



## RETURN OF THE NATIVE

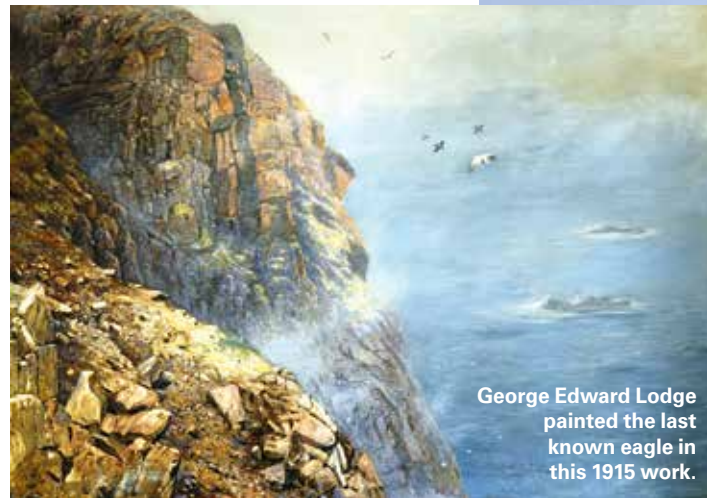
A century ago, the last UK white-tailed eagle was shot in Scotland. But now they're back. RSPB Mull Officer **Dave Sexton**, who's worked with the birds for decades, traces their story back from extinction.

It always brings a lump to my throat. The thought of the last known white-tailed eagle in the UK in 1918 sitting atop a wild, wind-swept cliff in Shetland searching in vain for its mate. Indeed, looking for any other of its kind. What must it be like for the last one of a species? They must feed and preen as normal of course, but for many hours a day, sometimes for years on end, they sit alone and watch... and hope.

This last sea eagle had been widowed eight years previously in 1910, but returned faithfully every year after to the eyrie where they'd raised their chicks together, to "gaze out over the wide horizon and wait".

Sadly, no new mate would ever appear over that horizon. All over Scotland sea eagles were being ruthlessly persecuted – shot, poisoned, collected and their eggs stolen. From what had once been the commonest, most widespread eagle in the UK, nesting the length and breadth of the kingdom from the Isle of Wight to the far Northern Isles, its population was reduced to a tiny remnant.

A few years previously in 1916, the last recorded breeding attempt had already occurred on Skye. Doubtless a few immature birds – and even some unpaired adults – still drifted, lost and aimless ►



George Edward Lodge painted the last known eagle in this 1915 work.

▶ along the remotest sea cliffs, but for all intents and purposes, sea eagles were already extinct as a breeding species. What a desperately sad and shameful period in our history.

Folklore has it that this last UK sea eagle was a female and an albino. There's a poignant black-and-white photograph taken sometime between 1912 and 1918 by Harry Brewster Macpherson who travelled to Shetland from Strathspey to record this remarkable bird for posterity. It remains the only known photograph of an original British sea eagle ever taken. Harry might not have realised then that the bird sheltering on the cliff below him was probably the last of its kind.

There's an equally moving account by the wildlife artist, naturalist, falconer and indeed taxidermist George Edward Lodge who also went on an expedition in 1914 to paint this bird. In his diary from 28–30 June of that year he noted:

"North Roe. Went to where the sea eagle lives. We saw her from a long way off, like a white spot on the cliff below the old nest, which is still there on a 500-foot cliff. She was very wild and flew off and away and we did not see her again.

"She is quite white, and looks as white as a gull while flying. This shelter was a big crack or chimney with a split in the side opposite the entrance, from where we could look across to the nest, which was about 100 feet from the top of the cliff. I spent a time here making an oil sketch of the nesting cliff; but it was a horrid cramped position and a bad afternoon, blowing half a gale of wind and driving thick drizzling mist across. I was fairly well sheltered and worked for one and a half

hours, but was then too cold and cramped to continue so went home in the rain.

"Very windy. Went again to see the eagle. She was not in sight when we got there. It was too windy to paint so I made a pencil sketch of the rock in the immediate vicinity of the nest. While so engaged a hoodie crow continually mobbed something round the corner where we had no view, as it was shut in by the rocks on our left. Meade-Waldo and Ogilvie-Grant therefore went out to the top of the cliffs to investigate, and out flew the eagle mobbed by two or three hoodies. I had a very short

view of her as she passed across my crack opening at a distance of about a hundred yards. I noticed that her primaries were not white but appeared to be light brown."

Despite the terrible weather and the fleeting glimpses of this apparition, George Lodge did manage to get what he needed and noted, "I got material for a picture and the wild weather is eminently in keeping with the subject."

But like all folklore, it's sometimes rather more fiction than fact! In truth, the bird probably wasn't an albino. As Lodge states, he noticed the primary feathers on the

**FURTHER READING**

Find out more about UK white-tails in *A Saga of Sea Eagles* by John Love (Whittles Publishing, 2013) or Dave Sexton's own book *Birdwatching on Mull and Iona* (Brown & Whittaker, 2011).

This 1985 photo shows the first white-tailed eagle chick to fledge in the UK for 70 years.



## EAGLE ECOLOGY

### LIFESPAN

20–25 years, sometimes older. The oldest pair on Mull disappeared in 2016 aged 37 (estimated). They pair for life, but will re-pair if one partner is lost. They mature at five years old when they develop the yellow beak, pale head and white tail of an adult.

### DIET

Mainly seabirds like gulls, fulmars and auks – but also geese, crows, ravens and other birds; mammals such as rabbits and hares; fish and carrion such as deer and sheep (see below) in the hills, and cetaceans and seals on the shoreline, particularly in winter. They'll scavenge fish off otters and chase gannets, gulls and herons to get them to cough up their supper (known as klepto-parasitism).

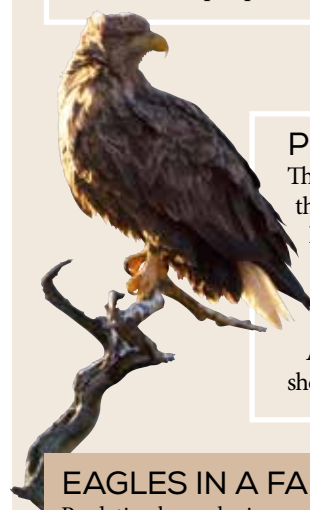
### NEST

Large, stick-built nest lined with grasses, on trees, crags, cliffs or occasionally on the ground. Nests are tended year-round in the run-up to egg laying in March. Incubation of one or two (rarely three) eggs lasts 38 days and both male and female do their share. Chicks hatch a day or two apart and are more tolerant of each other in the nest compared to golden eagles. Chicks are fully grown at 10 weeks but often don't fledge until 12 weeks. They may remain with their parents through the autumn and sometimes the winter.



### POPULATION

There are still less than 120 pairs of white-tailed eagles in the UK, all in Scotland, so they remain vulnerable. However, population growth is strong, with a target of over 200 pairs by 2025. The main threats come from nest-site disturbance such as from egg collecting and irresponsible photography or birdwatching behaviour. Also from direct persecution such as poisoning and shooting to protect livestock and game-rearing interests.



### EAGLES IN A FARMING LANDSCAPE

Predation by eagles is one of many environmental factors which can, at times, have an effect on some hill farms. We know small numbers of lambs can be predated by individual eagles in some years. We recognise the impact this has on the farmers involved so, with our partners in Scottish Natural Heritage and the National Farmers Union Scotland, RSPB staff are part of national and local sea eagle stakeholder groups seeking practical solutions to any issues which might arise. Farmers affected are eligible to join SNH's Sea Eagle Management Scheme which offers funding for positive management initiatives. In addition a Sea Eagle Action Plan has been produced which includes field trials of deterrents around lambing parks and on the open hill. Farmers and landowners have been essential to the success of the reintroduction project since the beginning and that vital contribution is gratefully acknowledged by all partners.

Photo: Chris Gomershall. Painting and written material © reproduced with permission of the George Edward Lodge Trust

Photos: Mark Hamblin, Laurie Campbell (both rspb-images.com); Alamy Stock Photo



“As they all vanished behind a ridge, we looked at each other in disbelief; we’d just witnessed conservation history. Sea eagles really were back home at last.”

► This widowed, single, leucistic male probably wasn’t the absolute last of his kind! Reliable reports persisted into the 1920s and even occasional later ones, sometimes of a pair but normally of lone birds roaming the Highlands and Islands.

However, for now, our almost white single bird in Shetland is the last proven, documented individual. Despite three decades of protection by islanders and RSPB Watcher James Hay, even this bird was eventually shot in 1918 by “an old man” no longer able to ignore financial inducements offered by collectors. Effectively this was the end for sea eagles in the UK. Even if a few lone immatures continued to haunt the wider landscape, they too will have eventually been killed.

But fast-forward 40 years and both amateur and professional conservationists were already trying to realise the dream of bringing this native bird back. RSPB Scotland Director George Waterston, so famous for his work with ospreys, also had a long held ambition to bring sea eagles home. Indeed, with his cousin Pat

Sandeman, they made the first attempt to do just that by releasing three Norwegian sea eagles at Glen Etive in Argyll in 1959. While one of the three survived for at least a year before being caught in a fox trap, another ended up in captivity and the fate of the third remains unknown.

In 1968, a further four immature sea eagles from Norway were released on Fair Isle involving another RSPB legend, Roy Dennis.

While both releases involved too few birds to be ultimately successful, important lessons were learned for the next “official” reintroduction attempt on the Isle of Rum starting in 1975. This was to become the first of three phases of releasing birds gifted by Norway to the west and east coasts of Scotland, concluding in 2012.

The detail and successful results of this translocation project are well documented elsewhere, but it was the first tantalising reports of sea eagles wandering away from Rum, and on to the nearby Isle of Mull, which first gripped my fascination (my family might say obsession!). I was on a ►

## CELEBRITY EAGLES

### 1 Blondie

Blondie was the all-time poster girl for UK sea eagles. She was brought from Norway in the late 1970s, released on Rum, settled on Mull and became the mother of the first chick to hatch in 1985 (pictured). She and her mate produced many chicks in her lifetime; her dynasty continues today.



### 2 Skye and Frisa

Their nest on Mull hosted the first live broadcast of *Springwatch* in 2005, and went on to star in many TV productions and films. Frisa was one of Blondie’s chicks in 1992 and is also a striking bird to watch, and a great mum to the pair’s many chicks.



### 3 Itchy and Scratchy

Skye and Frisa’s chicks in the *Springwatch* nest, named by Simon King and Dervaig Primary School. They had a cult following online and on “The Watches”. Scratchy was last seen in 2008 but Itchy paired up with a female and is still breeding on an island in the southern Hebrides.



### 4 Mara

In 2008, Skye and Frisa’s chick Mara became the first UK sea eagle to be fitted with a satellite tag. We followed his progress for five years until he settled on the mainland and started a family. His tag fell off as planned, and was retrieved after his life story was plotted by satellite. He’ll go down in the history books like his grandmother, Blondie.



### 5 Kellan

Fledged from another nest in 2010 Kellan was found by a farmer, unable to fly. He was rescued and nursed back to health by the Scottish SPCA. Following operations to save his injured wing and a lengthy recuperation he had five more years in the wild before sadly being found dead in 2015, possibly following a dispute with another eagle.



## WHITE-TAILS ON THE MAP

**Outer Hebrides** currently has one third of the Scottish population, with the highest concentration along the East Lewis coastline. Join the RSPB’s Eagle Walk in North Harris, follow the Outer Hebrides Bird of Prey Trail ([hebridesbirdofpreytrail.co.uk](http://hebridesbirdofpreytrail.co.uk)) or join a local boat trip.


Site of the last known nest site of a native UK sea eagle.

**MAP KEY**  
 ● Where to see eagles  
 ★ Reintroduction sites



Photos: Kevin Sawford (rspb-images.com); Chris Gomershall; Mike Langman; Debby Thorne; Iain Erskine; Gordon Buchanan/BBC; John McAvey/SPCA

Map illustration: Evelyn Sinclair. Archive photo (taken c. 1912-1918): HB Macpherson, courtesy of the late Hon D Weir, the Macpherson family, Balavil and John Love



“This very special, lone young eagle would also gaze out over the wide horizon and soar over distant mountains.”

► birding trip to Mull with my friend Eric Kidd in May 1980. We’d already seen our first ever otter in the wild and had watched golden eagles displaying. Then, on a late-afternoon drive along the shore road by Loch Spelve, we screeched to a halt as we’d both simultaneously glimpsed the massive, broad, plank-like wings of an adult sea eagle flapping hard across the loch, being pursued by a mob of angry hooded crows.

As they all vanished behind a ridge, we looked at each other in disbelief; we’d just witnessed conservation history. Sea eagles really were back home at last. Soon after, I began to pester long-suffering Richard Porter and Mike Everett in the Species Protection Department at RSPB HQ begging for a job to protect the first known nesting attempts.

My persistence eventually paid off and I was given a contract in 1984 to watch over an active nest on Mull with my colleague Mike Madders and boss Roger Broad. History was not to be made that year, however, as the single infertile egg failed to hatch. Undeterred, we were both back the following year and joined by Keith Morton to watch over the same pair, which were trying again.

Finally, 1985 was to be their year. And ours! This pioneering pair of Norwegian – now Scottish – white-tailed

eagles hatched and fledged the first wild-bred chick in the UK for some 70 years. That year we all witnessed wildlife conservation history (along with some heartache and near heart failure along the way). One of the two chicks that hatched died after a few weeks so we were down to one surviving chick. The pressure was on. It, too, very nearly didn’t survive long after fledging. Late one gloomy August day, we watched in horror as it ditched in the middle of a choppy grey loch and as dusk fell, appeared to slip beneath the waves. Sick with anguish and anxiety, we returned at dawn to retrieve what we knew would be a body. But there, sitting on the shoreline with his proud parents, was our chick; rather soggy but otherwise none the worse for his unexpected baptism in a cold Mull loch. Unable to contain my joy at finding him alive and well, I fell back into the dew soaked heather with the early morning sun on my face and wept tears of utter relief.

Unlike the lonely old sea eagle in Shetland in 1918, this very special, lone young eagle would also go on to “gaze out over the wide horizon and wait”, but he would see many others of his kind soaring over distant mountains, their echoing calls drifting towards him on the sea breeze. Tùsanaich a’ Tilleadh – Iolaire sùil na grèine: the return of the native – the eagle with the sunlit eye was underway. ■



**Dave Sexton’s first visit to Mull on a 1978 school trip sparked a lifelong love affair with the island and its wildlife, particularly the white-tailed eagles. After bagging his dream job with the RSPB on Mull in 1984/5, he went on to become Head of Reserves for RSPB Scotland before the magnetic magic of Mull lured him back again in 2003.**

### JOINING FORCES FOR EAGLES

Sea eagles wouldn’t be back in Scotland without many people, organisations and governments working together. It’s not possible to thank everyone, but special thanks should go to Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish and Norwegian Governments.

Forestry Commission Scotland, Police Scotland, Scottish SPCA, private landowners and farmers also played a vital role in the reintroduction. Today, much of the monitoring is done by volunteers and the Scottish Raptor Study Groups, while others play a key role in helping people see the eagles, including VisitScotland, NW Mull Community Woodland, SW Mull & Iona Development and the Mull & Iona Community Trust.