

WINTERWATCH
SPECIAL

EAGLE *isle*

The isle of Harris has been described as the best place in Europe to see golden eagles. What makes it so good and what does it teach us about their behaviour, asks **James Fair**.

Photos by **Laurie Campbell**

With large eyes and retinas that contain up to one million light-sensitive cells per square millimetre, golden eagles have super-sensitive sight – scientists say they can detect prey from 1.6km away.



In the airy kitchen of his self-built eco-house filled with Hebridean sunshine, Robin Reid is directing me to a birdwatching nirvana on his Ordnance Survey map. The RSPB conservation officer for the Western Isles points to Tarbert, on the isle of Harris, then follows the A859 with his finger, first west, then north as it snakes its way through the island's mountainous interior.

"You drop down to Loch Seaforth, where there's an outdoor centre, then there's a sharp bend and a car park," he says in an accent that blends his native Swedish with Geordie from his boyhood and the Scots of his home today.

The car park is at Bowglass – in Gaelic, Bogha Glas. By the standards of Harris, with its picture-perfect white sandy beaches, orchid-rich machairs and purple-heather moorland, it's an unremarkable location – especially for somewhere that Robin believes is the best place in the whole of Europe to see golden eagles.

"The track that goes up from Bowglass runs between four different golden eagle territories," Robin says, pointing to the footpath heading west. "If you spent a day between February and June going up that track, and you knew how to pick out the birds from 1km away – and the weather was half-decent – there's a good chance that you'd see five to ten different eagles. I can't think of anywhere else in Europe where you can walk up a glen and potentially see so many eagles in just three or four hours."

You've also got a chance of seeing a pair of white-tailed eagles that commute through the glen on the way to their hunting grounds out at sea, but for many visitors to Scotland golden eagles are the main attraction. They are

perhaps more representative of the country's mountainous topography and more symbolic of wilderness, and they thrive in the undisturbed interior of Harris.

There are an estimated 90 pairs of golden eagles in the Outer Hebrides – 20 per cent of the UK population of 440 pairs. Between 35 and 40 pairs live on Harris and south-east Lewis, and 22 pairs in a roadless, 500km² area of North Harris and south-west Lewis. On Skye, theoretically a more productive ecosystem, eagle density is a third lower.

EAGLE HEAVEN

"The Western Isles and Mull have the highest recorded density of breeding golden eagles in Europe," Robin says, citing three contributory factors. First, the heather-dominated mountain landscape supports the golden eagle's preferred prey species: mountain hares and red grouse. Second, because there are no driven grouse shoots – where there is a tendency to require large returns for high-paying clients – there is little history of persecution in the islands. The main field sports are deer stalking and fishing, neither of them affected by high numbers of apex raptors. Third, it has an expanse of good habitat that is unfragmented by intensive farming and provides plenty of good nest sites, too.

"Another factor is ►

Above: a female eagle brings a mountain hare for her chick. Large prey is often 'prepared' away from the nest; she may have fed on the head before bringing the body. Below: the North Harris Trust's Matt Watts prepares to lead an 'eagle walk'. These take place in spring, summer and autumn, and attract up to 40 people at a time.



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OUTER HEBRIDES BIRD OF PREY TRAIL

LOCH STIAPABHAT LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

In winter flocks of wildfowl and waders attract white-tailed eagles, hen harriers (left), peregrines and merlin, as well as resident buzzards.

More details: <http://bit.ly/1AuTHVU>

ALINE COMMUNITY WOODLAND

From the car park, follow the track down to Loch Seaforth. There are white-tailed and golden eagles here, as well as sparrowhawks in the woodland.

More details: <http://bit.ly/1GUUHVc>

BOWGLASS (BOGHA GLAS)

From the car park, walk up Glen Vigidale for the chance to see 5–10 golden and white-tailed eagles in one day. Best in late winter and spring.

More details: <http://bit.ly/16vTF7a>

RAVENSPPOINT

A visitor centre with café, hostel, shop and museum overlooks Loch Erisort, which is good for white-tailed eagles. Open all year.

More details: <http://bit.ly/1wI7IW8>

NORTH HARRIS EAGLE OBSERVATORY

Golden eagles are most active in the spring, white-tailed eagles in autumn and winter. Also watch for merlin (right) at this spot a 2km walk from the car park.

More details: <http://bit.ly/1z15poK>



Sound of Harris ferry

COMMITTEE ROAD

From the car park at the high point of Committee Road, look out over the moorland for hen harriers, short-eared owls (above) and merlin. This is one of the few places on the Uists where long-eared owls can be seen as well.

RUEVAL

This is the highest point (124m) on Benbecula, with a good track running from the A865 round its southern side. Watch for breeding hen harriers, merlin and short-eared owls, and golden and white-tailed eagles as you get close to the rugged east coastline.



Sound of Barra ferry

BARRA

CRAIGSTON

Follow the A888 for 5km west and north from Castlebay. Good for both merlin and golden eagles.

BEINN LANGAIS

This 90m-high hill just off the A867 (10km from Lochmaddy, main settlement on North Uist) attracts golden and white-tailed eagles. In spring hen harriers, short-eared owls and merlin breed on the surrounding moorland.

LOCH DRUIDIBEG

Hen harriers and short-eared owls breed in low-lying heather moorland at this large freshwater loch. Look for golden eagles to the south and white-tailed eagles following the shore as they cross the island.

More details: <http://bit.ly/1C5FcJ5>

LOCH SGIOPORT

Look for white-tailed eagles on headlands and skerries at this sea loch 3km east of Loch Druidibeg. High ridges to the south attract golden eagles. Peregrines (left) are also seen on the coast.

This male eagle has just fed on and then removed the remains of a previous kill from the nest



Peregrine: Sam Hobart
Merlin: M. Varesvuo/NPL



Watch for soaring birds from the eagle observatory in Glen Miavaig on North Harris Trust land.



The RSPB's Robin and Anna Reid ring and take measurements from a white-tailed eagle chick on Lewis.



Above: a juvenile (note its streaky plumage) feeds on a deer carcass. Golden eagles rely more on carrion in poor weather. Below: in flight golden eagles often hold their wings in a shallow 'V', though it isn't always obvious.



the absence of foxes,” Robin adds. “Here and Mull, but not Skye, are free from foxes [and always have been] and other mammalian predators. So the birds have everything – deer and sheep carcasses, hares, rabbits, grouse – to themselves.” Being half Swedish, Robin has a thorough knowledge of Scandinavia – but says that region can’t rival the Western Isles for golden eagle sightings. “The open terrain here makes it a great place for watching birds,” he says. “The heavily forested landscape in Sweden makes it impossible to see birds of prey, even though there are a lot of them.”

On Harris, the eagles are largely left to get on with it. The North Harris Trust – a community-owned estate with the conservation of land and wildlife at the heart of its objectives – puts out deer carcasses in the winter, but that’s it. Deer also have to be managed, but that’s true in any part of Scotland. “If the deer density gets too high, the hills get over-grazed,” trust ranger Matt Watts says. “That impacts on the habitat for grouse and hares, which in turn impacts on the eagles.”

Golden eagles don’t have Harris and the rest of the Western Isles completely to themselves, however. They face competition, but it’s also airborne: the white-tailed eagle. This bird – which became extinct in the UK in the early 20th century before being reintroduced in the 1970s – has been steadily recolonising the Outer Hebrides

over the past decade. In 2002 there were two pairs on Harris and Lewis, and one on the Uists. Today there are 25, and it’s estimated that there’s room for 50–75 pairs in total. But at the expense of golden eagles? Not necessarily.

THE DIET DIFFERENCE

The two species, though superficially similar, are essentially quite different (see box, p81). Golden eagles are in the genus *Aquila*, but white-tailed (also called sea eagles) are *Haliaeetus* – the same genus as bald and Steller’s sea eagles, more closely related to vultures and kites than ‘true’ eagles.

Compared with their mountain relatives, white-tailed eagles occupy a much broader niche. They will pluck a fish from a loch or the sea, scavenge a deer or sheep carcass, klepto-parasitise a seabird for its dinner or even eat the seabird itself. Golden eagles are hunters first, largely of mammalian prey, and scavengers second. Golden eagles nest in their hunting territory; white-tailed eagles usually nest close to a body of water, in a tree or a crag, and ‘commute’ to their food source. So the two species can live side by side.

Nevertheless there has been some disruption when white-tailed eagles invade their (distant) cousins’ territory. “For the first few years after sea eagles establish themselves in an area, the breeding attempts of neighbouring golden eagles are often disrupted because they get caught up in

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE...

How to know whether you’re watching a golden or white-tailed eagle.



FACT FILE

GOLDEN EAGLE

Aquila chrysaetos

RANGE In UK, confined to Scotland, with one individual in England. Recently reintroduced to the Republic of Ireland.

POPULATION Estimated at 440 pairs across Scotland.

SIZE Body length 0.8–0.93m, wingspan 1.9–2.25m.

STATUS Classified as ‘Least Concern’ by the IUCN.

FACT FILE

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE

Haliaeetus albicilla

RANGE In UK, Scotland; reintroduced to Republic of Ireland.

POPULATION 90 pairs on the west coast and numbers increasing annually; 3 pairs established on the east coast.

SIZE Body length 0.9m, wingspan 2–2.4m.

STATUS Classified as ‘Least Concern’ by the IUCN.

interactions with the larger white-tailed eagles,” Robin says. “Once the two species get used to each other, things calm down and they can co-exist.”

With the launch of the Western Isles’ Bird of Prey Trail, conservationists hope that the ease with which you can see eagles throughout the islands will attract more visitors. Laurie Campbell, a wildlife photographer whose images accompany this article, says that this would benefit local people and the eagles, too.

“They have a saying up there: ‘You can’t eat the landscape,’” he says. “A lot of crofters and hill farmers live on very low incomes, so it is a very marginal existence. It would be good if they saw the benefit of tourist money coming in.” This would also offset any negative attitudes towards eagles that stem from a perception that they take lambs, though Reid says most lambs found in eagle nests have been scavenged rather than killed.

The pros and cons of having eagles in your back yard are hotly debated. A 2011 study found that white-tailed eagles on Mull attract up to £5 million of tourist spend every year, supporting as many as 110 full-time jobs. By and large, according to Mull’s RSPB officer Dave Sexton, their presence is tolerated by farmers and gamekeepers.

Across the rest of Scotland, it’s a different story. Without persecution the country could support between 500 and 600 pairs, according to Stuart Benn, the RSPB’s communications officer for North Scotland – but up to 50 golden eagles may be illegally killed every year. Not only that, there is no reason why golden eagles couldn’t live in many English lowlands, too, from East Anglia to the Somerset Levels.

“A few years ago I went on holiday to southern Sweden and Denmark, and it completely changed my attitude,” he says. “Eagles were hunting rabbits and pheasants over arable fields – and, biologically, there is nothing to stop them doing that here. It’s simply not true that they are

SCOTLAND COULD SUPPORT BETWEEN 500 AND 600 PAIRS OF GOLDEN EAGLES – BUT UP TO 50 MAY BE ILLEGALLY KILLED EACH YEAR.

purely a bird of the mountains – it’s just that they’ve been driven there by human intolerance.”

But if I want to see one for myself, Harris is clearly the place to start. However, during a morning at the North Harris Trust’s eagle observatory with Matt Watts, I draw a blank: the sunny, windless day merely brings out the midges. But surely such conditions should suit our eagles? “You want bright and breezy weather,” Matt says. “If it’s a flat calm and too hot, they’ll do what they have to early on, then sit around for the rest of the day. Rain isn’t a problem, but if the cloud’s down then you won’t see anything.”

VIEW TO A KILL

So, on Robin’s advice, I head to Bowglass a few days later. The weather is more promising – high clouds, a spit of rain and a fresh breeze – and I soon hear the first throaty cronks of ravens, always a sign of something bigger in the sky. And, almost on cue, there are two eagles in my sights, skimming over the rocky ridge to my right.

Later, closer to the promontory of Tom Ruisg, I watch through binoculars as an eagle plummets earthwards, then lose sight of it among the rubble-strewn, heather-clad hillside. Thirty seconds later it’s in the air again, and carrying something that resembles a sack of flour. The load is a mountain hare – I’ve just witnessed my first ever eagle kill.

Best place to see golden eagles in Europe? Who knows. But that’s not a bad outcome for a gentle 1km stroll up a glen on a pleasant, breezy August afternoon. 📸

JAMES FAIR is the environment editor of BBC Wildlife.

+ FIND OUT MORE

● Find details of the Bird of Prey Trail at www.visitouterhebrides.co.uk/see-and-do/trails-and-journeys/bird-of-prey-trail

TWO Golden eagles feature in this year’s *Winterwatch*: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p012msk2

Illustrations by Mikel Langman/rspb-images.com