within a forest, the eagle must clamber up from branch to branch to reach the canopy, which it does with considerable lack of grace. Engorged with food, an eagle can be run down and captured by hand.