Loch Garten Osprey Diary 2003



Absentee landlord.

Compared to Saturday (14 June), Sunday was a comparatively quiet day. We searched in vain for a capercaillie, but were delighted by the appearance of crested tits on our osprey nest yet again, and also by another visit by a family of crossbill. Henry was conspicuous by his absence, which was an unusual change in his behaviour. We were discussing the possibility of him having found a perch on site, but out of our view, when at lunchtime two buzzards appeared and spent a full 10 minutes swooping and diving over the osprey nest one came within 20 metres of the nest. We felt sure that Henry could not have been perched close by, as he surely would not have tolerated such an intrusion. For once, it appears that we were correct at just after 3 pm an osprey was seen approaching from the south-west. It made a detour to attack one of the buzzards, which by that time was a full kilometre from the nest. Rarely have we seen a buzzard move so quickly to avoid contact with talons having made his point Henry then continued his flight towards

the nest and then perched on our camera tree but only stayed 10 minutes before leaving. We did not see him again that day. Had he given up hope of attracting a female this summer? Was he tired of all the intrusions into his territory and would only now visit the site sporadically?

A bit of DIY to take away the heartache.

Our questions were answered yesterday. We should explain that if a pair of ospreys fail to raise young in a season, they often build a frustration eyrie (a makeshift nest some distance from their nesting site). But as the female will not lay eggs again that year they lose interest quickly and drift away. The following year they may return to either the original nest or use the frustration eyrie of the previous year. There is some evidence that instead of building a frustration eyrie they may attempt to take over an existing territory. Back then to yesterday at 12.37 pm a female osprey landed on the nest. Her plumage looked familiar and when she stood on the edge of the nest we realised why this was it was none other than White EJ! She had been the first osprey to land on the nest this year on 26 March. She is five years old and bred successfully last year at a nest some 40 km distant. What was she doing back at Loch Garten?

What a show.

Phone calls elicited the information (we are yet again indebted to The Highland Foundation for Wildlife) that she had returned to her nest this year, but that her breeding attempt had failed. Within minutes a male osprey was displaying above the nest complete with fish. It just HAD to be Henry sure enough, the sky dance was performed with precision and impressed us all for over 20 minutes. Perhaps all is a slight exaggeration Henry began his gradual descent towards the nest, attempted to land and was repulsed by the female! Three times he tried to alight next to her and three times he was refused landing permission. Finally, he perched in our camera tree and ate his meal himself! After finishing the fish, he took off and half an hour later White EJ also left. Yet again, we were inundated with questions. Would White EJ return? Would Henry again attempt to court her? Our visitor centre was well attended today as word had spread of the latest developments in this soap opera. White EJ DID return and so did Henry again with a fish. His display performance today was, to us, as impressive as yesterday, but to White EJ, it appeared, it was even more so as she allowed him to alight next to

her on the nest and accepted with gusto his offering of a fish. A cynical visitor suggested that she was merely hungrier than she had been yesterday!

And the ice is broken.

Nevertheless, the ice had been broken and the birds spent an hour on the nest before White EJ announced that her hunger had yet to be satiated by giving the familiar food soliciting calls. Henry was no slouch in responding and left in a purposeful manner at 1.53 pm. We had high hopes of his swift return with another fish, but yet again the weather intervened (see diary entry Dont leave me this way) and the heavens opened. We hoped our new female would wait at least an hour, maybe two, before giving up on Henry, but at the time of writing, 7.30 pm, she is still on site awaiting his return! This again leaves us pondering the future. Will she now bond with Henry? Will he continue to feed her throughout the summer? If Olive returns after her prolonged absence (as she did last year), will we have a battle royal between the two females? It's far easier to guess what will happen in Eastenders next week than to predict what tomorrow will bring at Loch Garten.

Author: Andrew Simkins

All-day breakfast.

Male ospreys vary considerably in their ability to catch fish and we have been spoiled in recent years by our old male LS Green (Ollie). He held the record for fish delivery at our nest - bringing 14 fish to the female and chicks one day in July 1995 (seven fish with three chicks would normally be the maximum recorded in a season). Henry needs only to bring and share two reasonable size fish a day with our new female to keep them both healthy and we hoped that his fishing abilities would enable him to satisfy his new female's hunger. He left us in no doubt of his fishing skills on Thursday (19 June) by delivering four fish to the nest. On Friday, though he surpassed himself.

What a beauty.

He arrived at the nest at 6 am with a huge rainbow trout measuring at least 40 cm. This was delivered to his female immediately and she took it to what has now become her favourite eating perch a tree some 400 m

distant from our camera and the nest. Despite eating so much the previous day, she commenced her breakfast immediately and Henry left the site. She was still eating the fish when Henry returned with a small brown trout at 10 am, so he ate his catch himself she did not even bother approaching the nest the investigate. He left again at noon, returning at 1 pm with his third fish of the day another brown trout, estimated at about 25 cm. As the female was still eating, he again ate his catch. He had finished by 3.30 pm, but the female was still eating her 6 am rainbow, stopping to digest her fish every half hour or so before continuing to feed.

Give me more.

Henry left shortly after 4.30 pm returning at 6 pm with yet another brown trout. His approach was seen by the female who alighted on the nest moments before him still carrying about 10 cm of the 6 am fish! Notwithstanding this, she accepted his latest offer and with a fish in each talon returned to her perch! After tidying the nest Henry left at around 7 pm, returning at 7.45 with fish number five a rainbow trout (how the fish farm at Aviemore must love him!). He ate the head first and then presented the remained to his female who had only recently completed eating fish one and four of the day. What is even more impressive is that we had strong winds, gusting gale force, for most of both days wind makes it much more difficult for ospreys to fish because of the ripples on the water surface. The last four days have seen a more normal delivery of between one and three fish each day to the female. It is interesting to speculate the reasons behind this super-abundance of fish in the early stages or their courtship. Was Henry out to impress to ensure the female stayed on site or was she in a poor physical condition when she arrived? Whatever the reasons what has been proven is that Henry is no slouch in providing fish and would appear to be all that a female osprey could want from a male.

Author: Andrew Simkins
17 June 2003

Solid bond.

Our two birds appear to be bonding successfully. Henry is continuing to deliver 13 fish every day; the female is spending most of daylight hours on or around the nest site and again Henry, when not away fishing is

either tidying the nest or bringing sticks to add to it. We were asked by a visitor on Friday (27 June) if our birds had been troubled again by intruding ospreys and it occurred to us that they had not since the arrival of our new female. So perhaps the two intruding birds in the few days before her arrival had been her and the male with whom she has failed to breed this year? Whatever the answer we were pleased that our birds had been left to bond undisturbed. Things appear to be progressing well and if Henry keeps feeding White EJ, and she stays on site for the rest of the summer, and they can both survive migration, then as they are both five years old we could have a decade of a successful breeding partnership stretching before us.

Lessons from the past.

The question mark at the back of our minds is Olive. Last year she disappeared for exactly a month and returned to find a new female on her nest. A 6-hour battle ensued and Olive won the day. She has not been seen on site here since 2 May. Is it possible that history will repeat itself? Both birds had disappeared by mid-morning today Henry had left in a straight and level flight, gaining height rapidly, suggesting that he had gone fishing. White EJ flew low to the North and did not reappear above the skyline, suggesting she was awaiting his return on a perch hidden from our view. This was confirmed when we saw an osprey fly to a tree 500 metres behind the nest at 2 pm and start eating a fish we then heard faint food-soliciting calls from a female osprey.

Disturbing the domestic bliss.

It appeared that Henry was hungry as he stood his females nagging calls for over an hour. Then, within a moment of one another, both birds were on the nest, Henry with his partly eaten trout. Instead of taking the fish from him as we have often seen her do, our new female suddenly mantled (spread) her wings and began alarm calling. We watched Henry who similarly mantled, but did not call. As usual, the birds had seen the other osprey well before we saw the large bird rapidly losing height. Surely a female osprey from our females reaction and judging her on size? She circled the nest and we expected White EJ to launch herself at the intruder, but it was Henry that took flight after the female. Both ospreys were quickly lost to sight, but the food soliciting calls of White EJ some 15 minutes later suggested Henry had returned and he was spotted back on his eating perch where he sat for a while before finally

bringing the fish to the nest. As the intruding female did not land, we were unable to establish her identity but hope that there will be few repeat performances, which could start to unsettle our birds. Time will tell.

24 June 2003

Defending the realm.

At 10 pm last night, we were in the process of putting the finishing touches to our diary update. It told of a week of regular fish delivery by Henry to his new female White EJ, more nest building by Henry and, most encouragingly, nest-building by the female. As each day has passed over the last week, the birds have appeared to be increasingly settled. Our spell-check of the update was interrupted by a phone call from our volunteers. Our pair was on the nest and a third osprey had attempted to land, not once, but four times. Both Henry and his female had repulsed the other bird but it was persistent.

Who's who?

Confusion reigned as one chased the other, with all three birds changing places on the nest. The light was starting to fade and it was impossible to identify the interloper or even see if it had rings or not. The melee continued until Tuesday became Wednesday and we had an empty nest with no ospreys on site. No one had much sleep last night all thoughts were turned to the identity of the third bird and whether our pair had successfully driven it away. At first light this morning, Henry landed on the nest, shortly followed by White EJ. She began her food soliciting calls but, unusually, Henry seemed loath to go foraging. As usual, he had seen the third bird minutes before us. It attempted to land on the nest and our female left hurriedly. Seconds later Henry flew and all birds were lost to view. Then it landed.

Boy or girl?

Green leg ring 2N. Male or female? Difficult to judge on size and plumage, but probably male was the consensus. I hope that the behaviour of our pair would confirm this. It took off almost immediately and our female alighted on the nest again. Henry was beside her within seconds, then we had all three on the nest. Henry alarm called and

lunged at Green 2N and both birds flew. For the last three hours, all three birds have been on and off the nest, constantly exchanging places. As we write, the intruder has again flown as Henry landed. White EJ is food soliciting but we doubt whether Henry will be going fishing in the near future. Visitors to the centre may see the battle resolve itself today you will be able to follow the action on our webcam.

Author: Andrew Simkins

The battle for supremacy.

The battle for supremacy of our nest continued until 11.30 am yesterday morning, culminating in Henry disappearing over Loch Garten in pursuit of Green 2N. We are yet again indebted to The Highland Foundation for Wildlife who confirmed that this is a three-year-old osprey, believed to be male. Based on our experience of Henrys earlier battles we did not expect him to return for many hours. Our female, White EJ, 'stood sentry' for the rest of the morning and afternoon and her food-soliciting calls at 5.30 pm suggested she had seen him returning with a fish. Eventually, we saw him perched beyond the nest with his catch, which, much to White EJ's disgust, he kept entirely to himself before leaving the site at 7.05 pm and not returning. Presumably, he needed all of the fish to satiate his hunger following prolonged spells of flying during his battles with the intruder. The female went to roost at 10.20 pm, having not eaten all day. Our female was first to arrive on site this morning at 5.07 am carrying a pike that she had almost certainly caught herself. Henry arrived at 6.30 am and perched in the same tree eating his fish, a brown trout. He ate the head and then delivered the remainder to White EJ. After collecting sticks for the nest Henry perched next to his female until he left at 12.41 pm. He returned after only 17 minutes with another brown trout, which he delivered, completely untouched, to his female, flying off at 12.58 pm. Yet again his return was reasonably swift at 1.37 pm he arrived carrying the fourth fish of the day which this time he kept to himself. Fishing had obviously taken second place yesterday to defence of his territory, but today he was ensuring that both he and his female would be in condition to thwart any further attempts to usurp their nest. Four fish and still five hours of daylight left. What will this evening and tomorrow bring?

Author: Andrew Simkins

Great expectations.

Four fish proved to be enough on 10 July and we half expected Henry to reduce the rations on Friday two fish per day between the pair is sufficient for their needs. However, on 11 July, the first fish, in excess of 35 cm, was brought by him at 8.23 am and, as usual, he ate the head and part of the body before delivering it to his new female White EJ. Fish number two of the day was a rainbow trout, delivered untouched by him to his seemingly ever hungry beau at 12.47 pm. He left the site at 1.07 pm, returning by 1.36 pm with the third and fish number four was presented to his female at 7.21 pm. Henry surely has now proved to her that he is a more than adequate provider. Assuming they both survive migration, we hope that White EJ will return to this nest, rather than to the eyrie where she failed to successfully breed this year.

Raise the alarm.

Henry spent most of Saturday morning nest-building and left at 12.05 pm with White EJ on her rear perch. Suddenly at 12.50 pm she landed on the nest and began to give alarm calls and mantle (spread) her wings. Another osprey almost certainly female judging by its size eventually appeared over the nest, but drifted away without threatening her. Our male did not return until 9.04 pm, bringing with him his first and only catch of the day. After dining only once yesterday, we anticipated a day of plenty in the fish stakes and today started well. Henry arrived with fish number one at 11.15 am, departed at 11.50 am and was back in 26 minutes with a good sized brown trout. He then arranged sticks while his partner fed on her favourite perch, but she suddenly returned to the nest at 2.03 pm and this time both birds mantled their wings. The mantling did not prevent a third osprey landing on the nest. Her legs were devoid of rings but her plumage seemed familiar. It was certainly not Olive we would know her immediately. We quickly scoured the video recordings we make of all birds that land on our nest and realised it was none other than the bird christened Hope who had first landed on our nest on 24 May.

Strange stand-off.

What surprised us was the reaction of White EJ. She had not flown at the intruder to prevent her landing and tolerated her presence on the nest. It was, in fact, Henry who gave alarm calls from time to time as

Hope moved around the nest. For almost 90 minutes, all three birds were on the nest in a fascinating stand-off. Everyone was attempting to understand the behaviour of each of the individuals in particular White EJs almost-indifference to Hope. Visitors readily contributed to the exchange of ideas, which included Hope being White EJs mother! After almost one and a half hours, Henry almost apologetically sidled up to Hope and nudged her from the nest. What an amazing day!

Author: Andrew Simkins
10 July 2003

Lazy days for White EJ.

On Wednesday, the second and third fish were given to her untouched by him. Yesterday and today, he was absent until late morning, although his appearance with a brown trout today was accompanied by yet another thrilling skydance!
Not in my backyard
Our female has remained almost constantly on site during daylight hours. She now seems to have decided that this is her territory. This was confirmed when, yet again, she began mantling her wings shortly after lunchtime today and our belief that another female was in the area was well founded. Henry landed on the nest next to White EJ (with his half-eaten brown trout) and they both mantled as an intruding female circled the nest. Was it Faith or could it be Olive? The bird then perched in our females favourite fish-eating tree.
Stalemate
Eventually our female took the trout and flew, as did Henry. We were then treated to the sight of three adult ospreys perched in the same tree! After almost 45 minutes, the intruder took to the air, as did Henry. He landed on the nest, while White EJ continued to eat her meal half a kilometre away. Some of the questions about the intruders identity were answered as she landed on the nest next to Henry. We saw the flash of a green leg ring so not Olive, nor Hope but in an instant, Henry lunged at her and she was away before we had chance to glimpse the letters on her ring. How frustrating! We don't know when our birds will decide to leave the site to begin migration, but surely with so many intruders in the Strath, they would be foolish to make an early start south.

Author: Andrew Simkins

13 July 2003

Busy week.

If we thought last week was a timely reminder that the breeding population of Scottish ospreys was relatively healthy (approximately 160 pairs last year), and that there were still birds in search of territories in the area, then it proved only to be an appetiser for the excitement at Loch Garten this week. On Monday (21 July) our female White EJ had to pursue an intruding female and on Thursday (24 July) she was bothered by another female with a black leg ring before finally establishing her dominance. Yesterday it was Henrys turn to be troubled. At 5.25 am a male with a red ring had the audacity to land on his nest and had to be repelled. On his return after pursuing the bird, Henry appeared to celebrate by performing another of his now famous skydances. With some female ospreys already having departed south, it is pleasing that both our birds continue to remain on site for most of the day, providing us with hope that they will return here next year, assuming that they can survive the perils of migration.

Author: Andrew Simkins
20 July 2003

False identity?

Sure enough a male osprey came in with a fish, but it had no plastic leg ring. It wasnt Henry! Confusion ensued among the osprey staff. Where was Henry? Who was this intruder? But perhaps more importantly, why was EJ accepting the fish from him, and allowing him to mate with her? EJ as usual flew off to her favourite back perch, while the intruder remained on the nest, allowing the volunteers to take some video footage. After taking a closer look at the bird, it was found to have a metal ring on its right leg, and its head and chest pattern seemed very similar to Henrys. The plot thickened...
The following morning, recordings of the intruder were compared with those of Henry. After a few tense moments, a conclusion was reached and much relief spread through the osprey camp. It wasnt an intruder, it was Henry minus his leg ring! Poor chap! How or where he has lost his

leg ring we dont know, but were glad he lost it while he was still here, at least well know who it is if a bird with only a metal ring turns up next year!
Another week ends with both ospreys still on site. With all these intruders around, its good to see that Henry and EJ have established a solid pair bond, and are putting up a united front whenever their nest is threatened. This is a sure sign that all being well with migration, both birds will return next year, and hopefully for many years to come.

Author: Katherine Puttick
28 July 2003

End of an era?

Monday 4 August came and suddenly another intruder! Henry is mantling, White EJ is mantling, the intruder attempts to land. A closer look and it has a ring. A red leg ring with the letters 7J. From the ring we find out it is a male chick hatched at a nest 50 km from Loch Garten in 2001. He is only two years old and back in Scotland causing trouble already! Henry, remembering how he lost the nest to a young unringed male all those months ago, was not letting go of White EJ that easily! Red 7J knew when he was beaten and White EJ knew she had made the right choice. A sad farewell Tuesday (5 August) came, beginning like any other day. At 10.01 am Henry brought in a fish and sat on the rear perch eating the head, and preparing as we thought, to give the rest of the fish to White EJ, who sat patiently calling on the nest. Three hours later and she is still calling to him. Henry isnt eating it either - why isnt he giving it to her? Give her the fish Henry! visitors are saying (memories go back to the greedy unringed male who caused our resident female to leave 12 weeks ago). Suddenly Henry moves to the camera tree, is this it? Is he finally delivering it to her? No - he begins to eat a little more. The female turns to him, she calls but then suddenly stops. Why? Henry stops eating.
1.27pm.
White EJ lifts up off the nest and flies over the camera tree where Henry is sitting with the remains of his fish. Henry watches her. She flies above the nest and begins to soar, higher and higher and higher. She is still above the nest, she can still see Henry and he continues to watch her until suddenly& she is gone. That evening Henry sat alone on the camera tree as if expecting to see White EJ to return, perhaps with a fish of her own. She has not returned. Since Tuesday, we have hoped to see White

EJ back, but it is likely that thanks to Henry and his prize catches, she was simply fit, healthy, and ready to leave for her African winter grounds.
No time for tears
Thursday evening (7 August), the male Red 7J is back, Henry flies off chasing him away. No sign of Henry again that evening. Friday morning, who is that on the nest? Its Red 7J did he win? Where is Henry? Has another young male ousted him again? Come on now, where is your faith in Henry? Of course not! Here comes Henry, he chases away Red 7J. No sign of the intruder since.
It is now Monday (11 Aug). Henry sits alone on the camera tree. We do not know when he will leave, if it is soon we only hope that we will be there to say goodbye, we have, after all, been part of his life for the last 4 months.

Author: Jo McFarlane
4 August 2003

15 September 2003

Last post.

On the morning of Friday 5 September we had put pen to paper to write the final entry of the diary for the season. Henry's visits to the nest had become less frequent during the last few days of August and, bearing in mind that our male last year departed on 24 August, we were delighted to have seen him as late as the morning of Monday 1 September. No further sightings of him since then convinced us that it was time to post that diary entry. We were in the process of collating a summary of the season's events when an osprey landed on the camera tree and created great excitement for our visitors who had resigned themselves to be content with viewing an empty nest. It was without a ring on one leg and frustratingly had the other hidden behind a branch. The light was far from good and it was perched sideways on, preventing examination of its breast plumage.

Freeze frame.

For over an hour the bird perched motionless, oblivious to our attempts to identify it. Female ospreys are larger than males and judging on size alone this looked a very healthy bird. It was certainly an adult and if it was Henry, he was looking as fit as we had ever seen him this season.

Eventually, very slowly, the bird shifted position and almost teased us with glimpses of breast and leg. Then the clouds lifted for a moment and a shaft of sunlight sparkled on the tell-tale metal ring on the bird's leg. As though he almost knew he had been rumbled he turned to face us and his breast plumage left us in no doubt – Henry was back after an absence of four days! He remained on site for a total of two hours, returned again on Saturday (6 September) evening and yet again for almost two hours at lunchtime on 7 September. Four days have now elapsed since his last sighting and we are virtually certain he has now departed south. For those who missed the start of the season, here is a brief synopsis of the main events:

The year in brief

26 March
Female 'White EJ' is the first osprey to land on our nest and perplexes us by her appearance – she bred successfully for the first time last year at another nest 40 km distant. We discover that her nest had blown down over the winter and repair it for her. She returns to her nest.
6 April
Olive returns to the site for her 10th successive year.
11 April
No sightings of last year's male (Black 8Y) either here or at any other of the 160 osprey nests in Scotland, but a new male ringed Ochre HV, later christened Henry, arrives. He regularly delivers fish to Olive and she accepts him as her new mate. Mating occurs daily and we expect Olive to lay eggs around 25 April.
16 April
One of the four vanquished males from last year (Black 6T) attempts to take the territory during the late afternoon and evening. After a lengthy battle Henry successfully defends his nest.
17 April
Henry is challenged yet again – this time by an unringed male. Doubtlessly deplete of energy following yesterday's battle Henry loses and we have a new territory holder.
18 April
The new unringed male appears to be a young immature bird. His mating attempts range from interesting to ludicrous but, more importantly, he fails to deliver any fish to Olive. After food soliciting for up to six hours Olive is forced to leave to fish for herself. She is absent for up to two days at a time and on returning repeatedly calls for the male

to go fishing, but to no avail. Her absences from the nest become more prolonged.

2 May

The unringed male has still failed to deliver fish to Olive and she finally leaves without laying. If the food supply ceases Ospreys have the ability to reabsorb into their body any eggs they were producing – we are sure this is what occurred with our female.

11 May Henry returns and attempts to re-take the territory from the unringed male. His energy appears to have been restored and he succeeds!

16 June

White EJ returns to our nest. We discover that she has failed to breed successfully this year and realise that although it is too late for her to lay here this year if Henry is prepared to feed her this summer she may well decide to return here next year and not to the nest where she failed this year.

20 June

Henry proves himself to be a magnificent forager. Until today, we had had no evidence of his fishing ability – and ospreys can vary considerably in their ability to feed themselves and their mate. White EJ needs a share in two fish every day to remain healthy – this week Henry has delivered up to five fish a day to the nest.

1 August

Henry's Ochre leg ring cracks and falls off. He is now left with his metal BTO ring. 5 August White EJ leaves on migration having been fed by Henry since her arrival.

7 September

Our last sighting of Henry for the season.

A look ahead – 50th anniversary

Our thoughts now turn to next year. It will be the 50th anniversary of ospreys returning to breed in Scotland after becoming extinct in 1916. After two years of excitement and battles over the territory, we hope that we have a settled pair of ospreys next year and a successful breeding season.