Osprey Diary 2004



Should I stay or should I go?

On 6 April last year, we witnessed some amazing events. A once in a lifetime experience of seeing a male capercaillie in our camera tree (who was himself watching two females on the osprey nest tree) was followed an hour later by the return of our old female osprey Olive.
Our diarist adapted Henry V's soliloquy prior to the battle of Agincourt to summarise his feelings about the events of this red-letter day. Five days later, our new male osprey arrived and his orange coloured leg ring bore the letters HV.
This remarkable coincidence meant we had little choice - our new male osprey was dubbed Henry. Unusually, in August 2003, the plastic orange ring cracked and fell off leaving Henry with only a metal ring. He should be easy to identify this year!
Following her return last week, every movement of our female White EJ has been scrutinised and logged by our volunteers. Her condition

appears to be excellent. She left the site heading south-west on Friday to return with a rainbow trout at least 30 cm in length. She still had the remains of the fish the following morning, indicating that migration had not taken too much toll on her energy reserves.
The burning question at the moment is: does she intend to stay with us or will she tempted to return to her old nest some 25 km south? We were encouraged by her nest building activities over the weekend as she made flight after flight to collect twigs and sticks, sometimes gliding to within 30 m of our hide before attempting to break off a branch of a dead tree.
Surely, a bird investing this much energy in nest building has made her decision about her territory? All we needed now was Henry

Waiting for those ospreys

More than a month ago on the sun baked shores of West Africa the restlessness would have begun. Rather like a tourist who has enjoyed a long holiday in the sun, but now yearns for home, our ospreys would have been preparing for their long and arduous journey to their breeding grounds here in Scotland.

Our male osprey Henry and female ringed 'White EJ', who bonded but did not breed last year, migrated south separately and there is little evidence to suggest that they would have spent the winter together in Africa. Having had only themselves to look after for the last few months, when migration commences they should be in peak body condition.

They may need to call on all their reserves of strength to overcome the perils they could encounter on their journey north. Strong winds may threaten to blow them off course, bad weather could force them to temporarily halt migration, and their route may take them over countries where there are still people may try to blast them from the skies.
Our studies tell us that the earliest arrivals have the best chance of successfully raising young, but timing is vital - arrive too early and your fishing grounds may be covered in ice.
Our records suggest that we could expect our ospreys to return in late March, although the visitor centre will remain closed until approximately the first week in April to allow the birds time to settle.

Will Henry return to take up his throne?
However, preparations for the new season are already well underway and we hope to have our 'cameras rolling' within the next 10 days so that you can enjoy with us that breathtaking moment when our first osprey lands on the nest.
As the season unfolds, the birds themselves provide answers to the questions posed at the end of last season. Will Henry return to take up his throne? Will we be celebrating Olive's 11th homecoming? Will 'White EJ' again grace us with her presence? Will the useless unringed male challenge again?
We are glad that we don't know the answers to any of the above questions. The prospect of again working with our dedicated volunteers and the anticipation of what the new season holds makes us appreciate just how lucky we are to be associated with Operation Osprey, particularly in this extra special year for us.
Not only is it the 100th Anniversary of RSPB Scotland, but 2004 marks the 50th anniversary of ospreys returning to this country to breed after man had caused their decline and extinction.
What we do know is that our excitement is mounting, our eyes ache from scanning the skies and that we are willing that familiar silhouette to appear high above the nest.
One day soon we will be able to say to our birds 'Welcome Home' and to diary readers and webcam viewers 'Keep watching - the games afoot!'

Source: Andy Simkins
22 March 2004

Return of the native?

Our planning for the new season at Loch Garten was underway as soon as our birds left for Africa last autumn. In 2003, we noted that Olive, Henry and 'White EJ' all preferred to devour their catch on a group of dead trees some 300 m, than the nest (and our camera).
Although on occasion we were treated to some fine images when they ate next to the nest on the 'camera tree', more often than not we had to make do with very distant view of our birds. In addition, in the same general area as the dead trees, we noted some capercaillie activity in the lekking season.

Therefore, over the winter, we installed a new camera close to the birds' favoured eating perch in the hope that we will be able to bring you much better images this year.
When the birds return to the nest this year they will build up the outer rim of the nest cup with sticks and, if the birds breed this year, scrape out a nest cup into which the female will lay her eggs. Unfortunately, the 'osprey cam' cannot see over the rim of the nest into the cup.
'It was the coffee maker that saw her first. Not high in the sky, as we had assumed, but at treetop height, powering purposefully toward the nest.'

As you may be aware, the nest tree was the subject of an attack by vandals in 1985. They succeeded in chopping down the tree it had to be 'rebuilt' using supporting timbers. Our second, very experimental, innovation this year has been to slightly extend one of the supporting timbers that overhangs the nest, partially hollow it out, and insert a miniature fixed camera that looks into the nest itself.

Best osprey views ever in 2004?

We use the term 'experimental' as the birds may raise the level of the nest rim so much that all we will have is excellent views of Scots Pine sticks - but it just may allow us for the very first time to be part of an amazing incubation and hatching experience - only time will tell.

Today, 25 March, was dismal and dreary. Mist covered even the lower slopes of the mountains and drizzle hung continuously in the air. The last member of our team had finally succumbed to the 'flu' that had attacked all the osprey staff this week and our hide this afternoon sounded more like a bronchial hospital ward than a place from which to observe birds. Nevertheless, three pairs of eyes were scanning the skies as a fourth concentrated on making a much needed 'brew.' It was the coffee maker that saw her first. Not high in the sky as we had assumed, but at treetop height, powering purposefully toward the nest. There was no circling of the site as so often happens with a bird that has not seen the nest before - this was the strong direct flight of a bird coming home. Without hesitation the female 'White EJ', whom we had come to know between March and August last year, alighted at 4.05 pm and looked around her with confidence.
Aches and pains were forgotten. The weather was immaterial. Absolute silence ensued. Then the tissues were passed round - we all have colds, ok?!

Source: Andy Simkins
26 March 2004

At 8 am on 29 March, White EJ left flying south-west - fish farm bound we assumed. Her return 2 hours later 'empty taloned' surprised us a little. Then she looked skyward, crouched low in the nest and seconds later a second osprey landed and mated with her. Unless Henry found a shop selling orange coloured leg rings on his winter travels, we have a new male osprey!
Seventeen attempted mating attempts were recorded during the day and 13 appeared to be successful. We found it particularly interesting that White EJ allowed 'Orange VS' to mate with her even though he did not deliver a fish to her until 7 pm.
It will be some days before we are supplied with details about this new male. At the moment, all we can do is speculate about his age and experience. His relatively high success in attempts at mating could suggest the he is a bird with breeding experience.
Do other facts we currently have suggest more than this? Well our female had left at 8 am in the general direction of her old nest, she returned 2 hours later with the new male 'in tow'. She let him mate with her immediately without delivery of a fish or a 'skydance' display flight that Henry performed to a stunned audience on so many occasions last year.

Does this suggest that White EJ knows Orange VS? Could it be her 'old' mate from her previous nest? Pure speculation, but an interesting thought nonetheless.
What is sure to prove interesting is Henry's reaction if and when he returns. There was no doubt last year that he considered himself the territory holder. Stay watching and reading - we do not need to promise interesting times ahead. To use a golfing expression - 'that's a gimme.'

Source: Andrew Simkins
30 March 2004

30 March 2004 An old friend returns...

On 30 March, our new male 'Orange VS' continued to court 'White EJ' although he did not overly impress us, or presumably her, with his fishing skills. The couple was present at first light, nest building and mating but it took considerable 'nagging' from the female before VS left to fish.
After a two-hour absence our female left, presumably to fish for herself, and it was almost three hours before the male returned to an empty nest, carrying what one visitor thought was a stickleback. It was certainly true that we have seen bigger sardines in tins and he ate the meal in less than 15 minutes, after which time VS left the site. Our female returned early afternoon but we did not see him again that day.
A similar pattern of behaviour was observed again on 31 March and also on the morning of 1 April. However that afternoon, during one of VS's prolonged absences, an unringed male osprey alighted beside our female, presented her with a fish, and within an hour she had allowed him to mate with her. Comparison of this bird's plumage with our records from 2003 showed that this male was not the 'useless' unringed male osprey that deposed Henry in April last year. Phew! The unringed male stayed on site until dusk.
At dawn on 2 April VS was back on the nest with our female. This time it only took him two hours to return with a fish and White EJ was still present on his return. VS departed again at lunchtime and within an hour the unringed male was back on the nest, where he stayed unchallenged until dusk!

As dawn broke on 3 April, it revealed two ospreys on our nest. White EJ and Orange VS! The first rays of the sun were illuminating the nest when VS gave an alarm call. We looked up to see a third osprey (almost certainly male) high above the nest. Both birds sat 'tight' until a fourth osprey came into view, which also began circling the nest. VS took off and joined the other two birds, while our female remained on the nest. There did not appear to be any aggression between VS and the other two birds - we just marvelled at the sight of three ospreys flying. Then a fourth appeared - we double-checked and White EJ was still on the nest! What an amazing spectacle. Five ospreys in view! White EJ then joined the airborne birds and they eventually all drifted out of sight. White EJ was the first back to the nest at about 9.50 am. She had hardly alighted when we heard another alarm call. She crouched low in the nest as she was dive-bombed by another (certainly female) osprey. She stood her ground well for about 10 minutes as the attacks continued, then set off after the other female before they both disappeared. An hour later, she

was back, but again within 30 seconds was subject to more attacks. Yet again, she eventually took flight chasing the intruding female out of sight just after 11 am.
At precisely 11.23 am (give or take 10 seconds) an osprey landed in the camera tree. Telescopes were trained searching for rings. Certainly no colour ring, but the bird lifted its leg... surely, we had caught a glimpse of a metal ring? A shaft of sunlight broke through the clouds and there it was - the glint of a metal ring. As he turned to face us a check on his plumage confirmed it. Henry built up quite a fan club last year. Staff, volunteers, visitors to the centre, webcam viewers and diary readers alike all took him to their hearts. Well, you can rest easy now. Henry's back!
Source: Andrew Simkins
5 April 2004

Competitive males at the loch

Henry's arrival on 3 April was to an empty nest. He would not have been aware of White EJ's return, nor the presence of the two suitors - the un-ringed male and Orange VS. Henry left after about 10 minutes and the site was deserted until 3.30 pm when we were delighted by the return of our female.

Henry arrived around 5 pm with a good size brown trout and after eating the head, delivered it to the female he had last seen in August last year. Within seconds, a male osprey was displaying above the nest, but Henry immediately took flight and saw the bird off his territory. Our couple remained together until dusk.
On Sunday 4 April, our female was on the nest at first light, then left around 10.20 am, following a male osprey that had circled the nest. Twenty minutes later, Henry arrived with a pike, only to find his female missing. He remained on site all day, defending his nest three times to intruding male ospreys. But, rather worryingly, White EJ had not returned. The pieces of the jigsaw fell into place on 5 April. Regular diary readers will be aware of our speculation on 30 March that White EJ knew Orange VS. We are indebted to the Highland Foundation for Wildlife who advise us that Orange VS was indeed the previous mate of White EJ and that they had successfully raised young in 2002 at a nest some 25 km from our site.

Was White EJ's absence on 4 April an indication that she had been tempted to return to her previous nest? We breathed a sigh of relief when she returned shortly after lunchtime on 5 April, but her disappearance for over 24 hours had certainly been worrying. Three times that day Henry was forced to defend his nest against intruding male ospreys. He did not allow them to land on or near the nest, so we were unable to identify them.
On 6 April, both birds were present on the nest, although again Henry had to prove he was the dominant male by intercepting an intruding male osprey. He was stamping his authority on the site and appeared to be in excellent condition. He left to fish around 9.30 am, but within a few minutes White EJ was unsettled by three male ospreys battling the skies above her. In the midst of the melee, she took flight, with the three male ospreys pursuing her. Henry was greeted on his return some 40 minutes later with the sight of an empty nest. He remained on or around the nest for the rest of the day, troubled again by single male intruding ospreys, intercepting them before they got close to his nest.
Again, only Henry was present as 7 April dawned. White EJ appears to have been unsettled by the battles between the males for the territory. We hoped she would return and that Henry would be able to go fishing and return without other males disturbing our female in his absence. Yet again, we had to wait over 24 hours for White EJ to appear. When she did, her food soliciting calls began immediately.

It was patently obvious she was hungry, but Henry seemed loath to satisfy her. Eventually we saw him leave at 4.35 pm in a determined flight, gaining height as he left. The purposeful flight was like a note that had 'Gone Fishing' written all over it. The average forage time of Orange VS had been a little over 2 hours. Henry's was much better at about an hour. We prayed he would be back before intruding male ospreys yet again unsettled his female. We started watching the clock - as we watched White EJ waiting for Henry.
As we watched, the raindrops started to fall. A light shower at first, but the wind freshened and as the dark clouds scurried over our heads the gentle 'pitter-patter' on the roof turned into a cacophony of relentless rain. We feared the worst. Research shows that fishing would be nigh on impossible until either the wind or rain abated.
Thankfully, Henry appears to have been too busy fishing to read research papers - he was spotted atop a dead tree lustily eating the head of a 16-inch brown trout no more than 19 minutes after leaving us. He presented his female with his headless prize a quarter of an hour later

and one of our volunteers is certain Henry wore a self-satisfied grin. Who are we to argue?

Source: Andrew Simkins
8 April 2004

King of the jungle – but what of the queen?

Over the last few days, Henry has been outstanding. His arrival on site just before dawn each morning has been marked by a display flight, high above the nest.
He has fed White EJ extremely well with good size fish - she was still eating a fish at dawn on 8 April that he had delivered to her at 6.30 pm the evening before! He has stamped his dominance on the site and as days have passed he has been less troubled by intruding male ospreys - his defence strategy of flying to intercept an intruder before they get to within half a mile of the nest appears to be reaping rewards. As he sits atop the camera tree, he really does appear to be 'master of all he surveys.' His mating attempts have been largely successful and the only fault we can find in him is his nest building. He will insist on piling stick after stick against the nest support housing our new experimental camera. No doubt, the view now afforded by this camera will be of interest to students of lichens or Scots pine bark but we now have little prospect of seeing any eggs that may be laid. Nae matter. If that is the biggest disappointment we have to face this year, we can live with it very comfortably.
In an ideal world, White EJ would be spending all day every day on the nest conserving her energy. Thus the more than ample supply of fish she is getting would result in her producing eggs before many more days pass. Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world.
For the last six days, our White EJ has been troubled by an intruding female osprey attempting to oust her from the nest. With almost frightening regularity, every morning approximately an hour or so after dawn this bird launches her vicious attacks. This usually consists of a 'dive-bomb' approach to the nest at frightening pace, talons extended and directed towards White EJ's head. After taking defensive action, White EJ has taken flight and chased the female, but has failed to return to the nest for up to 10 hours. During her absence, Henry has remained resolutely on or around the nest no doubt watching, as we have,

spasmodic sightings of two female ospreys tumbling together in the skies some distance from the nest.
We were able to record a number of the attacks and from frame by frame replays, it appears that the intruding female is unringed. She alighted briefly on the nest on 10 April and this was again recorded and her plumage studied intently upon replay. We are almost certain that we have not observed this bird on site in previous years.
As we write on the evening of 11 April Henry and White EJ are on the nest together. Today our female has been subject to four separate attacks that we believe have been from the same female. Her absences following these intrusions thankfully were only between 30 to 45 minutes, but she is still expending a considerable amount of energy in flight and defence of the nest. This intruding female is nothing if not persistent. Is this to be a war of attrition? Will the intruding female give up soon and seek another territory or will White EJ succumb to the mounting pressure? Stay watching and reading to find out.

Postscript

We received an e-mail recently that asked (tongue in cheek) for re-assurance that the diary entries were fact and not fiction. We wish we had imaginations fertile enough to dream up such intricately woven plots!

One of the lessons we have learned so far as our ospreys are concerned is that we should not take anything for granted - we never know what is just around the corner. For instance - avid diary readers may recall that in 2002 our female Olive disappeared for a whole month whilst five males were contesting the territory. By the time she re-appeared, a new 2-year-old female (ringed Green 7B) was on site. An amazing 6-hour battle ensued and Olive eventually prevailed. We later made the astonishing discovery that Green 7B was in fact the granddaughter of Ollie, Olive's mate for the previous 8 years.
In the best soap operas, characters are 'written-out' and sometimes re-appear years later. If White EJ does capitulate and has to leave our nest, she will be unable to return to her old nest 25 km away. Ollie's granddaughter will certainly have something to say about that!

Source: Andrew Simkins
11 April 2004

Air raid!

World War Two films of the blitz of London often portray the menacing wail of sirens that preceded a bombing attack, then seemingly earth-shattering explosions of noise that may only last a few minutes, followed by an eerie silence.
The dawn raids by an unringed female on White EJ invoke similar memories. It is 11 days now since the first attack and they have continued relentlessly. It is usually too dark to see Henry's arrival at the nest, but we can hear his display calls high in the dark sky before he eventually alights on the nest. Within a minute or so, White EJ joins him and as the light improves the two look settled on the nest. The calm before the storm. Then the alarm calls start. We notice both birds looking skyward and, if we are lucky, see a black dot against a grey sky. White EJ's piercing calls become louder as the bird descends on her avian target from a great height. Within seconds, the air appears to be full of birds and then comes the silence. To us a deafening silence. Henry usually returns to the nest within minutes, but often has to wait many hours before his female returns.
Yesterday (13 April), she was absent some seven hours. The intruder attacked again later that afternoon, although our female was back within the hour. This morning was no exception - we can virtually set our clocks by these assaults. She was back after three and a half hours but must again have used energy in chasing the intruder that could have been utilised in egg production. Thankfully, there were no more attacks today and she remained on site until dusk.
A number of visitors have asked why Henry does not join forces with his female to see off the intruder once and for all. What may be important to him is that he has never bred with White EJ. His 'ideal' female would probably be a bird that is aggressive and could successfully defend his chicks against potential predators. He has no idea whether White EJ has this ability - so from his point of view why not let the most aggressive female win? It's a possible answer.
So has today been the beginning of the end? No attacks since 6 am this morning. Has White EJ finally won the battle or was there just a lull in the war? As dawn breaks tomorrow, we will know more.

Source: Andrew Simkins
14 April 2004

Winner takes it all?

Our aim is to update our diary twice weekly, but the extraordinary events we witnessed today demand immediate attention. We ended yesterday's entry with the statement that we would know more at dawn today. For once, we were correct.

The intruder appeared as usual at 6.15 am, Henry and White EJ took flight and Henry returned minutes later while the two females dived at each other before disappearing from view.

It was more than five hours before White EJ eventually returned - with Henry greeting her with a 'skydance'. Our female made food soliciting calls and Henry disappointed her for half an hour - leaving but returning quickly with sticks and moss. He soon relented, though, and flew north, returning 25 minutes later with a reasonable size rainbow trout. After eating the head, he delivered the remainder to our female who perched nearby to eat while our male remained on the nest. White EJ did not, in fact, finish the fish and returned to the nest carrying the tail, which Henry took from her and they both remained on the nest digesting their meal. Quite the settled pair they made - until 5.15 pm when both our birds were spreading their wings in alarm.

A visitor saw the third osprey approach the nest fast and low. Both Henry and White EJ were forced to duck as the intruding female passed within inches of their heads, talons outstretched. Henry left the nest as the intruder rapidly gained height but, for once, our female did not take flight.

The second assault was an almost vertical descent and was over in a split second. White EJ had refused to move, the intruder landed square on her back and appeared to drag our female over the edge of the nest. Staff, volunteers and visitors alike were stunned by the ferocity of the attack. Thankfully within seconds, we saw all three birds in the air. We had been fearful that one of the females might have hit the ground before being able to take flight. As usual, Henry was back on his nest within a few minutes, but both females were quickly lost to sight. We have only twice before witnessed actual bodily contact between two ospreys, and on both occasions, the bird that was attacked did not return.

It is now 7.45 pm and Henry is still alone waiting and watching. Our volunteers are waiting and watching. We are waiting, and holding our breath.

Source: Andrew Simkins
15 April 2004

A sad day at the Loch

Sometimes our diary entries can take only minutes to write. They often virtually write themselves. Rarely have we stared at a blank piece of paper for hours wondering why our vocabulary seems so inadequate to describe both the events we witnessed on Saturday last and our subsequent thoughts and emotions.
We should first though bring you up to date following the attack on our female last Thursday. It was growing dark when we received the telephone call at 8.35 pm that White EJ had landed back on the nest, over 3 hours since she had left late that afternoon. We all breathed a huge sigh of relief as she flew to the camera tree to roost and hoped that we had seen the last of this aggressive female intruder.
Our hopes were dashed again at dawn on Friday when yet again White EJ had to flee her nest after a dive-bomb attack. Thankfully she was only gone some 30 minutes and the rest of the day passed without incident - Henry brought in two fish for his female who spent a considerable amount of time resting on the nest and she appeared to be sitting lower than usual.

Saturday dawned and our female flew to the nest and nervously looked around her. It seemed we were all braced for the usual dawn attack. 6.30 am came and went, as did 7 am and for the first time in two weeks we had a peaceful start to our day.
The sun rose and White EJ seemed distinctly broody, settling very low in the nest cup. We all had similar thoughts, but scarcely dared to voice them...Surely this meant that the intruding female had now accepted that she was not going to oust our female? '

The events that followed on Saturday left us totally numb...'

At 8.30 am Henry left gaining height rapidly and, by his standards, was a little tardy in returning to the nest with a trout at 9.15. However, instead of giving the fish to the female, both birds started spreading their wings and making alarm calls.
A swift glance at the sky revealed why - the intruding female had followed Henry back to the nest and was circling menacingly. Her first diving attack caused both birds to leave the nest quickly and White EJ

could be seen pursuing the intruder and Henry, unusually, also appeared to be joining in the chase, trout in talon. All three birds then disappeared from view, but Henry was back on the nest alone some 10 minutes later. It was 9.50 am before our female returned, but seconds later the intruder circled again and powered down towards the nest. The next two hours seemed to pass in seconds.
Things happened so swiftly that it was difficult to be sure which birds were on the nest and who was attacking who. It is only with the benefit of replaying the video tapes in slow motion that we have been able to piece together the exact sequence of events. We had been stunned by the ferocity of the attack on Thursday. The events that followed on Saturday left us totally numb...

9:51 am

The unringed intruder whilst in flight launches an attack on White EJ, with talons outstretched. Thankfully she did not find her target and all three birds disappear.

10.08 am

White EJ lands on the nest but seconds later takes flight as the intruding female dive-bombs her. The intruder crash lands in the nest cup, scattering sticks with the force of her descent. White EJ gains height quickly and dives at the intruder, talons extended. The intruder spreads her wings on the nest and crouches in the nest cup. White EJ lands on the intruder's wing and, with much beating of wings and flailing of talons, drags her from the nest. Both birds are quickly lost to sight.

11.15 am
The intruder lands on the nest, but White EJ is close behind. The intruding female rolls on her back and White EJ plunges downwards. The intruder rolls away at the last moment, thankfully avoiding physical contact. Both birds take flight.

12:08 pm
Yet again the intruding female lands heavily on the nest dislodging sticks on impact, our female alights seconds later (with her back toward the camera) and both birds talons are locked together in a struggle lasting more than 20 seconds before both again take flight.
Our female returned to the nest safely at around 2 pm. As we write it is 11.30 pm on Monday 19 April and we have not seen the intruding female

since 12.08 pm on Saturday. She appeared to be flying easily and both birds, perhaps very luckily, appeared to have escaped injury.
If only we could conclude this entry by saying nothing more of note occurred on Saturday. If only. It is with a heavy heart that I have to report that shortly after returning to the nest on Saturday afternoon White EJ lowered her head into the nest cup, picked up an almost complete but broken shell of a perfectly formed egg, and took flight, dropping it a few hundred yards from the nest before then perching on the camera tree. There can be little doubt how it came to be broken.

Ospreys will normally have a clutch of three eggs, laid approximately two days apart. We are watching, waiting and indeed praying that our female now has the peace, quiet and determination to continue laying. Please keep watching. If you keep reading then even after a day like Saturday we will keep writing...

Source: Andrew Simkins
20 April 2004

Big turn in the tide of fortune

What a difference a day makes. Twenty-four little hours. At 11.30 pm last night we were rather disconsolately checking our previous diary entry for spelling errors. It's no exaggeration to say that the mood is now one of exhilaration.
We know almost exactly when it must have happened. We had heard from our volunteers shortly after dawn that White EJ had spent the night of Monday 19 April in the camera tree and at first light had flown to the nest edge.
We were greeted on site at 7.30 am by excited faces - at 7.15 am our female had walked into the nest cup and slowly but surely lowered herself deeper and deeper until only her head and back were visible above the rim of the nest. She had remained in this position, almost motionless, for 15 minutes.
The bird feeders were empty - the chaffinches would have to wait this morning. After 18 minutes, she rose and we half expected her to return to the camera tree. She looked slowly around and peered into the nest cup.
What happened next brought back floods of distant memories. For the first time in three years, an osprey on our nest lowered her head and we

observed gentle rocking movements. White EJ had to be turning an egg! '
What happened next brought back floods of distant memories'
The gas bottle for our heater was exhausted and needed to be changed. We didn't feel the cold. We waited for more conclusive evidence. She rose again at 42 minutes and repeated the same movement. Our smiles were getting broader.
A stock-take on Monday had shown that we needed to order some RSPB membership packs. We took the phone off the hook. Henry flew in after 57 minutes and stood on the side of the nest watching White EJ still deep in the nest cup.
If he went fishing, then on his return our female should take the fish to a perch to eat and he should settle on the egg. But she had eaten at 8 pm the previous evening and made no food soliciting calls. We would have to wait many hours before we were certain there was an egg.
The visitor centre needed vacuuming before we opened. Whatever. She had been in the same position now for 83 minutes. Henry exited stage left (north). 107 minutes and she turned the egg again. Henry was a long time getting a stick.
131 minutes and Henry arrived with a fish the female had not asked for. Would he take over incubation? White EJ got up, walked over to Henry on the edge of the nest, took the fish and flew to the camera tree. Henry sauntered to the centre of the nest and examined its contents.
The pen we use to complete the log book ran out. Why can you never find a pen when you want one? Someone offered to open a vein. We settled for a blunt pencil.
For the first time in his six years of life, Henry was staring at an unbroken egg. Would he know what to do? How could we doubt him? At 140 minutes, he leisurely lowered his body, softly shuffled his chest and got himself comfortable in the nest cup.
Seven times during the course of the day, the birds swapped incubation duties. The female was able to eat, preen and take exercise flights as Henry exemplified a proud father to be. At 10 pm this evening, we could just make out the silhouette of White EJ's head against the dark sky. She was going to remain on the nest all night for the first time since her arrival in March. Conclusive proof of incubation. What an extraordinary, and thankfully peaceful, day.
Did we say that our mood was one of exuberance? A member had earlier disagreed. She thought we all looked 'eggstatic'. Little wonder.

P.S. - for the benefit of HQ - the feeders were filled, the gas was replenished, membership packs duly ordered, centre vacuumed and you will shortly be getting a requisition for a gross of ballpoint pens.

Source: Andrew Simkins
21 April 2004

Settling down to it

White EJ incubating her egg in peace - thanks to Jen from Ohio who captured this moment.
We can start this entry by advising our readers that no update since last Tuesday really does mean that 'no news is good news.' We are delighted to report that Henry and White EJ look totally relaxed at the prospect of parenthood and have been untroubled for 8 days by the intruding female who was last seen on 17th April.
Henry is sharing incubation duties for about a third of all daylight hours whilst his female always incubates overnight. He is still generally providing two fish every day and is bringing both rainbow and brown trout as well as pike. When not away fishing he sits on sentry duty in the camera tree, but recently the only possible 'egg bandits' with which he has been troubled is a pair of crows. They were hardly a match for his superior flying skills and he had no trouble preventing a raid on his nest. His foray in the air with them left us with the impression that he rather welcomed the exercise.
The average incubation period is 37 days and as an egg was laid on 20th April then today marks day 32 (and counting) towards hatch. It is possible that our female had laid a third egg this week, and is therefore now incubating two eggs, but we cannot be sure. We are just delighted to see an osprey once again sitting low in our nest.
We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your feedback to our diary. It was particularly heartwarming to receive so many emails expressing concern and support following the tragic smashing of the egg. We were amazed by the sheer volume of your response and had no idea that our ospreys had touched so many hearts literally worldwide. It has been difficult to grasp that people from Toledo (Ohio) to Toronto (Canada) and from Halifax (Nova Scotia) to Halifax (England) were all rooting for Henry and White EJ.
The relative peace and quiet of the last few days has allowed us to exercise our minds to try and solve what many of you perceive to be a

problem. Henry has a name. White EJ does not. The visitors to our centre agree this is a problem - our female with a white ring embossed with the letters 'EJ' should have a name.
Over the last week or so we have also slowly come to realise something much more fundamental. We have relinquished 'ownership' of our ospreys. True, it is us and our volunteers that guard them and their egg, on a day to day basis - but only on your behalf.
We have therefore decided to listen to you. All of you. We are inviting visitors to our centre to suggest a name for our female and the most popular suggestion will be the name she will then be given. But YOU can also influence the decision. You can email your suggestion to: ospreys@rspb.org.uk. The most popular choice will be announced shortly after our egg is due to hatch.
The most popular suggestions to date, made by the visitors to our centre have been:
Edith - The derivation of the name apparently is 'Conqueror' which people thought appropriate after the events of 17th April.
Eliza Jane - No doubt due to her leg ring bearing the letters 'EJ'.
Fionn - A celtic name meaning white or fair - no doubt in view of the colour of an osprey's plumage.
Katherine - Presumably suggested as, according to Shakespeare, she was courted by Henry V.
Whatever your suggestion feel free to email us, with an explanation for your choice if you wish. Our diary updates will keep you up to date not only with news of our ospreys as hatch date slowly approaches, but also with what emerge as the most popular choice of name.

Source: Andrew Simkins
26 April 2004

While the cat's away...

Today marks day 13 of a probable 37-day incubation period for the egg that our female, White EJ, laid on 20 April. Fifteen days have now passed since we last saw the intruding female, and hopes are high that she has now found her own territory and another mate.
Three days ago, another osprey attempted to land on the nest while Henry was absent. It had a red ring on its right leg, but our female refused to let it land and, after hovering above her for a few seconds, it

quickly disappeared. We were unable to read the letters on the ring as it was only seen in flight.
This afternoon, again during one of Henry's absences, a red ringed bird attempted to land, but was quickly discouraged by our female. The plumage of this bird, and our female's reaction, tend to suggest it was a male, as does the lack of aggression toward our female by the intruding bird.
In general, ospreys return to Scotland to breed for the first time when they are sexually mature - at three years of age. In 2001, many osprey chicks were ringed with red colour rings and the likelihood, therefore, is that this recent intruder is a young bird looking for a vacant breeding territory.
What is Henry doing for three hours away from the site?
We have noticed a change in Henry's fishing strategy over the last two weeks. Prior to this (while his female was fertile), his absences from the site whilst fishing were very short. He would frequently return with a fish in less than half an hour.
In 'behavioural ecology' terms this could be interpreted as him 'mate guarding' - spending little time away from the nest so as to reduce the chance of another male mating with his female while he was absent fishing.
However, since White EJ has laid, and is therefore no longer fertile, his absences have tended to be much longer. For instance, today he was away for almost three hours (during which time the red ringed intruder appeared) and whilst WE were impressed with the ball of moss he brought back with him, our female's food soliciting calls suggested that she had no thoughts of turning vegetarian.
If the 'mate guarding' suggestion is taken a stage further... What is Henry doing for three hours away from the site? Some scientists would suggest that Henry should be looking to pass on as many of his genes as possible to the next generation and, therefore, logically he may be touring other osprey nests in the strath on the look-out for an 'unguarded' fertile female! Food for thought.
Thanks to all of you who have suggested names for our female. Please keep the e-mails coming - the top five suggestions (in alphabetical order) are currently:
• Edith
• Eliza - Because in 'My Fair Lady' (or 'My Fair Osprey'!) you have Henry and Eliza (thanks to Scott and Kate for pointing out this connection to us.)
• Eleanor

• Fionn
• Kate/Katherine
Some of the more unusual suggestions have included:
• Ealga - (pronounced Yal-ga) - an Irish Gaelic name meaning 'Noble' or 'Brave' (thanks to Lynda).
• Nimue - meaning 'Lady of the Lake' - thanks to Stephen of Niota, USA.
We have also learnt that there is a Henry and White EJ fan club in St Kitts in the Eastern Caribbean - thanks for letting us know about that Kate. We have to apologise for not having the time to respond to every e-mail.
Twenty-four days left - and counting...

Source: Andrew Simkins
2 May 2004

Doing the rounds or takin' it easy?

We intimated in our previous entry that Henry may be touring other nests in the locality attempting to find an 'unguarded' female. Yesterday (Friday 7 May) he confirmed our suspicions by disappearing for seven hours.
The weather was better than it had been in weeks - hot, sunny and only a light breeze - almost ideal fishing conditions. He returned at 5 pm with a headless fish. Our female grabbed it from him and took it to her favourite perch to devour before we had chance to identify it. What we were able to see was that it was 'as stiff as a board' - and had obviously been out of water for many hours. A visitor wondered how many other osprey nests that fish had visited before it eventually came to ours!
Today he was much more attentive to his female bringing headless fish to her at 5.30 am and 5 pm and undertaking at least two hours of incubation duty - but who knows what tomorrow may bring.
We hoped our female would lay another two eggs, thus completing the normal clutch of three
As many of you now know, Wednesday evening brought thrilling news. The recent poor weather broke during the afternoon and provided us with the opportunity of counting what many of us believed was probably going to be a clutch of one, possibly two eggs.
Having laid one egg, that had been broken in the melee with the intruding female on 17 April, we hoped our female would lay another two

eggs, thus completing the normal clutch of three, but suspected that the trauma may have meant we would only find a solitary egg.
In order to minimise the amount of time White EJ was off the nest, the 'counting party' of four was selected for their speed of foot. One staff member breathed a sigh of relief at inclusion as he had given up smoking once it was clear that eggs had been laid and would need to be counted. We all have different motivations - if it works don't knock it!
The sprint to the tree was undertaken in almost record time and then 21st century technology took over. Aluminium poles were slotted together and the old shaving mirror, cleaned especially for the occasion, hoisted above the nest.
Two pairs of binoculars were trained at the mirror. Why do bosses always see things first? This didn't appear to be an appropriate time for the recent non-smoker to ask for an explanation of what was obviously a highly technical expression he had heard immediately prior to the word 'THREE'. The non-smoker stood firm, adjusted his focus and also counted three. Three gorgeous, creamy white eggs. Three eggs blotched at each end with burnt sienna. THREE perfect unbroken eggs.
Our female only needs to share, on average, three fish every two days as she is using no energy sitting on the nest incubating. If Henry is 'taking life easy' at the moment, then perhaps we should wish him good luck. If all three eggs hatch, he will have his work cut out to feed three hungry chicks in the weeks to come.
Eighteen days left and counting...
A brief update on the name for our female ringed 'EJ' - a new entry has stormed into the Top Five suggestions:
• Edith
• Eleanor
• Eliza
• Fionn
Your comments are also coming in thick and fast about White EJ's name, and many of you seem keen on retaining it as 'White EJ'.
'Why not leave [White EJ] as her name? It's quirky enough for the 21st century!' - Mary.
'I can't think of her as some historical or fictional character. She somehow represents today... Let's go for something bold and different for the 21st century' - Moyra.
'We have this name now printed on our hearts after her brave fighting for the nest and their egg... It sounds kind of cool, like an Indian warrior's name... She deserves it... She doesn't look like an Edith or some other

name like that... Although whatever she gets called, I am sure we will all accept it and she will remain our star.' - Helen
Keep your suggestions coming - we will only stop counting once an egg is hatched!
And finally, we would like to dispel all rumours that we are currently in negotiation with a low-cost airline who are prepared to sponsor our female to wear an orange coloured wing tag bearing the same letters as her leg ring.
Source: Andrew Simkins
10 May 2004

Four’s just too much company

Our previous diary entry, written on 8 May, asked 'who knows what tomorrow will bring'. Well, we now know it didn't bring Henry!
He was absent from the site from 9 pm on 8 May and was not seen again until 8.10 am on Monday 10 May. Thankfully, he arrived with breakfast, which our female quickly devoured. To be fair to Henry, he has since delivered fish (almost) daily to White EJ, surpassing himself on Thursday with a total of three. Although the following day, despite being a Friday, was 'fishless.'
Our female had to wait until lunchtime yesterday before being presented with another meal, but was patently not ravenous as she returned a good portion of the fish to Henry after eating her fill. {Our male then delighted visitors by finishing the fish on the camera tree, resulting in some stunning close ups of him cleaning his bill.}
Henry cleaning his bill (Photo missing)
Today (16 May), marked the start of what we believe to be day 26 of a likely 37-day incubation period. Henry delivered a fish to his mate at 9 am and after taking over incubation for an hour or more, he left at 11 am.
A hot lazy Sunday afternoon stretched out before us as White EJ panted on the nest. It was mid-afternoon when we spotted Henry descending toward the nest with another fish.
An osprey in the air is always a delight to see, but when we see two birds in flight, with our female still on the nest, nerves start to jangle. White EJ seemed relatively unperturbed as a third flying osprey joined the aerobatic display. She spread her wings, covering her eggs and allowed Henry to land beside her. One of the intruders perched momentarily in the camera tree. It took to the air as Henry launched himself toward it, but not before we had noted '8T' - white letters, red ring, left leg (as soon

as we have details of the origin of this bird we will update our diary). As 8T disappeared, our female stood up from the eggs but was unable to prevent the second (unringed) intruder landing on the edge of the nest. Henry returned from chasing 8T and landed.
8T lands on the nest (Photo missing)
A newly-arrived visitor remarked that she had no idea one of our eggs had hatched and that osprey chicks were so large. Again, it was Henry that took the initiative and lunged at the intruder, causing it to take to the air. Henry was soon after it, grimly holding onto his fish, and both Henry and the two intruders were quickly lost to sight. Our Sunday afternoon was once again calm and peaceful.
Judging by the reactions of both of our birds, and the lack of aggression toward our female from the intruders, it seems logical that both intruders were male.
After a relatively peaceful spell, the events of today have underlined the fact that we cannot count our ospreys before they are hatched. Eleven days left - and counting...
The intruder beats a hasty retreat (Photo missing)
An update on the name for our female ringed white 'EJ':
Two new suggestions caught our eye: '
I feel that an appropriate name would be Wilhemina or Wilma derived from Wilhelm, meaning - resolute defender.' - thanks Bill.
Thanks also to Dorothy from West Africa - 'As we see lots of ospreys in The Gambia during the English winter, I thought an excellent name for the one in question would be Fatu, which is the name given to the first born female.'
However, the outcome does now appear to be a 'two horse race.'
After establishing and maintaining an early lead, will 'Eliza' be overtaken in the final furlong by 'EJ'?
Judging by recent e-mails, many of you think so: '
I cast my vote for White EJ to stay as her name. It has a ring to it. (Sorry)' - Juliet.
'Why not let White EJ be called White EJ? Let her be an osprey free of any human valour' - Jeannette from France. '
White EJ suits her and deserves to keep the name we have grown to love, it would seem strange to call her Edith or anything else after following her all this time... The names of "White EJ and Henry" just go together so well!' - Jacqui.
Keep the suggestions coming - you have about 10 days to make them count!

Source: Andrew Simkins
16 May 2004

Stepping up the regime

As the expected date for hatching of the first egg draws ever closer, we have to report another change in Henry's behaviour.
Since our last diary entry, he has been present on site for much longer than he has been since his female laid her eggs. Prior to last Sunday, his absences were sometimes in excess of 24 hours, whereas more recently the maximum length of time he has stayed away from the nest has been two hours. In addition, he has undertaken more of the incubation duties and faithfully delivered either one or two fish each day to the nest.
Perhaps the appearance of the two intruding birds last Sunday reinforced the fact that his territory still needs to be defended against other male ospreys. We are once again indebted to The Highland Foundation for Wildlife who advise us that 'Red 8T' is a three year old bird who was hatched at a nest in Strathspey and was indeed adjudged to be male when he was ringed as a chick (from weight and other measurements taken at that time).
He is almost certainly looking for a breeding site for the first time. We all wish him success in finding a territory and are just thankful that our site has been 'intruder free' for the last four days.
Would it perhaps be too cynical to suggest that another possible reason for Henry's 'attentiveness' to his female is that there are likely to be few fertile females left now in the strath as the vast majority of females will be sitting on eggs? Whatever the reason, we have been pleased to see both our adult ospreys in attendance for the majority of the day.
This afternoon each bird undertook a spell of incubation during two violent hailstorms, allowing the other to seek some shelter. In his first breeding season, Henry particularly impressed visitors by sitting tight on the eggs whilst hailstones bounced off his back and covered the nest.
A grim reminder, not that we needed it, that Spring and Summer in the Highlands of Scotland can still result in changeable weather, to which young chicks are particularly susceptible. Seven days and counting.
An update on the name for our female ringed white 'EJ':
It is now 'neck and neck' between Eliza and EJ.
'I am 14 years old and I too think that her name should remain as 'white EJ', I think that it makes her sound like a warrior and with the recent egg smashing incident I think this is very fitting.' - Hannah from Shropshire.

'I vote for White EJ. It sounds like an old Indian name to me, while Eliza sounds like an English schoolgirl.' - Dicky from Holland.
Sue seems to sum up what many of you have said in your e-mails: 'My vote is to keep the name EJ. To be honest, it doesn't matter what the final outcome of the vote is, to me she will always be EJ. It is funny, whereas the name Henry suits 'our Henry' and kind of rolls of the tongue easily, none of the other names suggested for EJ have that ease or familiarity. Henry and EJ - long may they reign.'
Although Jack from Glasgow has another suggestion - 'How about Penelope which according to my dictionary means 'Wife constant during husband's long absence?'
We will hopefully let you know the final result in seven days!

Source: Andrew Simkins
21 May 2004

Sprucing up for the big day

The last few, but critical, days before hatch sometimes appear to be crawling by.
The weather has been much kinder to us since our last update and the last three afternoons have seen our female leave Henry incubating whilst she disappeared for up to an hour.
Her return to the nest looking decidedly damp suggested she had been cooling off by bathing in Loch Garten and this was followed by her spending some considerable time preening. She is approaching the end of her moult and it is particularly important she keeps her new plumage in tip-top condition.
Henry has maintained his average of one and a half good sized fish a day. The 'usual' procedure is for him to eat the head before delivering the fish to the nest. Our female then takes it to a perch to eat whilst Henry takes over incubation.
As Henry has built up the outside rim of the nest, it is unlikely that we will be able to see any chicks until they are about seven days old. We will therefore have to rely on witnessing a change in behaviour, which should be the indication that the first egg has hatched.
Henceforth, we will be eagerly watching the delivery of every meal and will be overjoyed if our female does not take the headless fish to her favourite perch, but eats it on the side of the nest and then gently leans

forward into the nest cup to offer a piece to the wee newly hatched chick.
Watch for this change in behaviour at the same time as us - live on our webcam. Four days and counting!

Source: Andrew Simkins
24 May 2004

Bundle of joy – for all concerned!

Thank you to Les Garnett for this great shot of the happy parents admiring their family (Photo Missing)
We are absolutely certain that Henry and EJ (thanks for all your suggestions - it is now 'officially' 'EJ') would, if they could, be proud to announce the arrival of their first born on Wednesday 26 May 2004. We also feel sure that they would like to take this opportunity to thank the many volunteers who have missed countless hours of sleep in order to ensure the safety of the eggs and chicks.
One thousand one hundred days is a long time to wait since an egg hatched in what is probably the most famous nest in the world, but today the long wait is all but forgotten.
We all rejoice at a new life entering a population of birds that celebrates its 50th anniversary of re-colonisation of our country.
And we hope that the success story of this species demonstrates what can be achieved by people and organisations working in partnership for nature conservation and that it reinforces hope for the future, both for ospreys and other species.
We have played our small part - the future of the chick, and any siblings that may arrive within the next day or so, is now dependant upon the parenting skills of Henry and EJ.
Keep watching the webcam to catch a first glimpse of the chick.

Source: Andrew Simkins
26 May 2004

The magic number

Thank you to Claire Alsop for capturing this 'Henry and EJ' moment (photo Missing)

Ospreys will vary considerably in their foraging abilities. The evidence we have suggests that EJ's previous mate (ringed Orange VS), who appeared at our nest shortly after she arrived this year, would struggle to even qualify for the osprey fishing Olympics.

At Loch Garten, Henry has a very hard act to follow. Ollie, the former resident male, was undoubtedly a master at his craft, raising 23 chicks between 1990 and 2001 and he still holds the record for 14 fish delivered to the nest in one day in 1995 (not the same day he mated a record 49 times).

Up to now, Henry has only hinted at his prowess and on occasion there appears to be conflicting evidence as to his skills. Last year, he delivered five fish in one day to the nest shortly after EJ had arrived - we would have expected two fish to be adequate for just him and the female as there were no chicks. Yet this year, on occasion, he let more than 24 hours pass between the deliveries of fish whilst EJ was incubating.

On Wednesday last, we suspected that a chick had hatched after hearing 'chipping' noises late Tuesday evening. Early Wednesday morning, Henry delivered a fish and EJ did not take the fish to her usual perch but ate it on the side of the nest and then offered a piece of fish deep into the nest cup.

Surely, we now have enough evidence to suggest that Henry is more than a worthy successor to Ollie?

Hatch of chick number one was confirmed when we glimpsed a wee head bobbing in the cup of the nest. We expected Henry to increase the number of fish he brought to the nest - three would more than suffice, and Henry didn't disappoint - four fish were delivered.

EJ would have laid the three eggs we counted in the nest a day, perhaps two days apart and we were delighted to see a second small head on Friday lunchtime. We have twins! Henry had maintained a steady delivery of fish with three on Thursday and four on Friday.

One chick hatched after a barren two years was joyful news, two were indeed a bonus! Saturday was again a 'three fish' day and the stimulus of open mouths in the nest to feed certainly appeared to galvanise Henry into action.

We still had a question mark in our minds however. The weather since Wednesday has been good - mainly sunny, warm, with light or no wind - almost ideal fishing conditions. How would Henry perform in adverse conditions?

Yesterday our question may have been answered. EJ fed herself and also the occasionally visible two wee heads and had finished fish number three by 3 pm. Henry disappeared at 3.30 pm and the rain started. It turned into a downpour and EJ sat very low brooding the youngsters. Upon Henry's return, some 40 minutes later, she did not bother to take the whole brown trout Henry deposited on the side of the nest. The two chicks were obviously well fed and needed protection from the rain more than food. Henry disappeared within minutes and his return to the nest with a pike 25 minutes later coincided with a brief respite in the weather.
EJ began feeding the chicks with the trout and Henry looked at EJ, then the chicks, then the pike still in his talons. We hope you will forgive us for adding a mental caption to the picture in our minds - Henry saying 'So what do you expect me to do with this?'
Sunday ended with our male delivering fish number six of the day mid-evening. Surely, we now have enough evidence to suggest that Henry is more than a worthy successor to Ollie?
Today has brought truly stunning news. We have triplets! THREE heads were just visible for a brief second!
Time for some of us now to catch up on our sleep and for delayed holidays to be taken. Time for the diary to be written by other team members. Time for Henry to really show his mettle!

Source: Andrew Simkins
1 June 2004

Love me tender

EJ feeding the three chicks - thanks to Andrew Stuart for catching this great moment (photo Missing)

It has been eight days since our first chick hatched at Loch Garten. Not a day has gone by when we've not stood back to watch the three little heads bobbing about in the nest and marvelled at the tenderness and devotion of Henry and EJ to their new family.
Torrential rain on Tuesday saw EJ confined to the nest, determinedly protecting the chicks against the continuous rainfall. Even when Henry delivered a succulent brown trout to the nest in the morning, EJ

declined and chose to keep the chicks warm and dry rather than feed them.
With the third chick only one day old and extremely vulnerable, it was probably a wise decision. So poor old Henry, with his offerings rejected had no choice but to devour all of the fish right in front of EJ!
Later that day there was a break in the rain and Henry delivered his second fish of the day, this time much to the delight of EJ and of course the chicks! A bit short on fish on Tuesday but our concerns were soon allayed when, early on Wednesday, three heads were clearly visible in the nest still vigorously bobbing about.
'Henry surpassed himself by bringing in four fish by 6 pm this evening'

EJ's efforts were rewarded with a warm day and the delivery of two fish by Henry in the morning. Once her job of feeding the chicks was completed, EJ spent much of her time preening and shaking off her drenched feathers. It had rained most of the night as well!
The third fish of the day brought to the nest caused more excitement in the centre. Still alive! Unusual behaviour, as the male osprey usually eats the head of the fish before bringing it to the nest. This prevents the risk of damage to the chicks should it flap around in the nest.
Perhaps it is something Henry still has to learn. The female ate the head immediately, a little gruesome but truly remarkable to see the stark contrast of EJ killing the fish while at the same time tenderly feeding the chicks. She ensures each chick gets its share, even the youngest and less boisterous of the three.
A dramatic start to today with two intruding ospreys seen flying close to the nest early in the morning. With his first fish of the day in tow, Henry managed to see them off. Almost certainly one of them was a male, but otherwise we don't know who they were. No sign of them thankfully again today.
Henry surpassed himself by bringing in four fish by 6 pm this evening. It is essential he continues to do this at this crucial stage of rapid growth. The chicks are already becoming more visible with each day. For some of us in the team at Loch Garten who have lived through the frustrating and emotive drama of 2003, it is hard to believe that this is really happening.
Who would have thought after all that Henry and EJ have been through, that they would make it this far? They have fought for this nest and deserve to succeed this year... And as for Henry? Well I think we can say for a first time dad, he really is doing very well!

Source: Jo McFarlane
4 June 2004

Super-Dad

In 1993, a tragedy struck the Loch Garten osprey nest. Our regular male Ollie, delivered a fish to the nest to his eagerly awaiting family. As soon as he landed on the nest we knew something was wrong, for entwined around the fish was fishing line.
As we looked on helplessly, one of the two chicks, only a few weeks old, immediately became entangled in the line. The female, seeing there was a problem, moved closer to her chick but herself became entangled in the line.
After several attempts to detach herself, she took off, fortunately for the chick, taking the fishing line with her. Her sacrifice for her chick was greater than we could ever imagine. She never returned that day. We know she would never have abandoned her chicks at this stage, so we were left imagining the worst.
The loss of our female was a great shock to all at Loch Garten but this soon gave way to our greater concern for the chicks. We were left with a young male who, if the chicks were to survive, was now responsible not only for catching the fish but for taking over the female's role of feeding the fish to the chicks. Could he do it?
'We all hold our breath... Could it be?'
If he did accept the challenge, would the chicks survive alone on the nest while he was away fishing? What would we do if he abandoned them? All we could do was wait and hope for a miracle.
A miracle came, the morning after the female's disappearance, Ollie appeared with a fish and for the first time since his arrival in 1990 at Loch Garten, we saw him remove small bits of fish and cautiously feed them to the chicks. Ollie in fact became an expert in chick-feeding and despite all the odds, both of the chicks survived and on the 21st of July the first chick fledged, followed soon after by the second chick.
When Ollie returned in 1994 and met his new female, Olive, he continued this behaviour no doubt to the surprise and delight of Olive! Since then, we have never believed that any male osprey could ever match the skills of Ollie and although in our eyes, Henry is a worthy successor, we have always known that there was something just that little bit more special about Ollie. That was until...

Friday 4 June and Henry has been impressing our visitors with his fishing skills all day. Fish number four is on its way in and once again, the fish is still alive! EJ is excitedly calling to him but Henry ignores her and begins to eat the head of the fish.
Suddenly he stops and leans forward in the direction of the three little heads eagerly reaching towards him with mouths open. We all hold our breath... Could it be? Henry pulls back and continues to eat the fish himself...Just our imaginations!
Then suddenly, again, Henry leans forward and this time... Yes! Sure enough, the oldest chick takes some fish from Henry. EJ looks on - surprised? Then again, the second chick takes some fish from Henry. After ten minutes of this, EJ assertively grabs the fish from him and continues the feeding.
So we are now left wondering, if Henry is already feeding his chicks in his first few days of being a father, what more is he capable of? To be honest, I think some of the ladies amongst the team are starting to get quite jealous of EJ!

Source: Jo McFarlane
8 June 2004

Simply the best?

EJ settles down after Henry's excellent care(photo Missing)
A week has passed since Henry first showed signs of overtaking Ollie in what seems to have become the first battle for the award of 'Best Male Osprey' at Loch Garten!
Henry has continued not only to bring in a constant supply of fish each day for his family and himself, but he is still intermittently feeding the chicks. All three chicks are growing rapidly in size and looking stronger with each day.
Each time they emerge from beneath the safety and warmth of their mother - who we notice seems to be finding it harder and harder to spread herself out over the ever expanding chicks - we cannot help but marvel at the thought that by the end of August each of these helpless chicks will be making their 3,000 mile journey down to their wintering grounds in Senegal and Gambia.
Remarkably, they will travel alone, without their siblings and without any guidance from Henry and EJ.
...by the end of August each of these helpless chicks will be making their 3,000 mile journey down to their wintering grounds in Senegal and

Gambia Let us, however, try to put our concerns to one side for now, because the oldest chick is still only 16 days old! There is much to do before they are ready to set off for Africa...
As Henry is bringing in sufficient fish, the survival of all three chicks at this stage is looking extremely good. There are few threats to them in Scotland with no real predators, unlike their counterparts in Scandinavia who must be extra vigilant due to the presence of the eagle owl, a known predator of Scandinavian osprey chicks.
One main concern for Henry and EJ however, is the Scottish weather. Although we are in June, it is possible for gale force winds to occur in this area. For a chick that is no longer small enough to retreat beneath its mother and is still unable to fly, it must be strong enough to withstand these winds.
Should a chick be blown off the nest overnight, we can only hope it will survive until the morning so that we may intervene. On the ground, the predatory risk by foxes is great.
OK so we are trying to put our concerns aside and not succeeding very well, but it is only natural for there to be an element of parental concern! Henry and EJ might be taking parenthood seriously, but so are we!

Source: Jo McFarlane
11 June 2004

EJ shows her mettle as 'mum'

The chicks are masters of disguise - thanks to Les Garnett from Bolton for capturing this webcam moment (photo Missing)
Has it really been 21 days since we heard the first faint chippings from deep in the nest cup? As the oldest chick stretches out its tiny wing, much to the disdain of its siblings who are already defiantly jostling for space, we cannot help but wonder how the three chicks, Henry and EJ will all fit on the nest in 5-6 weeks time when the chicks are nearing adult size. At this stage their wingspans will be nearing 5.0-5.5 feet (1.5-1.65 m). Just 5-6 weeks to go and our chicks will take their first flights, who can believe it?
Currently, however, exploration of the nest is the priority! The chicks are barely able to see over the edge of the nest, yet this does not stop them from trying and at least once a day we are all reduced to nervous wrecks as they teeter closer to the edge.

Thank goodness for mum who is always close by and simply ushers them back to safety - we breathe a sigh of relief! Henry is still bringing in 4-5 fish a day, with all three chicks getting their fair share and growing considerably in size. Parenthood is running smoothly and the bond between Henry and EJ is growing stronger with each day.

'We turned our attentions to the nest, but the chicks were suddenly nowhere to be seen...'

We have spent much of our time of late focusing on Henry's brilliance in our osprey diary but it is surely time to turn our attentions to EJ, who has proven herself not only a worthy mate for Henry, but the perfect mother to his chicks.

She has continued to sit through torrential rain always protecting the three chicks beneath her and she has confidently defended the nest against intruding ospreys while Henry has been fishing.

Today, however, we finally realised the strength of the bond between EJ and her chicks. After sitting through several hours of Scotland's finest downpours, EJ finally had a chance to shake herself off during a respite in the weather. She was a short distance away from the nest, when suddenly a heron was seen flying in the direction of the nest and the chicks.

Herons sometimes take the young of other birds, as we witnessed in 2003 when two goldeneye ducklings were whisked away by a heron at the side of Loch Garten. But, surely, it wouldn't be in a heron's interest to cross paths with an osprey? EJ was not taking any chances.

She headed straight towards the heron and at the same time gave out an unusual call. For those of us in the team who have not seen a breeding year before, it was the first time we had heard it.

We turned our attentions to the nest, but the chicks were suddenly nowhere to be seen. There just seemed to be sticks, grasses and chick faeces! Where were the chicks? No need to panic! The chicks had not been whisked away by the heron - they were perfectly camouflaged. Heads down, low in the nest, they WERE the nest! Brilliant! The call we had heard was the female instructing her chicks to play dead and keep still so nothing would notice them, not even us! The chicks had done exactly what they had been told.

The heron was seen off and EJ joined her chicks.

When Henry returned with a fish half an hour later, EJ simply got on with feeding her chicks as if nothing had even happened. Just an average day in the life of an osprey female at Loch Garten!

Source: Jo McFarlane

17 June 2004

British summer hits

The weather at Loch Garten has been dreadful over the last week. June rainfall is a determining factor in the survival of chicks of many species here in Abernethy Forest, including the endangered capercaillie, whose recently hatched chicks are now at their most vulnerable to the cold and wet.

The osprey chicks can also be susceptible, but EJ continues to protect the chicks against the onslaught of rain, and Henry continues to bring up to five fish a day, despite the bad weather potentially hindering his fishing attempts.

As the bond strengthens between EJ and Henry, not only does Henry continue to feed the chicks intermittently, a skill he has improved on considerably, but we are still constantly being amazed by the unusual behaviour of these two ospreys.

Yesterday the rain was relentless and despite Henry's offering of a fish early in the morning, EJ chose to keep the chicks covered rather than feed them.

'Suddenly we heard a faint food soliciting call coming from beneath the female...'

That afternoon the rain became heavier and Henry brought his second fish to the nest. Despite the chick's obvious hunger, EJ had no choice but to remain sitting tight, opting again to not feed herself or the chicks. Henry stayed on the nest with the fish in his foot debating what he should do next!

Suddenly we heard a faint food soliciting call coming from beneath the female and sure enough a small head peeked out from beneath EJ and there was the oldest chick, now four weeks old, calling to Henry for food. As the chick continued to call to him, Henry, with his new-found skills, happily accepted the job and began to feed tiny bits of fish to the hungry chick while it remained sheltered under the female's wing, keeping dry. The other two chicks were not calling and were happily huddled beneath the female for warmth.

Very unusual behaviour but what a wonderful example of teamwork!

Source: Jo McFarlane
25 June 2004

Busy day

Fish-wise, Sunday morning saw Henry off to a slow start. It was 9.20 am before he brought in the first catch of the day, which was relatively small in comparison to some of those in previous days. EJ fed each of the chicks, although it didn't satisfy their insatiable hunger.
It was battle stations at 10.10 am, as EJ gave a loud alarm call which saw the three chicks immediately drop down low into the nest. An intruding osprey flew above the nest, but thanks to EJ's actions, soon realised the nest was occupied, and flew off to the north.
As EJ and the three chicks eagerly awaited Henry's return with the second fish, they occupied themselves with a spot of preening and the obligatory toilet duties. In doing so, they have managed to hit our nest camera a few times. If we have a nest camera next year, it will have to have an inbuilt washer bottle and screen wiper!
As EJ's food calls got more persistent, tensions in the nest mounted. Over the last couple of days, some visitors have been concerned that the third chick appeared to not get a fair share of fish. As the elder two chicks are just that wee bit stronger than their youngest sibling, they are slightly more adept at positioning themselves next to EJ, ready for when a fish is brought to the nest.
EJ remained on guard, looking skywards, as although the intruding osprey had flown away, a kestrel was now hovering about 50 feet above the nest
Again, as they realised Henry was about to land on the nest with fish number two, they jockeyed for the best position, forcing their sibling to 'wait in line'! When the second fish of the day appeared at 12.15 pm, our fears were allayed and EJ made sure that all of her three chicks received some fish.
After delivering the second fish, Henry immediately took off and just 25 minutes later could be seen on the lower branches of a tree behind the nest, tucking into the third fish of the day, which he brought to the nest at 1.05 pm.
There was a brief interlude in feeding when an intruding osprey appeared over the nest at 1.25 pm. Henry returned to the nest to help EJ defend it, which seemed to work as the intruder flew low over the nest for about five minutes but then flew off to the north. Henry then returned to one of his favourite perches, on the lower left branch of the camera tree.
EJ remained on guard, looking skywards, as although the intruding osprey had flown away, a kestrel was now hovering about 50 feet above

the nest. As this didn't appear to pose a threat, EJ and the three chicks settled down on the nest and looked forward to Henry bringing in fish number four.
A brief shower of rain at 2.30 pm saw the 'EJ umbrella' come out, with EJ brooding the chicks, keeping them warm and dry. Fish number four duly arrived at the nest at 3.08 pm. Henry had made up his quota of fish for the day, despite the slow start and there were still seven hours of potential fishing time left!
Whilst keeping you all up to date with the ospreys via this diary, we would also like to draw your attention to the following events that have been planned to celebrate the fact that it has been 50 years since the ospreys returned to Scotland.
Since then, hundreds of people have volunteered at Loch Garten, kindly giving of their time and energy to help protect this rare species. We are holding four evening receptions for both current and former Operation Osprey volunteers, at the Loch Garten Osprey Centre, Strathspey.
On four evenings, 16-19 July 2004 the Loch Garten Osprey Centre is hosting a reunion for volunteers who have taken part in Operation Osprey over the years. It gives the opportunity to return and see the ospreys, the new Centre and facilities, the new camera technology, meet the current staff, and generally see how things have changed since it all began 50 years ago.
A chance too, to possibly meet up with fellow veteran volunteers from years or decades past. Each evening will take the form of an informal gathering with some light refreshments between 6.30 pm to 8.30 pm.
So, if you are an Operation Osprey volunteer or know people who are or were, please pass on the message. To find out more details and to let us know if you are coming, please contact Christine Corfield at our North Scotland office on 01463 715000 or e-mail christine.corfield@rspb.org.uk

See our volunteering pages for details of opportunities near you.

Source: Catharine Jarvis
28 June 2004

Patience is a virtue

On Wednesday, Henry brought in no fewer than six fish, four of which were rainbow trout.

The first three fish were quite small and each time the eldest and middle chick managed to position themselves close to EJ and got first helpings, leaving the youngest chick to wait until they were both stuffed full.
Henry then excelled himself, catching a decent sized rainbow trout, measuring at least 18 inches. Indeed, Henry seemed so keen to bring his prize catch of the day back to EJ and the chicks that he forgot the golden rule of bringing a headless fish back to the nest.
Usually, male ospreys eat the head of the fish with self-preservation in mind, ensuring that they get the most nutritious part of the fish. However, this also ensures that the fish can't do any damage to the young chicks in the nest, by flapping around in its death throws.
The chicks have to practice flapping their wings in order to build up their strength for their forthcoming arduous 3000-mile journey to The Gambia and Senegal in Africa
However, this time, EJ and the chicks soon made sure it met its end quickly. In fact, because it was such a decent size, it meant that the youngest chick managed to get an equal portion as its siblings. All three chicks seemed satisfied with what they had eaten.
So much so, that when the fifth fish of day arrived on the nest less than an hour later, the eldest chick was so full that it didn't attempt to eat any. That meant that yet another rainbow trout was shared between the middle and youngest chicks.
The gusty winds on Thursday morning put paid to Henry making an early start fishing and it wasn't until noon that he finally managed to find some still water at one of the local Fisheries. As the chicks waited for Henry to return with their breakfast, they began their daily exercise routine of stretching their wings, often wafting each other in the process.
The chicks have to practice flapping their wings in order to build up their strength for their forthcoming arduous 3000-mile journey to The Gambia and Senegal in Africa. It is certainly hard to believe that in just 6-8 weeks time these chicks will have embarked on their long migration. They will need to be in tip top condition, as although they stop off en-route, it will take them almost two months to reach the distant shores and plentiful supply of fish in the African coastal lagoons.
With the morning exercises now over, Henry brought in the first fish of the day at 12.15 pm and like yesterday, it was a rainbow trout. However, it was not of yesterday's proportions, only about 12 inches. The small size meant that only the eldest and middle chick got some fish, with the youngest chick accepting that it would just have to wait.

At 3.55 pm Henry brought in an even smaller rainbow trout, only 9 inches, again leaving the youngest chick to wait until the older two were full. However, as this diary is being written, Henry has just landed on the nest with rainbow trout number three. The youngest chick has positioned itself next to EJ and is now very hopeful of a meal!

Source: Catharine Jarvis
1 July 2004

Stairway to heaven?

A long climb for our assistant warden... (photo Missing)

Compared to last year, the weather in the last few weeks has really been appalling. Our log books show that it has rained on 13 days of the last 14. Whilst on a few days there were just showers, on a number of days the rain (and high winds) were heavy and persistent.
Henry should now be delivering at least five average size fish a day to the nest and this will need to increase over the next couple of weeks to around seven.
The effect of rain and wind on an osprey's ability to find food has been well researched and the results confirmed this year by our own records - Henry has struggled to bring three fish each day to the nest in atrocious weather. Being in the rain-shadow of the Cairngorm mountains, we arguably have our own 'microclimate' - it may be raining here all day, but completely dry 40 miles away, and vice versa.
We are grateful to Roy Dennis for advising us yesterday that he has visited six osprey nests in the vicinity where all the chicks have perished due to the bad weather and shortage of food. It is cold comfort to have this confirmation that Henry appears to have fishing skills that would make any angler exceedingly jealous.
We had hoped that there would be a respite in the bad weather yesterday as the chicks were an ideal age to be ringed - the eldest at just under six weeks of age, and the youngest at just over five weeks. Their legs are fully developed at approximately four weeks and they will not take their first flight until seven or eight weeks of age.
The 'ringing party' were all present and correct at 8 am prompt, but Henry disrupted everyone's schedule by delivering the second fish of the day at 7.45 am. As we waited for EJ to finish feeding the chicks, our

normally garrulous assistant warden was taciturn and looked very pale. He had won first prize in the 'Who gets to climb the ladder this year' raffle. When he was first interviewed for a job on the reserve he said he would go to 'any lengths' to get it - 45' up a ladder was obviously, therefore, going to be like a stroll in the park for him.
Immediately the fish had disappeared, we started our walk to the nest. As soon as we were visible to EJ, she took flight and circled high above the nest giving alarm calls. Can ospreys get hiccups? If so then apologies to EJ for the fright so soon after she had eaten. The three-stage ladder was expertly put together and the AW commenced his steady, measured climb.
'Some of us were more than happy to stay on terra firma - strongly believing that the firmer the terra, the less the terror.'
The chicks, in response to EJ's calls, 'played dead' in the nest and it appeared easy (for those of us on the ground at least) to place them in a bag one at a time and bring them to the ground.
The oldest was first down and like her siblings was ringed with a metal ring on her right leg and a yellow colour ring (27) on her left. The numbers or letters on the ring are read from the bottom of the leg upwards. From measurements taken and drawing on a wealth of experience, Roy Dennis suggested that this chick was almost certainly female. The youngest (28) was next and adjudged to be male.
Middle chick (29) was a wee bit more problematic to sex, but was thought probably also to be male. Having been weighed and measured the chicks had their first official photo call. Shame the TV crew had finished filming when 29 left the boss with a momento of the occasion. He didn't appear to marvel like the rest of us did at the force and magnitude of the projectile motion. Strange that. It should make our 'highlights of the season' DVD quite easily though.
The chicks were then deposited one by one back into the nest and we returned to the visitor centre as quickly as possible. Within three minutes EJ was perching on the camera tree. There are no records of adult birds rejecting chicks because they have been handled/ringed and EJ was not the first exception.
At the first hint of rain she returned to the nest and brooded her young. Henry returned with fish number three mid morning and a further three by the end of the day.
Thanks are due to the consummate professional Roy Dennis and to the assistant warden who made no less than twelve journeys up and down that ladder. He will no doubt be delighted to learn that in the post

ringing euphoria, next year's raffle was drawn in his absence and yet again he had the winning ticket.
That reminds us, we forgot to buy our lottery ticket for tomorrow. The first three numbers have been chosen for us. For those of us who have experienced two years without eggs and chicks at Loch Garten, yesterday was better than winning the lottery. Money can't buy memories.

Source: Andrew Simkins
6 July 2004

Maiden flight?

Saturday the 17 July, and three months exactly to the famous day of battle between EJ and the intruder osprey. It was to be just as exciting a day, though with a much more positive outcome.
EJ had left from view at about 5.30 am on what we thought to be the usual short exercise flight and maybe morning bath in Loch Garten. The three chicks, all lying quite settled in the nest, were giving the odd call for food.
Then at 6.05 am Henry appeared with his first fish of the day, which the youngest chick, ring 28, was able to grab and enjoy all for himself.
However, there was still no sign of the return of EJ to the nest. This was most unusual, the female always being present when a fish is delivered to the nest so she can tear the fish up and feed it to the three chicks.
Where had she gone?
It was not long before the mystery was solved, as at 7 am with much surprise to all, in came EJ with a whole 10'' pike to the nest. Straight away EJ began tearing small bits from the pike and feeding them to the oldest two chicks.
Everyone was most taken aback with this turn of events. Had EJ just been going to Loch Garten for a quick bath when she luckily caught a fish? Or had she purposely left the nest to go fishing to provide food for the chicks?
There have been very few cases recorded of a female providing fish for the chicks. At this stage, when all the chicks have not yet begun flying, the female remains close by the nest - on the look out for any danger and always on hand when the male delivers fish to the nest. So why has EJ taken to going fishing? Will it be a one off or will it be repeated?

We were all intrigued by these exciting and unusual events, but our attention soon turned to the fact that today, our oldest chick had reached day 52, which, over the decades, has become the age at which a first flight is often made.
'Finally, at 2.30 pm our oldest chick, yellow 27, took her maiden flight and officially fledged the nest!'
Over the last few days, we have seen her confidence grow and wings strengthen, as gradually, she was able to get higher and higher off the nest, even landing on the post attached to the nest which contains our new camera. We were all on tenter hooks through out the morning. Every move she made we thought 'this is it!'
Finally, at 2.30 pm our oldest chick, yellow 27, took her maiden flight and officially fledged the nest! The first chick to do so at the Loch Garten nest since 2001.
It was fantastic to watch as she circled over the nest a number of times before she landed back on it. She didn't stay put for long, soon taking off again to circle round once more before coming down to perch on the dead tree next to the nest. There she remained for a number of hours enjoying her new-found freedom away from the crowded nest.
The evening of this exciting day ended with another twist, as EJ once again disappeared from the nest around 6 pm not retuning until just after 7 pm - with her second fish of the day!
If that was not enough, Henry flew into the nest 5 minutes later with a fish. This was too much of a coincidence and would suggest that EJ had gone away to purposely fish for the chicks.
So as the day drew to a close, we have much to look forward to, as it will only be a matter of days before the younger siblings follow in the oldest chicks flights! It will also be exciting to see if EJ's fishing was just a one of day or will become a continuing trend...

Source: Ciorstaidh Laing
17 July 2004

I believe I can fly!

After the excitement of the weekend, and our eldest chick's first flight, the osprey staffs' feet returned to the ground. However much more excitement was to come...

We began the week pondering over such things as: how long would it be before our middle chick fledged? Would EJ continue to bring fish back to the nest?
On Monday (19 July) morning we continued to see our eldest chick fly to nearby trees to perch and deliberate over her new found freedom. Unfortunately, at about 9.30 am, an unwanted visitor shattered the peace. An intruding osprey flew above the nest and began to dive bomb the eldest chick that was perched below the osprey nest!
She ducked and held on for dear life as the intruder then flew over the nest, where the middle and youngest chicks were sitting. This filled us with alarm because EJ was nowhere to be seen!
'It was a sight to see - five ospreys on our nest tucking into two fish and the feast lasted all morning'
However, a few minutes later she arrived to the rescue, carrying a huge rainbow trout. After much alarm calling and mantling of wings, EJ left the nest to see off the intruder leaving the fish in the nest.
The middle chick seemed to be frozen with shock after the commotion and was ignoring the large headless trout on the nest however youngest chick could not believe his luck and began to tuck in! A whole fish to himself and he was being left in peace to eat it!
EJ returned to the nest followed by Henry, who had caught a fish himself. It was a sight to see - five ospreys on our nest tucking into two fish and the feast lasted all morning. Later in the afternoon, Henry flew straight into the nest with a third fish and immediately started feeding the chicks himself! It was as if he was saying to EJ - 'Well, if you are going to start catching fish, I'll start feeding the chicks!' A fine example of teamwork from Henry and EJ, behaviour obviously learned from the seamless operation provided by the osprey staff and volunteers!
If that was not enough for one day, the eldest chick was then joined on her favourite perch by a young kestrel. They made friends and 'hung out' on the lower branches of the osprey nest for a while before going their separate ways.
Over the next couple of days, Henry continued to bring in about five or six fish a day. He did surprise us on Tuesday by bringing a very long eel back to the nest, which was still very much alive.
Eels are more commonly caught at this time of year when the water levels in the rivers are lower, but records show that this was the first eel at the Loch Garten nest in two years. Handling it proved a valuable learning experience for the chicks. With one chick at each end and one in the middle pinning it down, it was not going anywhere!

EJ also continued to bring in one or two fish a day, which is very unusual behaviour for a female osprey with young chicks in the nest. This has meant that all the chicks are being well-fed. The youngest has begun to fill out and is starting to flap his wings too.
However, our middle chick still seemed very reluctant to take its first flight. Many times, we stood, finger poised over the record button, but no, we would just have to wait a bit longer.
It was not until 4 pm on Thursday afternoon that he finally hopped up onto the post, waited, then helped by a gust of wing took his first flight over to the camera tree! He waited for about an hour, then Henry flew in with a fish and that enticed him back to the nest. Phew!
We now wait in anticipation for the youngest chick's first flight, as this will truly represent the success Henry and EJ have had as a pair on this nest.

Source: Rachel Bauld
23 July 2004

And it's take off...

Firstly - many apologies for the late diary update, which has not been due to a lack of, or bad, news - merely due to pressure of work.
'2 down and 1 to go' was where we left our last entry and we are extremely pleased to report that our 'wee one' successfully fledged on Tuesday 3 August - but in a most extraordinary way!
Chicks prefer to take their first flight aided by a healthy breeze, but we sadly had been becalmed for some days prior to last Tuesday. Doubly sadly as the fine, still weather brought out the midges with a vengeance (we can recommend not an insect repellent but a much more pleasantly perfumed product which appears extremely effective - 'Skin So Soft' delivered to your door by your friendly lady who appears to hail from a county in south-west England - a gross of boxes delivered gratis by the company concerned for this unsolicited endorsement would no doubt benefit next year's team of staff and volunteers).
The wee one, 28, had been vigorously flapping for some days
Apologies again - this time for the diversion from our ospreys. The wee one, 28, had been vigorously flapping for some days and was alone on the nest shortly after dawn last Tuesday when he managed to achieve vertical take off and reach the stunning height of at least half a metre before collapsing onto the nest.

No doubt exhausted by his efforts, but determined at least to show willing, he hopped onto the support housing our experimental camera around 9.30 am and peered downwards.
At around 9.50 'big sis' 27 alighted easily on the nest. She is flying so well now - a BA (who provide a marvellous service from Inverness to Gatwick - please see above in relation to product endorsement) pilot would be envious of her landings.
After checking in vain for uneaten scraps of fish she took off again and then 3 times she circled her sibling, who was still perched on the camera housing. Her circles gradually got wider and it was very difficult not to succumb to the temptation to conclude that she was attempting to encourage the wee one to take his first flight.
Volunteers agree with us - when you spend so much time with our birds it is extremely hard not to regard them as part of our family and so easy to anthropomorphise their behaviour.
It really would be going too far to suggest chicks were capable of such thought processes. We were still scolding ourselves for our interpretation when 27 took off again, hovered above 28, extended her talons and attempted to push him off his perch! 28 managed to duck and avoid contact, but wobbled dangerously. He had ALMOST, but not quite, fledged at 9.54, - not by his own choice! 27 gave it up as a 'bad job' and flew north and was quickly lost from sight.
The wee one was determined not to be hurried and watched her departure, gave himself a quick scratch on the head (obviously in need of 'Skin So Soft' - that must be worth at least TWO gross of boxes) and launched himself into the air at 9.57 precisely.
His landing 1 minute later would have had the emergency services on full alert if he had been at Heathrow, (unlike all BA flights we have been privileged to have been passengers on - trips to the USA are popular with osprey staff - BA please note) but he had survived. Phew! Amazing stuff!
He obviously wanted to 'test the water' by himself and at least he had avoided the embarrassment of take off and landing in front of visitors as we do not open until 10 am - although our cheers and applause could apparently be heard on the car park.
Yet again our diligent volunteers had managed to capture footage of these extraordinary moments which will be included in our 'highlights of the season' DVD which is being completed as we type..... Watch this space for details of how and when you can order a copy of the 2002 - 2004 highlights on DVD.

It was a shame that EJ had not been present to witness the fledging of her youngest hatched - she had not been seen since Saturday 31st July and was spending more and more time away from the nest and her departure for Africa appeared to be imminent.
As Wednesday followed Tuesday and Thursday ended without a sighting of EJ we were resigned to the fact that EJ would probably never know that all 3 young had fledged. No matter. The good weather prevailed and Henry was doing his stuff with at least 3, and usually more, fish each day. The 2 big sisters were spending more and more time off the nest, whilst 28 appeared to prefer the 'little but often' approach to the gaining of his wings, rarely being absent from the nest for more than a few minutes. This however does have its compensations - his sisters were sometimes absent upon Henry's return with a fish and he was able to eat his fill prior to the arrival. He certainly seems a different, and much plumper, bird since his ringing.
We have often remarked on EJ's and Henry's remarkable eyesight. Last Friday the chicks proved that this is acquired early in life. At around 5 pm 28 (as usual) and 29 were on the nest and suddenly began mantling their wings and alarm calling.
Most inconsiderate as we were in the middle of a video presentation and our audience of visitors left their seats and rushed to the hide flaps. We were not to be outdone and asked our visitors to count.
We knew what was coming! They reached 53 before we spotted the dot in the sky. We got to 72 before we were confident enough to identify it as an osprey. It circled fairly high above the nest before disappearing quickly south-east.
We were absolutely certain that it wasn't Henry. If it was good enough for our chicks who are we to argue? The fact that they were able to see that bird almost a minute before we could AND know it was not a parent never ceases to amaze us.
Two minutes later an osprey was observed perched in a tree about 750m from the nest. We could be relatively sure through the telescope that it was an adult bird. Close study of the plumage suggested a female.
Was this the intruder? If it was the chicks were now unconcerned. But, having said that, it posed no threat at that distance. So was the intruder a failed breeder? Was it a female from a more northerly nest returning on migration and just being nosey? Was it a female whose chicks had all died in the atrocious June weather now heading south?
It shifted position and we thought we saw a flash of a white leg ring. No chance of reading any letters or numbers at that distance. Anyway the light plays tricks. Surely not EJ? She hadn't been seen for 6 days.

At least 50 ospreys have white leg rings. What we needed now was for this bird to take off and approach the nest. Then the chicks would tell us. We wouldn't need to see a leg ring. Just watch their behaviour. Trust the chicks. They know. It took off - and headed south-west. Away from the nest. We would never know.
Our volunteers 'change over' on a Saturday. A sad day of goodbyes, but followed by a happier 'Welcome to Loch Garten'. Our volunteers have an induction at 4.30 - 6 pm (hey! why use 30 words about ospreys when 3,000 will do quite nicely?)
We had our back to the TV monitor when at 5.47 pm we told them that they needed to try and distinguish between our 3 chicks who had yellow rings 27, 28 and 29, and also Henry who had a metal ring but no coloured ring. Thankfully they had only 4 birds to identify as our female EJ had gone back to Africa.
Many of our volunteers have been an invaluable part of our team for many years and some decades. For some it is their first year here. Why is it always the volunteer who admits to having difficulty in distinguishing between ospreys and chaffinches who has to ask;
'So what is that bird with a white ring with the letters EJ who has just landed on the nest with a fish?'
She came back with another fish a little over 2 hours later - EJ that is, not the volunteer. By that time we had just about recovered our composure and explained to the volunteer that an absence of a whole week from the nest by an adult female was not that unusual. Well at least we TRIED to say it with confidence.
So, to summarise. We have learned a number of lessons over the past few days. If you want to avoid:
1. Receiving 362 emails from irate web-diary readers and 1 from your boss enquiring if you still work here
2. Embarrassment from a 'rookie' volunteer who obviously knows more than you about ospreys
3. Drawing erroneous conclusions about the reasons for an ospreys first flight
4. Irritation from insect bites.

Then you need to: Update your web-diary entries much more frequently, relax and take more holidays - preferably aboard a BA flight to Ohio - with the invaluable 'Skin So Soft.'

Source: Andrew Simpkins
11 August 2004

A fishy tale

Over the past few days, as the web cam sometimes shows, we are increasingly seeing an empty nest at Loch Garten. The three chicks have now taken to perching up in nearby trees, each trying to get a good vantage point from which to see Henry returning to the nest with a fish.
Early on Saturday morning, a meadow pipit took full advantage of the fact that the three osprey chicks were away from the nest and it spent a good 10 minutes collecting as many insects as it could cram into its beak, a kind of bird version of supermarket sweep!
The meadow pipit's time on the nest was up when the youngest osprey chick (28) returned to the nest and began calling for food. Sure enough, shortly afterwards, in came Henry with the first catch of the day. With no sign of its older sisters, the youngest chick probably couldn't believe his luck and quickly set about tearing into the fish.
The heavy rain of last week was a blessing in disguise, as the screen on the nest camera was so clear and visitors were treated to some excellent close views of the youngest chick feeding. The chick started to eat the head of the fish and it didn't seem to pause for breath until it had swallowed the tail! Then, as though that fish wasn't enough food for it, the youngest chick retired to a branch on the camera tree, just to the right of the nest, perhaps getting in position for fish number two.
With over 160 pairs of ospreys in Scotland, the sight of intruding birds above the nest is becoming a more common sight
However, by then the middle chick (29) also had designs on the second fish and within seconds of Henry's arrival on the nest, the middle chick was off her blocks and got a head start on the youngest chick. The middle chick wasted no time in taking the fish from the nest and taking it to a nearby perch. From the microphone in the nest visitors could hear the youngest chick calling 'false start'!
The protest calls from the youngest chick didn't fall on deaf ears, as less than an hour later, Henry flew in with the third fish of the day, a brown trout, which he probably caught along the nearby River Spey. Having just eaten well, the middle chick seemed quite happy this time to let the youngest chick take the trout.
Given past experiences, the youngest chick mantled his wings very tightly over the fish, perhaps expecting more of a challenge. However, the challenge actually came from an intruding osprey, which suddenly appeared over the nest. The middle chick dropped down low into the

nest as the youngest chick made sure that the fish was safely hidden below itself in the nest. The intruder, like most intruders we have seen over the nest this season, passed over the nest and flew off to the south. With over 160 pairs of ospreys in Scotland, the sight of intruding birds above the nest is becoming a more common sight. The youngest chick continued with its record-breaking attempt at devouring a fish and in just 25 minutes all traces of the fish had gone. Not to be outdone, next up was the middle chick and when Henry dropped another fish on the nest at 3 pm, she too began to tear into the fish, but as this was somewhat larger than the one the youngest chick had devoured, the record attempts today were declared null and void.

Sunday morning at Loch Garten was beautiful and calm, the loch itself was like a mill pond and we believe that it was time for an early morning diving competition, as the youngest chick returned to the camera tree with very wet feathers. He preened away until just after 10 am when, as the first visitors were making their way up the path to the centre, he flew off, giving those early visitors excellent views of an empty nest for about 1 ½ hours!

Fortunately for us at the centre, the great spotted woodpeckers put in several appearances and the gymnastic abilities of the red squirrels were also there for all to see, as instead of feeding from the squirrel feeder, they jumped onto the peanut feeder and hung upside down on it. The new compilation DVD of the highlights of this season also proved a great hit and the time soon passed until at 11.30 am, the middle chick landed on the camera tree. It too had wet feathers, indicating that it had also been diving into the Loch or nearby river.

In fact, all three osprey chicks should be practicing to fish for themselves, to equip them for the biggest athletic feat of their lives. In just a couple of weeks, the chicks will start on a marathon migration journey of their own, taking just two months to fly 3,000 miles to The Gambia and Senegal. Surely in this Olympic year, each one of them deserving of a gold medal?

Source: Catharine Jarvis
15 August 2004

Practice makes perfect

EJ has not been seen for nine days and we are now of the opinion that she has finally begun her journey back to Africa. She could not have

timed it better with the terrible weather that has hit most of Scotland since her disappearance - we all wish we were going with her!
Not only has EJ left our site, we have also not seen her oldest female chick (27) for six days. She was last seen on the nest on Saturday and was looking in excellent condition.
She had been spending more and more time away from the nest and we believe she must have been successful in some of her fishing attempts as she was not returning as frequently to the nest for Henry's fish deliveries.
As she flies south for the winter, these skills will be the key to her survival. Skills she has had to learn in only four weeks and with little tuition from her parents.
'...he is looking stronger and healthier with each day and finally the feathers at the back of his head, so graciously pecked out by his sisters, are starting to grow back'
With the oldest chick and EJ almost certainly away, we are now left with the two younger chicks and Henry. The chicks have been hindered by the weather in the last five days and have hardly left the nest at all. Even for an experienced hunter such as Henry, it has been a difficult time for fishing.
For the chicks, it would be almost impossible to fish in this weather. And as with so many days before, they have become more reliant on Henry for food - and without hesitation Henry has delivered. On Tuesday, he managed to deliver five fish to the nest despite the rain.
The youngest chick (28) is now much more aggressive and is winning many of the battles for the fish. A little cheer resounds around the visitor centre each time he beats his sister (29) to it, but he is still not able to take the fish off the nest like his sisters.
Until we see him do this for the first time, we know he will be unable to fish for himself because he is simply not strong enough to carry and fly with the fish he catches.
There is no doubt, however, that he is looking stronger and healthier with each day and finally the feathers at the back of his head, so graciously pecked out by his sisters, are starting to grow back. He really is looking more handsome with each day.
While the chicks have been on the nest, it has not all been quiet. Not only have we had the intruding male (8T) back in the area, but yesterday another osprey popped up on the camera tree, much to the disdain of the chicks who created quite a commotion.

This osprey had a leg ring - yellow JA - the same colour as our chicks. This suggests that it may be a chick from this year. We await news on the intruder!
Today the heavy rain has stopped and now the chicks have the chance to get back to building up their skills for migration. The middle female chick (29) will be leaving next and we are unsure when this may be because she hasn't been spending a lot of time away from the nest. The youngest will then be next to go. To imagine him flying to Senegal or The Gambia on his own is hard for all of us. Then again, he has managed to survive this far and fought through all the odds. Like his father he's a fighter and if Henry can do it, so can he.

Source: Jo McFarlane
20 August 2004

It’s farewell – for some at least

We can now confirm that EJ and our oldest chick have started their migration back to West Africa. EJ has now not been seen for 13 days and the oldest chick has not been seen for 10 days.
However, if you are thinking about paying us a final visit at Loch Garten before the end of the season, you can still count on Henry, middle chick (29) and our youngest chick (28) for entertainment!
We initially thought that all our chicks would have left the site by the beginning of September. It is now looking likely that middle and youngest chick will still be here at the beginning of September as they are still spending all of their time either on the osprey nest or perched on the camera tree. The chicks seem reluctant to leave the nest to catch their own fish and Henry is still supplying them with 2-5 fish a day, so why bother!
Fierce competition for food still exists between the two youngest chicks and one of them leaving the nest could result in the one getting more fish than the other, a risk that neither of them is willing to take. Henry will now begin to reduce the amount of fish he is bringing back to the nest and, with any luck this will entice them away. We wait with baited breath...
The intruding osprey chick ' Yellow JA' made another appearance at the weekend and we have now found out that this is a chick from a local nest. The chick had obviously heard about the famous Loch Garten nest

and wanted to see why it was so special that is was being watched 24 hours a day!
The heavy rain has now ceased, for how long we do not know, but hopefully we will see the chicks in the next few days take this opportunity to practice their fishing and venture further away from home.

Source: Rachel Bauld
24 August 2004

Last man standing

Following our last diary entry, our middle chick (29) began to spend more and more time away from the nest.
She was obviously honing her flying skills, although she often returned to the nest literally seconds before Henry arrived with a fish. This suggests that she was either following him on fishing expeditions or was flying near the nest and spotted his return.
On Saturday afternoon, she was absent for over an hour and when she perched in the camera tree, she was wet through. Perhaps she had been attempting to fish. Chicks have been recorded returning to our nest with fish in previous years, although it is possible they had been following the adult male and he had passed them the fish close to his fishing grounds. Or maybe she had decided that a bath would assist her in preening the feathers she will need to keep in good order for her imminent long flight? '
...our middle chick may have caused excitement to early morning commuters stuck in a traffic jam at 'Spaghetti Junction' in the West Midlands'
Unusually she was nowhere to be seen when Henry arrived with a fish at 9.47 am on Sunday and she had not been seen since leaving to roost late Saturday evening. Her failure to precede Henry's arrival with another fish at 1.10 pm made it almost certain. She had commenced her migration.
From the satellite tracking work undertaken by the Highland Foundation for Wildlife we know that it is perfectly possible that as we write (8 am 31 August) our middle chick may have caused excitement to early morning commuters stuck in a traffic jam at 'Spaghetti Junction' in the West Midlands. Even without a tail wind, chicks often fly 300 km a day on migration. We wish you a safe journey 29...
Which now leaves us with Henry and the wee one.
He will continue to deliver fish until he is certain that 28 has started his migration. We know better than to try to predict when that might be.

Twenty-eight now has no competition when Henry delivers a fish and it took him over 7 hours to devour the monster rainbow trout, estimated to be some 40 cm in length, that was delivered early yesterday.
His body condition and fat reserves should now come on 'leaps and bounds', so he may surprise us by leaving before the week is out - but the 'clever money' might just be on a mid-September departure. Time will tell us - and our diary will tell you!

Source: Andrew Simkins
31 August 2004

Farewell, dear friends

On Sunday 5 September, the doors of our visitor centre shut for the final time this season. We had already told our visitors that the 'wee one' had strict instructions not to depart before they had a last chance to see him, and he didn't disappoint.
Henry delivered the first fish of the day at just after 7 am and, as usual, flew off immediately. It was a sizeable fish and '28' leisurely ate breakfast, pausing frequently as his crop filled and emptied, before finally eating the last morsel at 9.50 am. Unless visitors to the hide are lucky, their stay will rarely coincide with a delivery of fish. Even then, if they get a quick glimpse of Henry for 10 seconds as he lands and drops his fish before disappearing, then they are fortunate. Some of our volunteers have worked with us for three or more days before managing to see Henry! Those 'early bird' visitors didn't catch a worm at 10.05 am, but they did catch a glimpse of Henry delivering fish number two of the day. A very blurred glimpse perhaps, but nonetheless they saw him!
'It was with a very melancholy air that we took a last look at the mere empty shell of a building on Wednesday 8 September. '
Our chick, '28', was obviously replete as he sat in the camera tree virtually motionless, holding his fish, and appeared to be dozing in the bright morning sunshine. When Henry arrived on the nest at just after 10.40 am with fish number three, the wee one scarcely bothered looking at dad. Yet again, Henry was on the nest barely 10 seconds before taking off, but this time took the fish to a perch some 100 m from the visitor centre, affording some stunning views. He then waited for '28' to call for the fish. We quickly gathered the visitors round the telescopes so they could see Henry before he flew. Henry was still waiting bless him! The wee one seemed in no hurry to commence battle with fish number two.

Not that it would be much of a battle with one of the combatants now as stiff as a board. Henry was still perched in his tree! He waited.
We went for our lunch and once we returned duly sated, we saw that '28' had now indeed started to eat. Well, rather he was picking at the fish in a disconsolate manner reminiscent of some schoolchildren minutely examining a head of soggy broccoli on a dinner plate. He was lucky - Henry was still waiting, and our visitors were enthralled. At a little after 3.30 pm, the wee one appeared to be dozing again. Henry was still waiting - but losing patience perhaps, so he began eating. At 4 pm the race was on! On the last day, we were open we didn't have one osprey to show people - we had a race between two ospreys to see who would finish their fish first! '28' shaved it by a whisker, or perhaps by half a tail, and landed on the nest calling for food at 5.50 pm.
Henry took off from his perch, circled the nest checking for food scraps and left foraging for fish number four of the day as we 'shut up shop' at 6 pm. What a perfect end to an amazing season for our visitors!
Packing up the centre for the winter takes a good three days and it was good to have the distraction of the chick still with us as we packed, cleaned and vacuumed (the centre not the chick). It was with a very melancholy air that we took a last look at the mere empty shell of a building on Wednesday 8 September.
At least we now had some time to have a lie-in for the rest of the week - if we wanted to - and pursue hobbies that had been put aside during the extremely busy breeding season. So it was that we found ourselves at the fish farm before dawn last Thursday, pursuing surely one of the most engrossing hobbies of them all - trying to see an osprey catch a fish.
The sun rose a little after six and started to cut through the mist immediately. An osprey appeared from the south. We doubted it was Henry, if he had come straight from home he would have come from the north-east. Judging by its plumage, it was an adult and, although it was fairly high, size suggested a male. We also know that virtually all Scottish females started migration many days ago. It was barely interested in foraging and quickly settled on a fence some 200 m from the wee lochan. It was still there some 30 minutes later, when a second bird appeared from the same direction. Our first bird joined it and both quickly disappeared from the direction in which they had come. Having been distracted, we had failed to notice the arrival of a third osprey - again undoubtedly an adult male. This bird had a determined air. It circled lower over the water and as it passed overhead. We thought we saw the flash of a metal ring, but could not see a colour ring. He then flew over to the main 'holding tanks' for the rainbow trout, but we knew

he would be back. The tanks have visible nets over them, making it impossible for ospreys to gain access. He had to come back over the lochan. As he approached the tanks, a horde of corvids (crows) took off and swarmed round him. If a group of crows is a 'murder' then perhaps in excess of 40 young jackdaws could be described as an 'annoyance' by a hunting osprey. He was surrounded and it took him some while to shake them off before he returned and perched on a bare tree on an island. There was no doubt about his identity. A telescope was merely used to confirm what we knew. One metal ring, no colour ring, that familiar kink in the eyestripe - we had studied that head for two seasons now. We were about to watch the master at his craft.

He remained perched for 15 minutes or so, moving his head from side to side, judging distance and depth no doubt of a trout. Then he took off, circled to gain height and virtually hovered, about 40 metres above the water. Wing beats slowing, he descended to hover again, then a little lower, then a power dive - feet first. The fish didn't stand a chance. With a great flapping of wings the bird lifted himself from the water, did a 'dog roll' to shake off excess water, and with a trout carried 'torpedo' fashion, Henry headed north-east for home.

We said in our previous diary entry that perhaps the 'smart money' would be on a mid-September departure date for our chick. With the centre closed, it was going to be difficult to know when the chick decided to leave.

It's a good job we need a twice daily constitutional and that a very pleasant walk just so happens to take us past the visitor centre. Well, within a mile or so. And who in their right mind wouldn't walk a mile out of their way to try and see an osprey?

We have to report we saw a wee one twice on Thursday, still there on Friday, eating a fish Saturday and listening to the church bells on Sunday morning. But, yesterday [Monday 13 September] the bird had flown the nest. We checked three times and he was nowhere in sight or on site. Today, the same. He has finally left home.

That is twice we have used the word 'home.' But we use it advisedly. We look upon Africa as wintering grounds for 'our' birds and just hope and pray that they can survive the many perils that lie ahead.

Another season over.

A time for farewells - and also many, many 'thank yous'. Apologies if this reads like an Oscar acceptance speech. Not sure what category we would be nominated in, anyway.
Thanks firstly to the 90 volunteers we have had the privilege to work with here this year. We really could NOT have done our jobs without you.
Thanks also to the other 'behind the scenes' staff at the centre and HQ - from Kate who organises our volunteers to Sue who hassles us (in the nicest possible way) about 'SMS'?!. Thankfully, we still don't understand its machinations, from the Senior Site Manager right down to the guy who rakes the composting toilets - they actually bear a striking resemblance to one another!
Thanks to the Web Team at HQ who assiduously check our diary entries, make them live as soon as is practically possible, and fill our inboxes with e-mails of complaint about late diary updates. Thanks a bunch guys!
And finally thanks, in no small measure, to you. Thank you for reading, and thank you for all the feedback. The e-mails of support, particularly those during the early part of the season when EJ was subject to the horrific attacks and an egg was broken - they were truly, truly touching. They carried us through some very dark days.
We really have been astounded by the amount of interest, not only in this country, but worldwide, that our birds have generated. Join us again next year in late March when we are sure that the new Osprey Team for 2005 will once again allow you to experience a 'virtual' visit to the most famous bird's nest on the planet, bar none.
It has been nothing less than a privilege to attempt to put our thoughts into words.

Source: Andrew Simkins
14 September 2004