

Sea Eagles

Naturally Scottish



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Scottish Natural Heritage Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

All of nature for all of Scotland
Nàdar air fad airson Alba air fad

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Front cover image:

Adult sea eagle in flight.

Frontispiece:

Adult sea eagle feather detail.

Back cover image:

Adult sea eagle with fish.

Sea Eagles

Naturally Scottish

by John Love, SNH



Foreword Facal-toisich

If we adapt George Orwell's maxim to state that whilst 'all birds are equal, some are more equal than others' it still rings true and there is no finer example than the sea eagle. Many of our raptors are fêted for their beauty, shape and form and also for their agility and speed. But if there is one quality which this species truly exhibits it is simply... presence. Like many others, I still find it impossible to turn my binoculars onto a sea eagle without drawing a breath and saying 'Wow'. Even distant views of these great rectangular 'flying doors' cannot fail to evoke awe.

As you will read in this booklet, people did a great deal of harm to this species, through misdeed, mischief and mistake, and terminated its tenure on the craggy coast of the British Isles. Some 60 years later, after a change of conscience and through a groundbreaking project, conservationists have successfully re-introduced this totemic animal. I remember looking at grainy black-and-white photographs of scruffy eaglets perched on their 'kennels' in the 1970s and feeling so distant from this bird. But as a teenager in the south of England researching the humble kestrel for a school project, it wasn't just the geography that separated us. It was also the improbability of the scheme's success in the face of apathy, persecution and egg-collecting and the clear difficulties which faced the small team of pioneers. I never dared dream that one day I'd have the privilege to stand in cold, driving rain on a wintery Hebridean coast and watch one of these birds strafe by. Then, ten years later, I visited a hide to watch live CCTV pictures of young eaglets picking at their food, snapping at flies and soaring down through the clear Scottish air as they exercised their wings. Fantastic! How refreshing to be able to enjoy and champion this great success in an age when it is all too easy to focus on doom and forthcoming gloom. The dedicated crew who made it happen, to whom we are all indebted, have proved that if you reach for the stars you can earn your eagles and make a real difference.

Being sea eagles, their habits and ecology mean they are still not that accessible. To get really cracking views of sea eagles you still have to work hard on the hills, in the glens and along the shores. At least we can all now dream of one day being in the right place at the right time to peer for a moment into that sunlit eye.

Chris Packham
Naturalist and Broadcaster



Contents

1	Introduction
1	The eagle with the sunlit eye
2	Sea eagle names
3	What are sea eagles?
6	Nesting
8	Breeding
11	Feeding
13	Issues
14	Where they live
16	From totem to target
18	Mythology
20	Towards extinction
22	The return of the native
23	Sea eagles in Scotland – timeline
24	Reintroduction
26	Phase one
26	Phase two
28	Self-sustaining
30	Protection
33	Where to see sea eagles
34	Helping sea eagles
37	Finding out more about sea eagles

Clàr Innse

1	Ro-ràdh
1	Iolaire sùil na grèine
2	Ainmean iolairean-mhara
3	Dè th' ann an iolairean-mhara?
6	Neadachadh
8	Briodadh
11	Beathachadh
13	Ceistean
14	Far a bheil iad a' fuireachd
16	Bho thòtam gu targaid
18	Seann-sgeulachdan
20	Faisg air a dhol à bith
22	Fiadh-bheatha dùthchasach a' tilleadh
23	Iolaire-mhara ann an Alba – clàr-ama
24	Cur an aithne a-rithist
26	A' chiad ìre
26	An dàrna ìre
28	Fèin-chumailteach
30	Dion
33	Far am faicear iolairean-mhara
34	Sibh fhèin agus na h-iolairean
37	Leughadh a bharrachd



The eagle with the sunlit eye *Iolaire sùil na grèine*

Sea or fish eagles are a group of eight species belonging to the genus *Haliaeetus*. They are more closely related to vultures and kites than to 'true' eagles, such as the familiar golden eagle. The sea eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) occurs across Asia, Scandinavia, Iceland and part of Greenland. It once occurred throughout Britain.

When William Macgillivray was a boy in Harris, the white-tailed or sea eagle was quite a common sight in the Hebrides. Indeed, the Gaelic language has several names for this well-known bird of prey – *iolaire mhara* translates literally as 'sea eagle' and *iolaire chladaich* as 'shore eagle', while Gaelic even distinguishes the darker, more mottled juvenile as *iolaire bhreac* or *riabhaich*. But the most lyrical of all is surely the poetic term *iolaire sùil na grèine* – 'the eagle with the sunlit eye'.

Sadly, by the time Macgillivray became Professor of Natural History at Aberdeen University and wrote a book about British birds of prey, the sea eagle was a rare sight indeed. Robert Gray, a famous naturalist at the time, had already reported in his *Birds of the West of Scotland* (1871) that:

'It is impossible to conceal the fact that if the present destruction of eagles continues we shall soon have to reckon this species amongst the extinct families of our "feathered nobility".'

The species last bred in Britain in 1916 and became extinct two years later. One of the last nests in Scotland was on the Isle of Rum in 1909 and it is appropriate that this island in the Inner Hebrides, a National Nature Reserve (NNR), should serve as a springboard for a brave reintroduction programme run jointly by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). Since the project began in 1975 many local folk have also helped this spectacular bird return to its former haunts.

'The white-tailed eagle usually chooses for its retreat some lofty precipice overhanging the sea, and there in fancied security forms its nest and reposes at night.'

William Macgillivray, *Descriptions of the Rapacious Birds of Great Britain*, 1886.

Sea eagle names Ainmean iolairean-mhara

‘Sea eagle’ has been in use for a long time now, and it is only recently that the ornithological world has tried to standardise bird names in English by adopting ‘white-tailed eagle’. This may result in the loss of many beautiful local names of birds, like ‘peewit’ for northern lapwing, ‘whaup’ for Eurasian curlew, or ‘hedge sparrow’ and ‘dunnock’ for hedge accentor. Some would prefer our largest bird of prey to have the equally large, fuller title ‘white-tailed sea eagle’. Confusingly, young sea eagles do not have a white tail at first, whereas young golden eagles do have a conspicuous white tail.

The general public are well used to ‘sea eagle’, and many researchers and members of the project team still use the handy term ‘sea eagle’ that was used in early ornithology books and in the first reintroduction attempts. It is also a direct translation from many of the names used in other countries throughout the bird’s range.

So, despite current ornithological convention, we have retained the use of ‘sea eagle’ in this booklet.

What’s in a name?

The sea eagle has long enjoyed a near-mythical status in the Gaelic-speaking areas of Scotland.

Gaelic	English
<i>iolaire chladaich</i>	shore eagle
<i>iolaire mhara</i>	sea eagle
<i>iolaire ghlas</i>	grey eagle
<i>iolaire sùil na grèine</i>	eagle with the sunlit eye
<i>iolaire bhàn</i>	pale eagle
<i>iolaire fhionn</i>	white eagle
<i>iolaire bhreac</i>	speckled eagle

The sea eagle has many names in many languages, not least in English.

Perhaps the oldest used in Scotland is ‘Erne’, from the Old Norse, which still appears in many placenames, especially in Orkney and Shetland. And it is a useful one to know for crosswords or Scrabble!



What are sea eagles?

Dè th' ann an iolairean-mhara?

The sea eagle is the fourth largest eagle in the world and is Scotland's largest bird of prey. Its wingspan – an impressive two and a half metres – is bigger than that of the golden eagle, usually considered the king of birds.

With a longer neck, short wedge-shaped tail, broad wings and clumsy-looking flight, the sea eagle is more reminiscent of a vulture. Where the golden eagle tilts its wings upwards when soaring, the sea eagle holds them out flat. Both species have yellow legs, but those of the golden eagle are feathered down to the foot, whereas the sea eagle's are bare.

In Gaelic the sea eagle was sometimes called *iolaire ghlàs* (grey eagle) and, indeed, the adult can often look quite grey. The head and neck can be especially pale, rather reminiscent of the American bald eagle, a very close relative. Occasional white birds – *iolaire bhàn* (pale eagle) – have been recorded and, indeed, the very last widowed bird, still maintaining a lonely vigil on its nest in Shetland in 1916, was said to have been an albino. The islanders knew it to be about 30 years old when it finally disappeared two years later.

The sea eagle only gains its famous white tail as an adult, at around five years of age. When it first fledges the juvenile is a chocolate-brown colour, with a dark-grey beak and dark-brown eyes. Over several annual moults it gradually attains the adult appearance – the sunlit eyes, yellow beak and light-coloured plumage.

1

This map of Shetland illustrates the continued use of the word 'Erne' in local placenames.

2

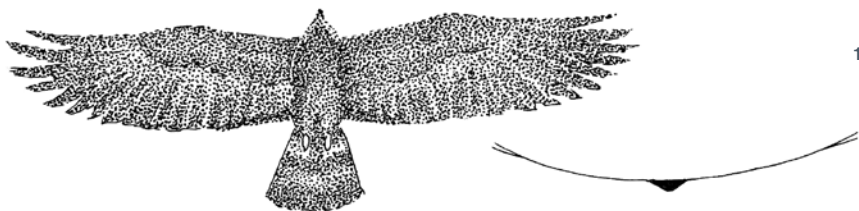
White-tailed sea eagle talons (left) and golden eagle talons (right).



2

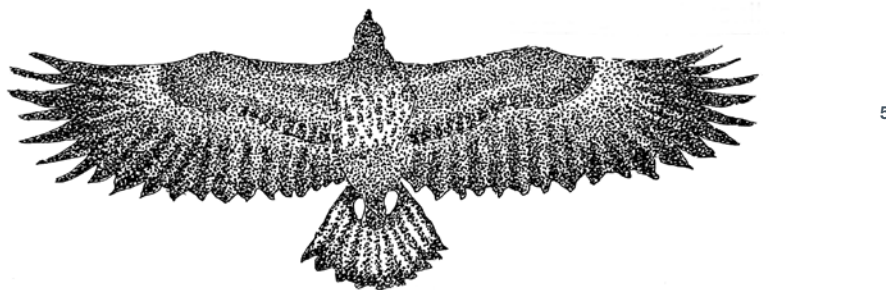
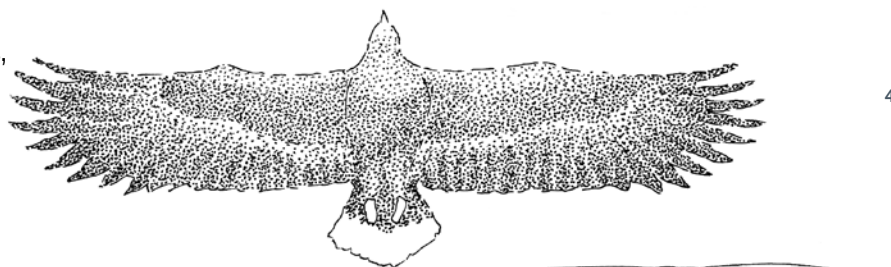
Golden eagle

- legs feathered down to the foot
- length 75 – 85 cm
- wingspan 2 – 2.2 m
- weight 3 – 6.5 kg
- habitat: high peaks and upland areas, very occasionally coastal areas
- will catch and eat grouse, ptarmigan, hares and rabbits. Also eats dead sheep and deer
- short neck, long tail
- normally silent



Sea eagle

- bare legs
- length 70 – 93 cm
- wingspan 2 – 2.45 m
- weight 3 – 7 kg
- habitat: rocky coasts, offshore islands
- will catch and eat live fish, seabirds, rabbits and also carrion
- long neck, short tail
- can be quite noisy, yelping or croaking calls



- 1
Golden eagle adult.
- 2
Golden eagle juvenile.
- 3
Buzzard adult.
- 4
Sea eagle adult.
- 5
Sea eagle juvenile.
- 6

Many sea eagles released in Rum bear coloured leg rings (as do some fledged abroad), so if you are lucky enough to be close enough to read the colour combination, please report it to SNH or RSPB.



Nesting Neadachadh

As its name suggests, the sea eagle is normally a bird of the coast. The golden eagle, which has enjoyed some respite from persecution in the past, is found in more remote mountain retreats. But sea eagles can also be found around lakes and rivers further inland, and sometimes in open farmland.

In Scotland sea eagles nest safely at the top of tall trees, constructing bulky nests of large sticks and branches. Where tall trees are in short supply, such as in parts of northern Norway or the west of Scotland, the bird is content to use broad cliff ledges, needing little in the way of a nest structure but often with a small tree in front. Sometimes, on small, undisturbed islets offshore, the nest is even placed on the ground. Being more tolerant of neighbours than golden eagles, sea eagles can nest quite close to one another.





- 1
Sea eagles often rear twins.
2
An eyrie in a treetop can be quite a bulky structure.

Breeding Briodadh

Courtship often begins over the winter, but intensifies in early spring. The pair will sit near the nest together or fly around for long periods wing-tip to wing-tip. Occasionally, when excitement mounts, one may stoop on another and they may even interlock talons to cartwheel earthwards with high-pitched yelping.

But, more often than not, such behaviour involves young birds reacting to an attack from an adult, or even trying to snatch food from them. The pair will defend their territory from intruders, young or old, but usually seem more tolerant of golden eagles than the goldens are of them.

Two, sometimes three, eggs are laid from mid-March into April and are incubated, by both sexes, for 38 – 40 days. It is not uncommon for two, or even three, young to survive together amicably in the nest. This is in contrast to the golden eagle where – especially if food is in short supply – the bigger chick from the first-hatched egg will prevent the younger bird from getting enough food, and perhaps even attack and kill it.



1
A cartwheel display is used
in courtship, but also during
fighting or when young attempt
to snatch fish from adults.

2
Juvenile sea eagle partly
covered in down.





1



Feeding Beathachadh

Both species of British eagles can have a very varied diet. The golden does best where rabbits, hares, grouse and other medium-sized prey abound, while the sea eagle can easily supplement its diet with seabirds and fish.

In Shetland of old, it was believed that the sea eagle could charm fish to the surface, where they would roll around on their bellies, offering themselves up to the predator hovering above. Some superstitious fishermen even smeared their baits with eagle fat to improve their catch. It is true that sea eagles are quick to exploit spent salmon after a spawning run, or disabled fish that have been swept up to the surface by whirlpools and strong tidal currents.

Although it has one thing in common with the osprey – spiky soles on its feet – the sea eagle does not plunge dive. Instead it will snatch fish from the surface with barely a splash. It is not averse to stealing prey from otters and gulls, and will even follow fishing boats to take discarded fish.

Both golden and sea eagles will feed on dead animals, especially while they are young and inexperienced, or over the winter when live prey may be in short supply. Thus, in bad springs or in areas with heavy mortality in sheep, both adults and lambs may be scavenged. Indeed, it was for this very reason that birds of prey, and sea eagles in particular, were persecuted so strongly in the past. With their confiding and sociable habits, and a vulture-like taste for carrion, sea eagles were especially vulnerable to poisoning.

1

Adult sea eagle with fish, a key part of a varied diet.





Issues Ceistean

Not surprisingly, the carrion in their diet may well include any dead lambs they come across. Occasionally, individual sea eagles might be tempted by shortage of other food (or sheer opportunism) to start taking live lambs. To crofters who might have relatively few sheep this can become a problem.

- 1
Adult sea eagle with the distinctive bright yellow beak and characteristic pale head.
- 2
Sea eagle and hooded crows feeding on carrion.

The issue is, however, a tricky one. Research has shown that these birds do not necessarily prove a nuisance every year. Lambs are especially vulnerable if they are in poor condition as a result of severe weather or if, for instance, a ewe is unable to defend twin lambs from repeat attacks. In some problem areas payments towards assisting sheep husbandry and lamb survival can be justified.

2



Where they live Far a bheil iad a' fuireachd

On a global scale, the sea eagle extends across the northern hemisphere from Siberia and Japan to Europe, and south to the Mediterranean and the Middle East. It is replaced by the bald eagle in North America, although it is the sea eagle that has colonised the southwest coast of Greenland.

Despite being so widespread, the status of the species is nowhere certain owing to loss of habitat (such as forest clearance and wetland drainage), persecution and pollution. Norway retains a healthy population, recently estimated at around 2,000 pairs, and it is from here that the eaglets have come for the reintroduction in Scotland.

1

The Isle of Mull is a sea eagle stronghold, along with the Isle of Skye further north.

2

Sea eagle distribution in the Highlands and Islands. Note the concentration on the western seaboard.





From totem to target

Bho thòtam gu targaid

Sea eagles were once a familiar sight throughout Britain. Their bones have been found in a Bronze Age burial tomb at Isbister on South Ronaldsay, Orkney. Perhaps they fed on the human corpses deliberately laid out to have the flesh stripped from the bones by carrion-eating birds. This practice is known from other cultures in the past, such as native North Americans, and even today in parts of India.

A totemic role seems to have survived for a lengthy period into later times, with images of eagles carved into the celebrated symbolic stones of the Picts in northern Scotland. The finest example – and obviously a sea eagle – is from the Knowe of Burrian in Orkney. Sea eagles and ravens feeding on human corpses after a battle are also mentioned in several Anglo-Saxon poems from southern England.

There are records of sea eagles nesting throughout the length of Britain:

- a pair of sea eagles was known to nest on the Isle of Wight in 1780
- another nested on the Isle of Man in 1818 and
- several were known in the Lake District until the 1830s.

Old placenames in both English and Gaelic indicate other nest sites throughout Scotland, while, in Shetland especially, Erne's Brae and Erne's Hamar preserve the traditional Old English name, based on the Scandinavian word 'Ørn' for eagle. Such placenames, together with records from Victorian naturalists and collectors, reveal that at least 150 pairs of sea eagles once nested in Britain and Ireland. Many others will have gone unrecorded.



1

1
This Pictish stone carving from Orkney depicts a sea eagle rather than a golden eagle. Note the massive beak, vulturine form and unfeathered lower legs characteristic of the sea eagle.

Mythology Seann-sgeulachdan

It is the golden eagle that is seen as 'the king of birds' and its Gaelic name, *fior eun*, means 'the true bird'. It is not surprising that such a symbol of might and power should be revered by many diverse cultures of the world. An eagle was the messenger of the Greek god Zeus, and of his Roman equivalent, Jove. The legions of Rome marched under an eagle of silver, its wings open ('spread-eagled') and a thunderbolt in its talons. When a Caesar died his body was cremated and an eagle set free amongst the flames – reminiscent of the legendary phoenix, a supernatural bird of the Hittites.

In 800 AD the Emperor Charlemagne united Europe under a double-headed eagle, a symbol known from Babylonian times, which survived to become the national emblem of the Russian and Austrian empires. The bald eagle is the national bird of the United States, while an eagle on a cactus and holding a snake is portrayed on the Mexican national flag. This derives from an ancient myth that celebrates the founding of the great Aztec civilisation.

Such eagle/serpent symbolism is worldwide. In Viking mythology, a mighty eagle sat at the top of an ash tree with a coiled snake on the ground below. A nimble little squirrel had to run up and down the tree conveying insults between bird and reptile! It was said that the flapping of the eagle's wings caused tempests in the world of men. This phenomenon was also attributed to the mighty eagle of Snowdon. *Mor eryr* is Welsh for eagle and *Eryri* the name for the mountain. Indeed, in the 12th century it was declared how the golden eagle of Snowdon could predict future events, and in particular foreshadowed war. She would perch on 'the fatal stone' to sharpen her beak before satiating her hunger on the bodies of the slain. This gruesome habit of sea eagles is also celebrated in Anglo-Saxon poetry; the Battle of Brunanburh in 937 AD left behind 'the grey-coated eagle, white-tailed, to have his will of the corpses'.

The Anglo-Saxons also believed that the bones of the sea eagle possessed curative properties, while the Faroese claimed that its yellow claws could cure jaundice. Folk tradition is also rich in stories of eagles snatching human babies, usually rescued unharmed through the heroic efforts of the mother.

We know from the Orkney burial tomb that sea eagles have been held in reverence for at least 4,000 years. Their importance locally seems to have persisted into the Iron Age with a superb depiction of a sea eagle on a Pictish symbol stone, now in Kirkwall Museum, and in illuminated manuscripts of the Celtic church throughout Medieval Europe. It was held that an eagle could look directly into the sun without harm and it was taken as the symbol of the evangelist St John, who had looked upon 'the sun of glory' to acquire his faith.

1

The juvenile sea eagle can be mistaken for a golden eagle but it has a much larger beak.



Towards extinction Faisg air a dhol à bith

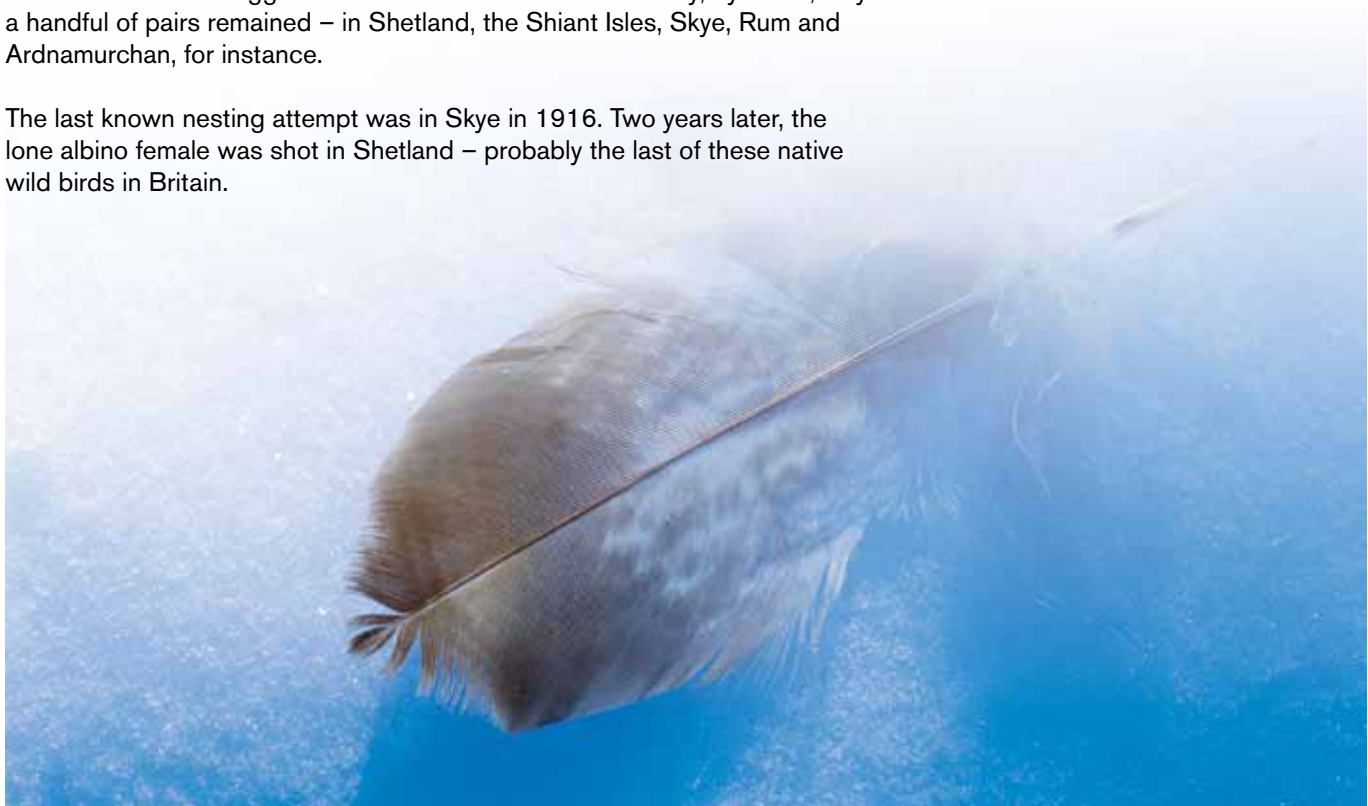
The remote coasts of Scotland and Ireland, where habitat destruction and persecution were less severe, provided the last strongholds for the species into the 19th century. Then, with the spread of sporting estates and better firearms, predators became prime targets, and in many places bounties were offered.

Until 1835 in Orkney, for instance, up to five shillings was offered for the head of a sea eagle, while the species figured prominently in the 'vermin' lists of most Highland estates. As sea eagles became rarer, they attracted more attention from egg collectors and museums. That is why, by 1900, only a handful of pairs remained – in Shetland, the Shiant Isles, Skye, Rum and Ardnamurchan, for instance.

The last known nesting attempt was in Skye in 1916. Two years later, the lone albino female was shot in Shetland – probably the last of these native wild birds in Britain.

1

Adult sea eagle showing off its short, white tail against a hillside. It has a slow, ponderous flight.





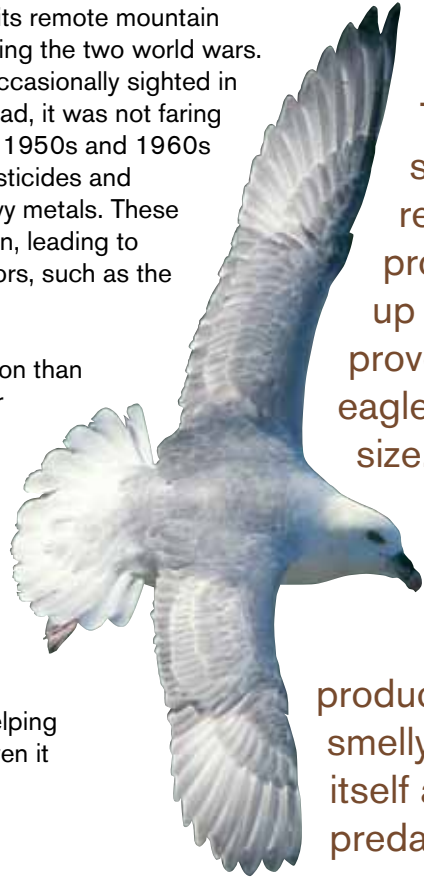
The return of the native

Fiadh-bheatha dùthchasach a' tilleadh

The golden eagle suffered similarly but it survived in its remote mountain haunts and thus gained respite from persecution during the two world wars. Although stray sea eagles from the continent were occasionally sighted in Britain, this species was unable to re-establish. Abroad, it was not faring well either, as it became especially threatened in the 1950s and 1960s from chemical pollutants, such as organochlorine pesticides and industrial PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) and heavy metals. These toxins concentrate as they progress up the food chain, leading to breeding failure and even premature death in predators, such as the sea eagle, at the top of the chain.

In normal situations any predator is much less common than its prey but, if its distribution and numbers are further limited by human activity, it becomes vulnerable to extinction. Since 1954 it has been illegal in Britain to persecute birds of prey. But, at that time, Europe's sea eagles were under threat, while Scotland was relatively unpolluted and still offered suitable habitat.

Unlike the osprey, the sea eagle has been unable to re-establish in Britain without considerable human help. It seemed only right that it should be given a helping hand by the humans who had, quite unjustifiably, driven it out in the first place.



Natural hazard – the fulmar

The 1968 sea eagle reintroduction programme threw up a tale that proved that the sea eagle, despite its size, doesn't always have things its own way. The fulmar – a small sea bird – produces a sticky and smelly oil to defend itself and squirt on predators. Of the four sea eagle youngsters released that year, three disappeared and one was found covered in fulmar oil – it died just days after being found.

Sea eagles in Scotland – timeline

Iolair-mhara ann an Alba – clàr-ama

1791 – 1799

The *Statistical Account of Scotland* gathers information on 20 counties and presents them in weighty volumes. Relying largely on the evidence of local ministers it notes developments and trends throughout Scotland. The sea eagle is mentioned as breeding in many localities including Braemar, Inverness-shire, Tongue, Dunnet Head and Jura.

1793

In Orkney a crown (a substantial amount of money at the time) is offered for every eagle destroyed.

1834

The *New Statistical Account of Scotland* repeats the 18th-century exercise, noting sea eagles as present in Dumfries and Galloway, Argyll and several northern counties.

1911

The final breeding success of sea eagles in Shetland.

1916

Last pair nest on Isle of Skye.

1918

The last known individual – an albino female about 30 years old – dies in Shetland.

1942

An injured sea eagle is found in Kincardineshire. Similar sightings noted in Canna, Inverness-shire (1920) and Hermaness, Shetland (1949).

1959

First reintroduction attempt in Glen Etive, Argyll; privately funded.

1968

Second attempt at reintroduction as four birds are released on Fair Isle. Two disappear within 12 months, the third shortly afterwards and the fourth dies in 1969.

1975

Third attempt at reintroduction begins on the Isle of Rum NNR. Despite a faltering start, in which two of the four birds die early, the project gains a foothold. Run jointly by the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) and the RSPB, the project gradually succeeds and over a decade 82 young birds are released.

1985

First recorded breeding success of reintroduced birds.

1993

Phase two reintroduction begins with 58 Norwegian birds released at Loch Maree over five years.

2000

The 25th anniversary of the current project coincides with 25 pairs of sea eagles holding territory in Scotland. To date they have fledged 100 chicks in the wild.

2003

30 pairs of sea eagles raise 26 youngsters.

2005

Up to 2005, there have been 192 sea eagles fledged in the wild in Scotland.

Reintroduction

Cur an aithne a-rithist

In 1959 and 1968 attempts were made to reintroduce the sea eagle into Scotland. They failed, however, because only seven birds were released and the efforts had not been continued over a period of time. These eaglets had been brought to Glen Etive, Argyll, and to Fair Isle in Shetland, but had either died or dispersed.

In 1975 the Nature Conservancy Council began a full-scale reintroduction programme, to be supported later by the RSPB and other conservation groups. Over the next 10 years, up to 1985, a total of 82 chicks (39 males and 43 females) were imported, again from Norway, where the sea eagle population continued to thrive. Since the breeding density was so high and twins were common, only one chick needed to be collected from each Norwegian eyrie, and rarely was the same pair deprived more than once. At six to eight weeks of age the chicks were not quite able to fly.

With the generous assistance of the Norwegian authorities and 120 Nimrod Squadron of the Royal Air Force, speedy transfer was arranged from Bodø (a town in northern Norway on the Arctic Circle) to Kinloss air station and thence to the Isle of Rum. During a statutory five-week quarantine period, the eaglets were fed on a natural diet of fish, birds and mammals, with food dumps being maintained nearby after release. Without parents to show them what to do the young eagles had to quickly adapt to the wild but, as the project progressed, they benefited from the presence of older and more experienced releases still present on the island.

1

A tethered young sea eagle,
waiting to be released on
Rum in the mid 1970s.



Phase one A' chiad ìre

The youngsters survived well and, although most left Rum, they gathered together at other particularly favoured places in the Hebrides. Sea eagles take at least five years to mature, so it was several years until the first breeding pairs established. The first eggs failed to hatch, as did two clutches in 1984. However, in 1985 one of the two pairs fledged – the first wild sea eagle in Britain for over 70 years.

Although no more young eagles were imported, the population continued to grow slowly. Eight pairs of birds, established by 1993, successfully reared 34 youngsters themselves. The RSPB were monitoring the population closely but it was obvious that many of these fledglings came from just two pairs of birds. Thus it was considered necessary to give the population a further boost.

Phase two An dàrna ìre

Scottish Natural Heritage started a second phase of releases in 1993, this time based by the shores of Loch Maree in Wester Ross and involving 58 more birds from Norway. By the time this project ended in 1998, there were 18 pairs established in the wild. Some of the phase two birds were themselves breeding, and that year saw nine broods resulting in 13 young birds being raised.

2

Harald Misund, who collected all the sea eaglets that were sent to Scotland from Norway.

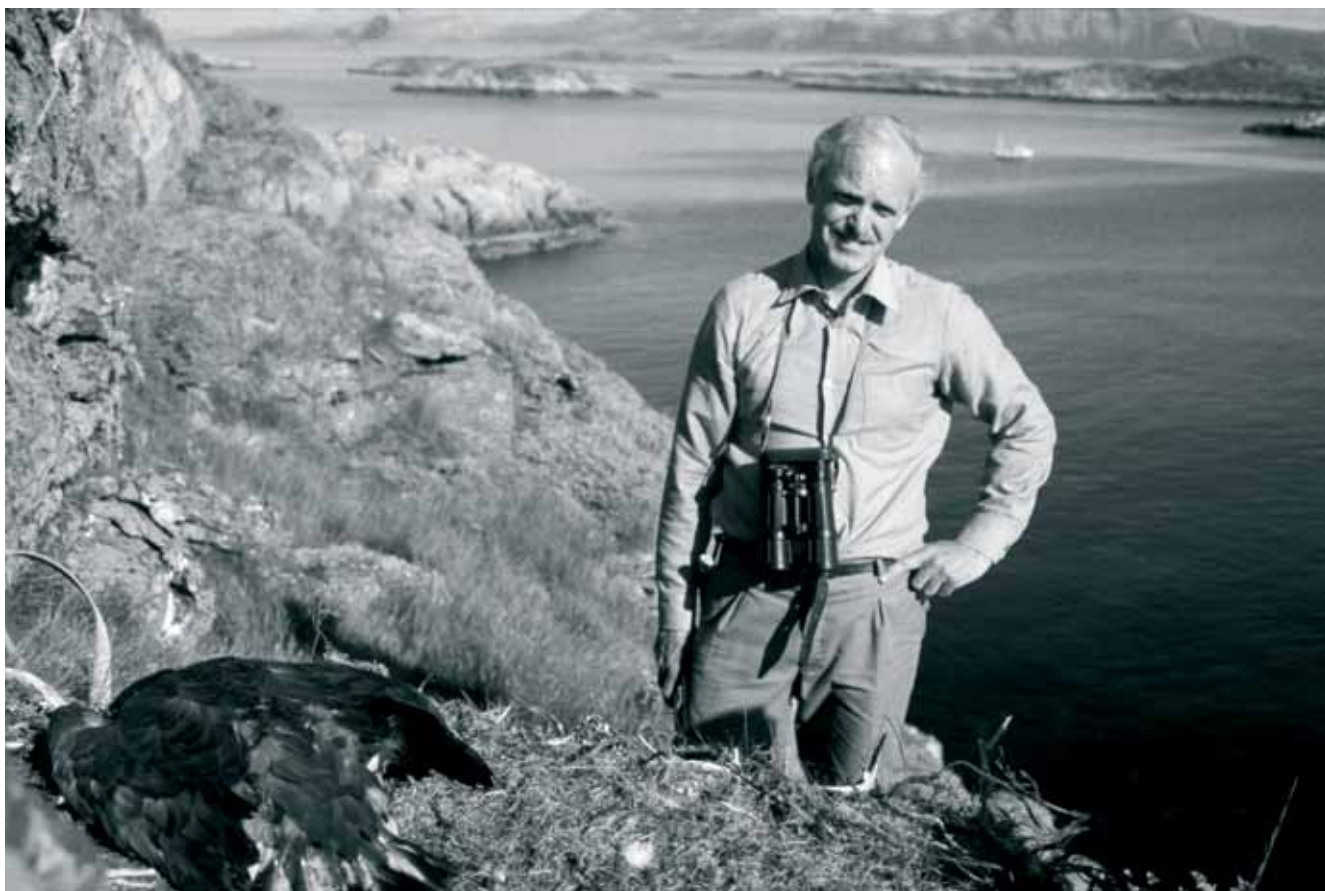
3

The crew of RAF Nimrod admire their unusual cargo at Kinloss.

4

Unloading the eaglets at Kinloss, each bird safe in its own cardboard box.

2



3



4

Self-sustaining Fèin-chumailteach

The next few years saw the number of pairs continue to increase but no more than about a dozen young were surviving each year. Then, suddenly, 2003 proved a bumper year. Thirty-one pairs were established by then and no fewer than 26 young flew from 25 clutches laid. The following year proved almost as successful with 19 young, while 2005 saw 24 young fledged.

Such a significant rise in recruits will no doubt give a great boost to the population, but other possible release sites are being considered. Farmland on the east coast of Scotland could offer further habitat similar to parts of Germany and Poland.

5

The author releasing a sea eagle juvenile on the Isle of Rum in 1980.

6

An adult sea eagle carrying a fish.



5



Protection Dion

In common with all other birds of prey in Britain, sea eagles and their nest sites are fully protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004.

It is illegal to:

- shoot, poison or otherwise kill sea eagles
- disturb them at the nest
- take eggs or young or
- destroy nest sites.

Heavy fines and even imprisonment may be imposed on anyone who breaks these laws.

Despite this, cases of egg-collecting and persecution still occur. SNH, RSPB and many local people are constantly vigilant. Nest sites are kept under close surveillance by RSPB field staff to ensure that the birds can breed without being disturbed.

Even well-meaning members of the public or birdwatchers can disrupt the birds' breeding cycle, keeping the parents off eggs or vulnerable chicks by straying too close and lingering too long. At least four sea eagle clutches have been taken by egg collectors and it is extremely disappointing to see that this illegal habit still persists.

Any animal population will normally have a higher death rate amongst its youngest age group. But being so fond of carrion, sea eagles – especially the inexperienced young – remain particularly threatened by illegally poisoned baits.

Amongst the 25 or so dead sea eagles that had been reported up to the end of 2004, at least six were victims of persecution, mainly by illegal poisoning. Even worse, two-thirds of the poisoned birds were adults. Losing established breeding birds and the long and productive life they may have had is damaging the efforts to reintroduce the sea eagle.

The Glengarry cull

Between 1837 and 1840 it is documented that the Glengarry estate killed 1,372 birds of prey, a count that included no fewer than 27 sea eagles. This was by no means an isolated incident.

Sad saga in Morar

In spring 2002 a nesting sea eagle was found poisoned in Morar. One year later his mate was also found poisoned. These illegal, barbaric and highly damaging incidents caused outrage locally and beyond. The police and local community are now increasingly vigilant. Both dead birds had been imported from Norway in the mid 1990s. They had been breeding together since 2000.

7



8

7

A sea eagle perched in a tree.

8

Island communities cooperate with the police in protecting the nesting sea eagles.



1

Where to see sea eagles

Far am faicear iolairean-mhara

Throughout the world, governments are more and more committed to conservation and the biodiversity of life. Indeed when it began, the sea eagle reintroduction in Scotland was seen as a 'ground breaking' effort which has since paved the way for many other similar conservation projects.

Gradually, if allowed, sea eagles could re-establish themselves in suitable areas all over the country. But, for now, the Hebrides remains your best chance of seeing these magnificent birds. Communities have developed a sense of pride and ownership and consider the sea eagle a valuable tourist attraction. Indeed, the presence of sea eagles is now seen as a welcome benefit to a local economy.

Nowhere have you a better chance of seeing sea eagles than in Skye or Mull. During the breeding season, at the Aros Centre near Portree on the Isle of Skye, the public can follow a pair of sea eagles through CCTV cameras set up near their nest. In Mull, the Forestry Commission and local community partnership keeps an observation hide near another nest where the birds and their chicks can be viewed from a safe distance.

A few people remain unconvinced that bringing sea eagles back to Scotland was justified, when so much effort had been put in over the last couple of centuries to get rid of them. But the extermination of the species was little more than a blatant act of vandalism and is something that would not be tolerated today.



1

Young and adult fighting over food in winter time. Note the darker plumage and beak of the younger sea eagle.

2

Birdwatchers scan the sky for sea eagles above Mull.

Helping sea eagles

Sibh fhèin agus na h-iolairean

The reintroduction programme is looked after by a UK project team which organises efforts to monitor and protect the sea eagles. This is made up of representatives from SNH, the RSPB, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH).

As the project continues, it is becoming easier to come across sea eagles in the wild. Most still frequent the west coast of Scotland, but younger birds do tend to wander further afield. One youngster was seen recently in the centre of Glasgow! A few have strayed into England and Ireland but we know of only one bird that has ever made it back to Norway, where it is now breeding.

Most of the birds released or bred in Scotland have been marked with metal leg-rings, each with an individual number and return address. You are unlikely to see this in the wild, unless you come across a dead bird. But many of the sea eagles also wear coloured and numbered wing tags, which are more easily visible. Any details of tag colour or pattern are especially helpful in building up a picture of the fortunes of individual birds or age classes.

All sightings help add detail to the success of the project so please send any records, together with your own contact details, to:

RSPB, Etive House, Beechwood Park,
Inverness IV2 3BW.
Telephone: 01463 715000

You can contact the Sea Eagle project team through:

Species Group, SNH Headquarters, Great Glen House,
Leachkin Road, Inverness IV3 8NW





1

Finding out more about sea eagles

Leughadh a bharrachd

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Websites

More details about the project can be found through the SNH website:
www.snh.gov.uk/publications/on-line/naturallyscottish/seaeagles/
or the RSPB site:
www.rspb.org.uk/birds/guide/w/whitetailedeagle/index.asp

For our younger readers

SNH's free 'all about . . . White-tailed Sea Eagles' leaflet is available from the Publishing Unit at Scottish Natural Heritage.

This leaflet can be downloaded from the Publications area of the SNH website or ordered from:
The Publishing Unit,
Battleby, Redgorton,
Perth PH1 3EW
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About the author

John Love first met sea eagles on Fair Isle in 1968. His holiday there coincided with an early reintroduction attempt of the species. A graduate in zoology at Aberdeen University, he joined Nature Conservancy Council in 1975 to work on Rum on the Sea Eagle Reintroduction Project, and is still a member of the UK Project Team. In 1983 his first book, *The Return of the Sea Eagle*, was published. This SNH booklet now brings the story up to date. Since 1992 John has worked as an Area Officer for the Western Isles, based in South Uist.

