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White-tailed eagles Iolairean sùil na grèine

Fortunes have changed dramatically over the centuries for the UK's largest eagle and the fourth largest bird of prey in the world. White-tailed eagles (also known as sea eagles) were revered as special birds in the Bronze Age and, though we are unclear of their significance, sea eagle remains have been found in ancient burial chambers. Competition with human activity, however, brought massive declines and even extinction in many western European countries by the 19th and early 20th centuries. By the mid 20th century, pollution compounded the problems to such an extent that even the Scandinavian population, which had been considered healthy, was in dangerous decline.

This critical low was recognised in the nick of time and the tide turned. The introduction of legal measures to protect the birds in Norway, the banning of DDT from agricultural and industrial use and the reintroduction of sea eagles to Scotland, and later Israel, have all contributed to a gradual recovery of this magnificent species. Several other European countries are now considering reintroduction projects.



Iain Erskine

Sea eagle project team

The sea eagle project is overseen by a team of representatives from Scottish Natural Heritage, RSPB Scotland and other individual experts. The project team is responsible for managing the reintroduction, co-ordinating survey and monitoring work, management issues and protection of our sea eagle population.

Thank you

The fortunes of sea eagles in Scotland continue to improve thanks to the support of many individuals, businesses and organisations, both in Scotland and abroad. Without your contributions, the recovery of this species would not be possible. Thank you.

Reintroduction

At one time, sea eagles were widespread in the United Kingdom. Scotland and Ireland were the main strongholds, but places such as the Isle of Wight and the Lake District held pairs in the 18th century.

Sadly, persecution and egg collecting brought about the extinction of the original UK population. The last pair of sea eagles in the UK are known to have nested on Skye in 1916. Unlike ospreys, which are migrants and found their own way back to Scotland, sea eagles had to be reintroduced.

Attempts to reintroduce the birds in 1950s and 60s were unsuccessful, but provided valuable lessons for the main reintroduction, which started in 1975. Over the following ten years 82 young sea eagles were brought from Norway and released on the Isle of Rum.

The first successful breeding took place in 1985 when a five-year-old male and a six-year-old female reared a single chick on Mull, the first sea eagle chick in Scotland for 70 years. Although sea eagles gradually recolonised the west coast of Scotland, with Mull and Skye emerging as strongholds, the population was still vulnerable. A further 59 Norwegian chicks were released in Wester Ross between 1993 and 1998.

In 2000, supporters of the sea eagle project celebrated the fledging of the 100th chick from the new population. With 24 chicks fledging from a breeding population of 28 pairs in 2005, this brings the number of wild-fledged chicks to 192.

Fact file

Wingspan: 2-2.4 m

Overall length: 0.7-0.9 m

Weight: 3075-5430 g (male)
4080-6920 g (female)

Oldest known: believed to be 36 years (average lifespan 11 years)

Gaelic names: lolair suil na greine (eagle with the sunlit eye), lolair mara (eagle of the sea)

Foreign names: Havorn (Norwegian and Danish)
Bielik (Polish) Seeadler/Aaren (German)
Erne (Scots) Havsorn (Swedish)
Merikotka (Finnish) Eryr cynffonwyn (Welsh)

Behaviour: pair for life, though if one dies replacement can occur quickly. Bond is formed aged four or five when a permanent home range is chosen. They have a characteristic aerial courtship display which culminates in the pair locking claws mid-air and whirling earthwards in a series of

spectacular cartwheels. Sea eagles are much more vocal than golden eagles, particularly during the breeding season and especially the male when near the eyrie. Calls can sometimes take on the form of a duet between the pair.

Nest: nests are built on cliff ledges or in trees, by both male and female from twigs and branches, lined with rushes and grasses. Being faithful to their territories, once

they breed, the same nest may be used on and off for decades. In Scandinavia, trees have been known to collapse under the weight of enormous, long established nests.

Habitat: Territories between 30-70 km² normally in sheltered coastal locations. Sometimes found in-land by lochs and along river systems. Can overlap with golden eagle territories, though competition between the two species is limited. Golden eagles are a bird of mountain and moorland while sea eagles prefer coast and sea.



Chris Gomersal (RSPB-images.com)

Eggs-fledge: two-three eggs are laid two-five days apart in March or April and are incubated for 38 days by both parents. Once hatched, chicks are quite tolerant of one another (unlike golden eagles), though the first hatched is often larger and dominant at feeding times. The female does

most of the brooding and direct feeding, with the male taking over now and then. Young are able to feed themselves from five-six weeks and they fledge at 11-12 weeks, remaining in the vicinity of the nest, dependent on their parents for a further six-ten weeks.

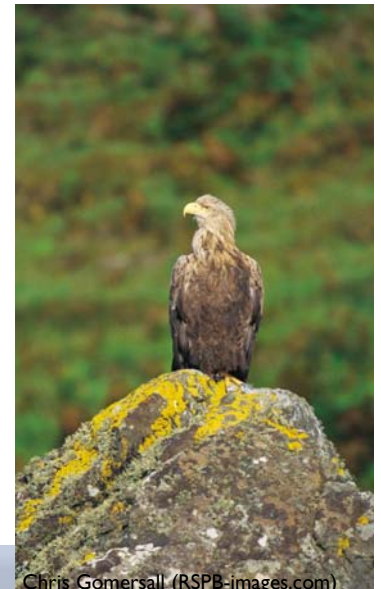


Justin Grant

Diet: sea eagles are opportunistic hunters and carrion feeders, relying on surprise rather than agility to catch a variety of fish, birds (mainly seabirds and shorebirds but particularly fulmars), rabbits and hares. Larger items such as sheep and deer tend to be taken as carrion, though lambs may be predated in some areas. They regularly pirate food from otters and other birds. During the breeding season they require 500-600g of food per day when actively rearing young. During the winter months they tend to be inactive most of the day and their intake falls to 200-300g per day.



Chris Gomersall (RSPB-images.com)



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Wing tagging

In order to monitor the movements and survival of sea eagles, some have been fitted with coloured wing tags. Records of all sightings of sea eagles and in particular the wing tag information is a most welcome contribution to the monitoring programme. If you see a sea eagle, please get in touch with your nearest RSPB office.

The key details are location (ideally grid reference), date and time of sighting, age (if discernable) and what the bird was doing (soaring, direct flight, perched). Recording the colour of wing tags is really useful, but if you are lucky enough to pick up the legend as well, please keep a note of the symbol used, its colour and whether it was the left or right wing tag.

The colour of the wing tag denotes which year the sea eagle was born.

1994	Yellow	2000	Yellow
1995	White	2001	White
1996	Grey	2002	Pale blue
1997	Blue	2003	Pink
1998	Green	2004	Green
1999	Red	2005	Red



Jon Pear

Contact:

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Inverness office 01463 715 000

Lewis office 01851 703 296

Mull office 01680 300 387

Skye office 01471 822 882

Uist office 01876 560 287

Alternatively, visit our website at

www.rspb.org.uk/scotland to download a sea eagle sighting form.



Justin Grant

Identification

Sea eagles are large vulture-like birds with huge, deep bills and long necks. They have medium brown plumage, dark flight feathers with a paler head, neck and breast (appearing yellow-grey) white tail and yellow bill. Male and female are similar, though females are slightly larger. Juveniles have mottled or uniform dark brown plumage and only get their white tail and pale head at final moult into adulthood (aged five).

Sea eagles are sometimes confused with golden eagles, which are almost as big but have a much slimmer build. The flight silhouette can help distinguish the two species.

Wings

Sea eagle: broad with parallel edges

Golden eagle: narrower with shallow S-curve to trailing edge

Tail & head

Sea eagle: short, wedge-shaped tail, both head and tail protrude roughly equal amounts front and back, tail is dark in juveniles, attaining full white by age five

Golden eagle: long, fan-shaped tail, head protrudes less at the front than tail does at the back, juvenile's tail has white band

Beak

Sea eagle: large, bright yellow in adults, but dark in juvenile birds

Golden eagle: dark grey with a yellow cere around nostrils

Legs

Sea eagle: bare bright yellow tarsi (ankles)

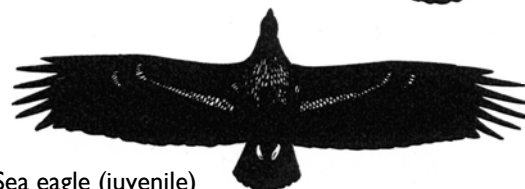
Golden eagle: feathered to the toes



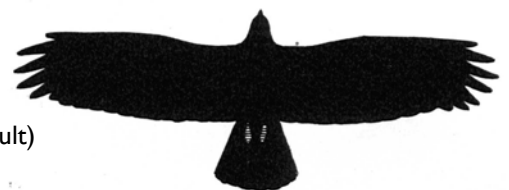
Sea eagle (adult)



Golden eagle (juvenile)



Sea eagle (juvenile)



Golden eagle (adult)



Sea eagle



Golden eagle

Viewing

There are currently just over 30 breeding pairs of sea eagles in the Scottish population. Thanks to their almost mystic ability to conceal themselves they are seldom seen. However, there are two viewing projects - one based on Mull, the other on Skye - which offer the chance of seeing these magnificent birds of prey.

Mull: Guided visits to a temporary hide with views to the nest area of a pair of sea eagles are available from Easter to the end of July when nest selection allows. Contact 01688 302 038 for further details.

Skye: CCTV camera on a local nest beams live pictures whenever possible to the Aros Centre, just south of Portree, where RSPB staff are on hand to interpret the behaviour of the birds. Exhibition open March to October. Contact 01478 613649 for full details.



Chris Gomersall (RSPB-images.com)



Chris Gomersall (RSPB-images.com)

Sea eagles are now found throughout the north west Highlands and Islands and are most visible from January through to March, as they establish their territory. Your best chance of seeing birds is undoubtedly to visit Skye or Mull, where they can be seen almost anywhere. While on Skye, a drive north, round the Trotternish peninsula may offer good views of sea eagles as will a short walk round the north side of Portree bay. On mainland Scotland, a favoured spot is Gruinard Bay, near Laide, where sea eagles can be seen hunting on Gruinard Island.

Please remember, that it is illegal to approach and disturb a sea eagle at its nest, unless under special licence. Sea eagles, along with Scotland's other wildlife, are a special and valued aspect of our heritage. Please have consideration for our wildlife and for those who work and live in the area.

RSPB Film Unit have produced a film, *The Eagle Odyssey*, available on DVD and VHS which tells the remarkable story of this stunning bird, its habits and behaviour and reveals how its close relationship with man has proved a mixed but ultimately successful association. Copies cost £12.99 (VHS) or £17.99 (DVD) plus £2 p&p. They can be ordered by contacting Christine Cooke on 01767 680 551.

Contacts

For more information about sea eagles, or any other aspect of RSPB Scotland's work, please contact :

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Further reading

Love, J. A., *The Return of the Sea Eagle*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Helander, Marquiss & Bowerman, *Sea Eagle 2000, Proceedings from an International conference at Bjorko, Sweden, September 2000*. Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, Stockholm.

Helping

To report a sea eagle sighting please contact your nearest office (see above or previous page for contact details).

Volunteers regularly help with monitoring sea eagles, particularly during the breeding season. We also have office based roles, such as data-input, which is vital to our population analysis. If you'd like to get involved, please get in touch.

You can also support our work by becoming a member of the RSPB. 80% of our income comes from memberships, with approximately 73p in every £1 is spent on our reserves. To find out about becoming a member, please telephone 01463 715 000.