

Scottish Natural Heritage

Key facts on the golden eagle





Golden eagle

Aquila chrysaetos

The golden eagle is the UK's second largest bird of prey and has a wing span of around 2 metres. Males weigh-in at about 3.5kg but females are heavier at about 5kg. Adult golden eagles are predominantly dark brown with paler feathers around the back of the head – giving the species its name. Juvenile golden eagles are a richer chocolate brown with conspicuous white wing and tail patches.

Habitat:

The rugged and remote terrain of the peatlands, uplands and mountains is the haunt of the golden eagle. Originally they ranged over much of upland Britain and Ireland but persecution and modification of their habitat since the mid 18th century has all but restricted them to the wildest parts of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. A few pairs survive in the hills of southern Scotland but currently there

are none in England. There is a project to reintroduce golden eagles to the mountains of Ireland underway at present.

Ecology:

Golden eagles are opportunistic feeders taking a wide range of prey. Typical food includes hares, rabbits, ptarmigan, grouse, deer calves, seabirds and carrion. They require large home ranges in which to hunt and breed and are highly

territorial, in particular defending the core part of their home range; this area is their territory. Home ranges and territories are used over many years and some pairs have more than one nest (eyrie) and make alternate use of these. Eyries can be on cliffs or in trees and they become large, bulky structures over the years. Golden eagles rarely breed until they are four to five years old and many birds live beyond 30 years. A clutch

typically comprises one to three eggs with two the norm. These are laid between early March and mid April. Incubation lasts 41 – 45 days so that the chicks hatch in late April to early June. The chicks then spend about 70 days in the nest before fledging from July to mid September. The most productive pairs can raise two young but many pairs only raise one. There is a high overall failure rate with the latest national survey recording an average of just 0.36 chicks fledging per pair.

UK population:

The latest national survey was in 2003 and it recorded 442 pairs. Previous national surveys in 1982 and 1992 counted 424 pairs and 422 pairs, respectively. There has therefore been little change in the overall population over the past 20 years. However, this apparent stability disguises some shifts in the population distribution (e.g. there have been increases in the Western Isles and in parts of Caithness and Sutherland but declines in the central and eastern Highlands).

At present, full national surveys are undertaken every 10 years. The Scottish Raptor Study Groups undertake annual monitoring of about half of the current golden eagle population and results are reported through the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme.

International population:

Golden eagles are found throughout the uplands of Europe, Russia, north-west Africa, Asia and North America. There are estimated to be over 50,000 pairs worldwide.

Importance:

The golden eagle is an iconic species for the environment, conservation and culture in many countries. The UK population is c.5% of the total European population and ecologically is very significant as it comprises about a quarter of the population in the mountainous, Atlantic-influenced north west of Europe; hence it contributes significantly to the maintenance of the golden eagles' range. Whilst the UK supports a notable proportion of the golden eagle population, the actual population size is nevertheless relatively small and hence vulnerable to any losses.

Status/conservation protection:

The golden eagle is recognised as a Category 3 Species of European Conservation Concern, indicating that it has an unfavourable conservation status in Europe, and the Birds Directive lists the golden eagle in its Annex 1, identifying it as a species within the European Union for which there should be

special conservation measures. In the UK, it is also listed in Schedule 1 (part 1) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) as amended meaning it is protected by special penalties.

Threats:

Threats to the golden eagle come from disturbance, inappropriate upland management and loss of habitat, such as through large scale afforestation, and illegal persecution.

UK SPA status:

Under the Birds Directive European Union member states have a responsibility to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for species such as the golden eagle. Within the UK there are currently eight SPAs with golden eagle as a feature. These are: Caenlochan, Cairngorms, Caithness and Sutherland peatlands, Cnuic agus Cladach Mhuile, Cuillins, Rum, North Harris Mountains and Lewis Peatlands. The Scottish Government has recently asked Scottish Natural Heritage to consult on proposals for a further six sites: Cairngorms Massif; Foinaven; Glen Affric to Strathconon; Glen Etive and Glen Fyne; Jura, Scarba and the Garvellachs; and Moidart and Ardgour. The three month consultation period is expected to commence early in 2010.

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