

THE BIG PICTURE » PHOTO SERIES BY SOPHIE HOWARTH



FLIGHT *Like* A GIRL

A 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL IS
SMASHING A THOUSAND YEARS
OF TRADITION...AND EVERYONE
LOVES HER FOR IT.

AISHOLPAN WEARS THE
FOX HER EAGLE CAUGHT.



FOR MORE THAN 1000 years, the Kazakh nomads of northwestern Mongolia have hunted with the majestic golden eagle. It's a proud tradition usually passed from father to son, but 16-year-old schoolgirl Aisholpan has set a cat among the falconers.

She's the first female in 12 generations of her family to train as a hunter, catching foxes, marmots and rabbits for their pelts. And she caused a commotion by being the first female to win the top prize at the annual two-day Golden Eagle Festival. Competing against 70 boys and men, at just 13 years old, she broke the festival record, calling her eagle to her hand in a record-breaking five seconds.

Australian photographer Sophie Howarth was there to capture Aisholpan's 2014 triumph on one of her many visits to the region.

"On my first trip to Mongolia, I went for two weeks and I stayed for two months," says Howarth. "I really fell in love with it. There is something powerful about the landscape, the sky, the space – it's that unseen magic that I set out to capture."

That magic, she argues, is witnessed between hunter and bird. "Eagles have a mythical resonance," she says. "One hunter told me: 'It's our soul, our souls are connected.'"

Aisholpan's bond with her bird Akkatnat, or "White Wings", has been made into a documentary, *The Eagle Huntress*, by director Otto Bell, narrated by Daisy Ridley. It goes from the moment she and her dad scale a mountain to capture the eaglet from its nest, through to her first foxhunt in the depths of winter. With her brother away for military service, her father wanted to pass on the tradition that sees only 250 eagle hunters remain.

"Even though there is a strong message about gender roles, in a more simple way it's just someone doing what they love," says Howarth. "She is just a really gorgeous, light-hearted girl... She was drawn to this animal, to hunting."

Aisholpan's stunning 2014 victory has seen more women and girls compete in the Golden Eagle Festival. "The locals are warmly proud of her," says Howarth. "They really respect what she's doing, the importance of her tradition and that her voice is reaching outside of Mongolia."

by **Amy Hetherington** (@AmyHetherington)

» *The Eagle Huntress opens nationally 16 March. Howarth's exhibition is on at Dendy Newtown and Lido Hawthorn. For more, see sophiehowarthphotography.com.*



THE WINNING BIRD AKKATNAT, OR "WHITE WINGS".



DESPITE INITIAL RESERVATIONS, AISHOLPAN'S COMMUNITY IS VERY PROUD OF HER.

“GIRLS CAN DO ANYTHING BOYS CAN DO, IF THEY ARE DETERMINED,” SAYS AISHOLPAN.

