Osprey Diary 2005



Wednesday, 23 March 2005

The waiting game

What better way to start a new season of the osprey diary than to look at the highlights of 2004? When the 'team of 2005' had an opportunity to read about the events of last season we were staggered by the drama that had unfolded.
For new readers to the diary perhaps a summary of 2004 would be in order, and the end of season report sent by last year's osprey warden to the volunteers perhaps best encapsulates the season:-
25 March: Female 'White EJ' lands on the nest and we breathe a sigh of relief that she has returned to our site and not the nest she was ousted from last year some 25km away. We await the return of Henry.
27 March: 'Orange VS' alights on EJ's back and she allows him to mate without courtship. We discover that Orange VS is her old mate from her previous nest.
3 April: Henry arrives and it takes him just 10 minutes to see Orange VS off his territory. He delivers fish to EJ, renovates the nest and mates successfully with her.
4 - 16 April: EJ is attacked at dawn every morning by an unringed female osprey. She spends up to 7 hours a day away from the nest attempting to see the other bird off her territory. The attacks are repeated day after day after day and the prospect of no eggs being laid for the 3rd year in succession becomes very real.

17 April: The battle between the 2 females culminates in 3 separate attacks during the morning, the ferocity of which no-one has before witnessed. At 3.15pm EJ removes a broken egg from the nest. It must have been laid that morning.
20 April: After spending the last 3 days sitting on the edge of the nest EJ crouches in the centre of the nest and later appeared to be turning an egg. Henry took over incubation duties after delivering a fish. Egg-laying confirmed that night when EJ spent her first night on the nest. A visit to the bottle bank was necessary the following morning.
5 May: The egg count confirmed THREE eggs. 2 visits to the bottle bank were necessary the following morning.
26 May: The first chick hatches.
28 May: The second chick hatches.
31 May: The third chick hatches. A lorry is ordered for bottle bank duties.

5 July: The chicks were ringed with yellow coloured rings 27 (oldest - a female), 28 (youngest - a male) and 29 (middle chick - a female).
17 July: 27 takes her first flight.
22 July: 29 takes her first flight.
3 August: 28 takes his first flight (at long last and amid much cheering!!).
10 August: Our last sighting of EJ.
13 August Our last sighting of 27.
28 August: Our last sighting of 29.
12 Sept: Our last sighting of Henry and 28.

Loch Garten Osprey aficionados will recall that EJ arrived on our nest on 25th March last year and on 24th March in 2003. Many prayers have been said across the world for her safe return this year and also that of Henry. Whilst we wait impatiently for the arrival of the first bird on our nest we are grateful to The Highland Foundation for Wildlife for providing us with the following news.
Firstly, we have received confirmation of the first adult osprey back on its nest in the Strath - and it is none other than 'Orange VS' who was observed nest building last Saturday. He obviously took advantage of our 'Indian Summer' last weekend to make excellent progress on his migration. We wish him well in his breeding attempt this year.
Secondly, we are thrilled by the news that in 2004 no less than 184 breeding pairs of ospreys were recorded north of the border. The breeding sites of a number of pairs were not located and it is therefore probable that the total Scottish population is close to 200 pairs.

When one considers that 51 years ago the total population of Scotland was our 1 pair here at Loch Garten, this is a remarkable achievement. It is also testament to the dedication of many people who have ensured their protection and in addition demonstrates what can be achieved for both man and the environment when agencies work in partnership towards a common goal.
STOP PRESS: At 10.50 am this morning an osprey circled high above our nest then descended gradually getting to within 3 metres, before quickly disappearing north. As it failed to land we were unable to see if the bird was ringed but from its behaviour we cannot believe it was either Henry or EJ..... perhaps, like last year, Orange VS has paid us a visit and perhaps, like us, he is keeping his eyes peeled for EJ... watch this space!
It is vitally important that when the ospreys first arrive they remain undisturbed and are given time to settle. The Osprey Centre will therefore remain closed for both osprey and capercaillie viewing until Friday 1 April.

Sunday, 27 March 2005

Who's that girl?

She has visited at least three times now. On Friday morning, we saw her for the first time. She spent over five minutes nervously circling the nest, gradually losing height in slow spirals. She got to within four metres of the nest then changed her mind and flew east. No doubt about the sex of this bird. This was one big female.
At 9.45, she returned and after more circling she perched in the camera tree and apprehensively surveyed our nest. Henry and EJ, if and when they return, will be a little wary of camera movement in their first few days back with us - a 'new' bird takes much longer to accept that this strange moveable object will do it no harm.
We left our camera trained on the nest and contented ourselves with scrutinising her through a telescope. Green leg ring - left leg. Even with a 'scope she was too far away to read the letters on her ring. How frustrating. She left again flying south.
At 3.15 she was back, this time perched on the tree favoured by Henry and EJ to eat their fish - but 'Green ring' chose a different perch, never used by our pair, at the very top of the tree. She was looking round her all the time - so alert and attentive.

After 15 minutes, she took off and made toward the nest, circled yet again and landed. NOW we would be able to read her ring. Wrong! She landed with her foot behind the nest support and the ring was hidden from view. She stayed only a few brief seconds, then away east. This was a nervous bird. A nervous bird maybe, but in excellent condition.
We had to wait until late Saturday morning before she appeared again - a little more confident at first - she circled the nest only once then landed - with her right foot obscuring the green ring on the left 'perfectly'. Even more frustrating. This time she stayed all of 10 seconds. She knew this was not her nest and was keeping both eyes open for the resident female.
She sped off north-west. She was certainly a bonny bird. A big bonny bird. And what striking brown streaks on her breast! Will we ever be able to read this leg ring to establish her identity? We don't think we need to. We know who she is.
In 2002, our much loved male osprey Ollie failed to return to our nest. His mate of many years was then courted by five new male ospreys that spent much more time disputing territory than feeding her, a consequence of which she left. One of the males later stamped his authority on the site and attracted a new female ringed - left leg - 'Green 7B.'
The warden's personal log records the day she arrived - 'This HUGE osprey landed on the nest. I was stunned. I have NEVER before seen an osprey as large as her. She towers above our male osprey and appears to look at him with disdain as though he is not worthy to be on the same nest as her. She has one of the boldest, rich chestnut, breast bands I have seen. It stretches from the top of her throat to mid chest. Her eye stripe is really striking and adds to her regal air. Her plumage is stunning. She is magnificent. I think I am in love. By the way she is ringed left leg "Green 7B".'
Unfortunately for Green 7B Olive returned to our nest after a month's absence and ousted Green 7B. Exit stage right Green 7B. Another 'bit player' in the Loch Garten saga? Perhaps - or perhaps not... In 2003, EJ landed on our nest in June. She had been forced off her own nest some 30 km away after she had laid eggs.
The intruding female was never identified, and did not lay eggs that year, but she did have a green ring on her left leg. In 2004, EJ was back at Loch Garten and when we checked her old nest, it was Green 7B holding territory! Whilst we celebrated the success of Henry and EJ last year in producing three fledged young we were saddened to learn that Green 7B's chicks had all perished. This was undoubtedly due to the

poor weather in June and her male's inability to deliver sufficient fish. When ospreys fail in their first breeding attempt, the female will often 'divorce' the male and seek a new mate and a new territory the following year. Green 7B already knows the location of our nest - she spent over three weeks here in 2002.
Aren't video recorders and a tidy filing system amazing tools? We have re-played the 2002 footage and agree with the warden's observations (although the proclamation of love may have to wait until we get to see her on a clear sunny day).
We have compared those images with our recordings from this week. If Green 7B proves NOT to have been the bird that landed on our nest this week, we will sleep out for a week.
Which leaves us pondering. If Henry arrives soon and 'Green ring' keeps returning, will he accept her as his new mate? If EJ returns, will we have another 'battle of the females?' Can these birds recognise individuals and if so do they have a retentive memory? Does EJ have the capacity to recall that it was Green 7B that forced her from her old nest in 2003? If so might EJ give up her Loch Garten nest without a fight?
One thing is for sure... The next 10 days or so promise to be full of excitement.
Oh, and by the way, for those of you interested in family history... In 1991, our old male Ollie fathered two chicks. One of these was a male. Some years later this male returned to Scotland and started breeding at a nest 150 km away and he, himself, fathered a female chick in 2000. She was ringed 'Green 7B' - Ollie's grand-daughter.

Thursday, 31 March 2005

Hi honey, I'm home

6 pm every evening heralds the 'handing over of the baton' - one team of volunteers makes their way home for a well earned break as another take their place. The changeover is usually accomplished in under 10 minutes with the old team briefing the new on events over the last few hours.
Tuesday's afternoon shift had little to report. The main item for discussion was how, in future, to avoid the breakdown in communication between teams that had resulted in the last of the custard creams being consumed at 4.45 pm. A 'biscuitless' evening loomed ahead - a chilling prospect indeed.

The grey cloudy skies that had threatened rain all day had already started to darken as dusk fast approached and there was little chance of an osprey landing on the nest now.
The books say that 'osprey roosting time' was well and truly upon us. Heated debate relating to the propriety of breaking into emergency rations of chocolate digestives suddenly gave way to absolute silence as EJ proved, yet again, that she is not a great reader of books.
Her appearance on the nest had been sudden and dramatic. In sharp contrast to 'green ring' she looked about her with confidence. Two hundred and thirty one days have passed since we last saw her. She looked as though she had been absent only half an hour.
After checking the view in all directions she commenced 're-arranging the furniture'. Sticks were moved, positioned then moved again and re-positioned. After less than 10 minutes, she launched herself into the gloom and now she was away to roost.
She was back at 6.30 am and as dawn broke we could see that she looked in fine shape. The long migration does not appear to have taken its toll on her - this was confirmed when she left at 7.10 am, returning at around 9 am with a good size brown trout.
She was not anxious to eat and remained close to her nest all day on various perches. At around 4.15 pm she landed on the nest and gazed aloft. Some two minutes later, she began 'alarm calling' and a further two minutes were to pass before we saw the other female osprey.
EJ crouched lower as it came to within 10 metres of the nest, but then became more relaxed as it sailed overhead and away into the distance. If the intruder was 'green ring' she now knows that the resident is back and intends to stay. Still with the tail of her trout, EJ flew back to the camera tree, the threat having passed and continued to stand guard - and maintain a vigil for her mate.
The osprey centre will open on Friday 1 April 2005 at 10 am for both capercaillie and osprey viewing. We have our fingers crossed that Henry will appear at around 9.55 am (accompanied by a fanfare of trumpets?). He always did have excellent timing. Let us hope he is nearing the end of his long journey and we can welcome him home very soon.

Monday, 4 April 2005

I think you'll find this is my nest!

In our first diary entry for this season, we announced the arrival of the first osprey in the strath at a nest some 40 km distant from ours - the

male 'Orange VS'. We wished him well in his breeding attempt this year. Little did we realise when we wrote that diary entry that his breeding attempt this year might directly affect us here at Loch Garten...

Since our last diary entry, EJ has provided us with plenty of confirmatory evidence that she is in magnificent physical condition. Her daily routine, while she waits for Henry, has been to collect sticks and nest build in the early morning, leave on a fishing expedition mid morning, return with her catch towards lunchtime, and then spend up to eight hours leisurely combining lunch, tea, dinner and supper before a final spell of nest building prior to retiring to roost.

Today started no different from previous days with frenetic stick gathering after dawn. She left flying purposefully 'river Spey' bound shortly after 10 am. At 11.06 am an unringed female osprey landed on our nest, immediately followed by none other than 'Orange VS'.

He immediately attempted to mate with her, but his advances were shunned by the female. He flew off but returned with an offering of a two-foot stick. The female was not impressed and again refused to allow him to mate. Twice more he delivered a gift of nesting material but this female wanted more than sticks before accepting him as a partner. '... the unringed female gave an alarm call and looked skyward'

At noon, he disappeared leaving the female sitting contentedly on EJ's nest. We were able to compare her plumage with that of the recorded footage from last year of the unringed female that so viciously attacked EJ at dawn - little doubt about it - this was NOT the same bird.

At 12.40, the unringed female gave an alarm call and looked skyward. An osprey, carrying a fish in one talon, was descending rapidly towards the nest from high above. The unringed female took evasive action before the other bird had descended to within 300 feet and swiftly left the nest. We lost sight of her flying north-east, being pursued by the second osprey, which appeared to have dropped its fish whilst in hot pursuit.

At 1.10 pm EJ landed back on the nest. There would appear to be little doubt about interpretation of the events half an hour earlier... despite losing her lunch EJ had seen the intruder off and was safely back on her nest.

Readers may recall that Orange VS is the former mate of EJ - they had bred together successfully at his nest 40 km away in 2002 before EJ had been ousted from that nest in 2003 by a green ringed female. In addition, on 27 March 2004, Orange VS landed on our nest and mated with EJ and continued to do so until Henry returned on 3 April. After a 10- minute battle, Henry established his dominance and we did not see Orange VS again that season.

At 1.13 pm today, EJ showed she had a good memory for 'faces' as Orange VS alighted, not on the nest, but on her back and she co-operated in his mating attempt. Four more successful matings followed before Orange VS left, returning - in what appears for him - to be a record-breaking 137 minutes (see last years diary entry 5 April 2004) with a fish! EJ readily accepted his offering and retired to the camera tree, leaving Orange VS to scrape a nest cup in Henry's nest!
Is this history repeating itself? Where is Henry? Has bad weather delayed him or has he fallen foul of people in some countries who still consider it 'sport' to shoot at anything that flies? If Henry returns what will be his body condition? Will he have the strength to oust a bird that has had three weeks to regain his fat reserves? Will Orange VS be OUR new male at Loch Garten?
We will continue to update the diary as often as we can, particularly after dramatic events such as those witnessed by our enthralled visitors today.

Sunday, 10 April 2005

Missing in action

Our 'new' male 'Orange VS' has frustrated us since his arrival. Every male and female osprey resident at Loch Garten have their own favourite perches they use for eating fish.
For instance, in 2003 and 2004 Henry, before delivering fish to EJ, would alight on a tree we had never seen an osprey use prior to him. It was (and still is) about 80 m. from our visitor centre and afforded magnificent views of an osprey devouring a fish from the public hide. It was his alone, and obviously became known as 'Henry's Tree.'
Orange VS, however, appears to prefer to dine 'in private' and has chosen a tree obscured from view. We have known he was there only because EJ has begun calling for food and eventually Orange VS has delivered the partly eaten fish, always appearing from the same group of trees.
Orange VS appears to have improved from last year in the length of time he is away fishing. He is now averaging 57 minutes, which considering the current weather conditions of strong northerly winds, is not bad at all.
Although sometimes he does tend to eat most of the fish before delivering it to EJ - yesterday afternoon's offering of a 2 cm piece of brown trout tail would have been considered by most to be derisory, but was accepted with relish by our female.

To be fair to him, EJ received half of the first and third fish of the day. His delivery of a high percentage of brown trout and pike also tends to suggest that he is not relying on the 'sitting ducks' of rainbow trout at the local fish farm, but is skilled enough to take fish from local lochs and rivers. Perhaps we judged his apparent lack of fishing expertise too harshly last season.

Talking of the fish farm... We are indebted to Roy Dennis of the Highland Foundation for Wildlife for providing us with details of the provenance of our new male:

1994: As part of their scientific research both adult and 'sub adult' ospreys were trapped at the fish farm in Aviemore - some 13 km from our nest. In August of that year, an unringed male osprey was caught there and the orange ring VS was applied. He was aged as a 2-year-old bird.

1995: Orange VS was trapped again and a small radio transmitter was attached to one of his tail feathers - this transmitter was designed to fall off after approximately 12 months - after the tail feather moulted. As a result of radio tracking, a new osprey nest was discovered that year in the Aviemore area and Orange VS successfully raised one young.

1996: Orange VS returned to his 1995 nest. His mate laid four eggs, but the nest was robbed by egg thieves.

1997: Orange VS moved and took over an old established nest in the Aviemore area and successfully helped raise two young.

1998: He returned to his 1997 nest, but the nest was again robbed by egg thieves.

1999: He helped to successfully raise three young.

2000: Although eggs were laid, pine martens robbed the nest of eggs.

2001: He attracted a new female - EJ - but yet again pine martens robbed the nest of eggs.

2002: He, and EJ, successfully raised one young.

2003: He mated with EJ, but she was forced off the nest by a green ringed (unidentified) female - EJ arrives on our nest in June.

2004: After being forced off our nest by Henry, he returned to his old nest, mated with Green 7B (Ollie's grand-daughter), but all the young died as Orange VS could not deliver sufficient fish, due to severe rain in June and July.

So Orange VS, aged at least 13, in osprey terms, is no spring chicken!

He now appears very much at home on our nest and is delivering fish, bringing back nesting material and mating (with varying degrees of success) with EJ. He arrived on 4 April and the average time from having a pair of ospreys to the first egg being laid is 12 days... so we may have an egg laid in a week!

Concern is obviously mounting over the fate of Henry and we now have to accept that with each day that passes without him returning the chances that he has survived migration are rapidly diminishing. He certainly would not return to any other nest - he invested too much time and energy at Loch Garten in 2003 without breeding, and successfully raised three chicks here last year.
He really will be sadly missed - the comments of our visitors and the number of emails we have received over the last week confirm this. He really was a remarkable bird and a worthy successor to 'Ollie.'
Let us hope that in future years his offspring from last year return to breed in Scotland and that Henry's genes enter the breeding population of Scottish ospreys. Wherever you are Henry, we know the thoughts of thousands are with you.
There has been little disturbance to our ospreys since we wrote our last update.
Except... at 2.32 pm this afternoon, Orange VS suddenly landed on the nest next to EJ and began 'alarm calling.'
A (male) intruding osprey appeared high over the nest, circled, then gradually lost height. He did not attempt to land on the nest but overshot it, perching on a tree some 80 m. from the visitor centre. He left after less than 10 seconds before we had time to 'scope' him for rings - south-west - fish farm bound, no doubt.
Strange choice of tree though. Since 2003, we have always thought of it as 'Henry's Tree.'

Monday, 18 April 2005

Didn't see that one coming!

If you normally enjoy reading our diary relaxing with a cup of tea may we suggest that making a fresh pot might not be a bad idea? Depending on the time of day and where you are reading this perhaps a wee dram might be more appropriate. Maybe even two. In fact, best keep the bottle close to hand.
Our intentions are to update the diary at least once, and hopefully twice, each week. We had decided to put pen to paper last Thursday evening. We had just sat down to review our notes.
We had not had any more sightings of the intruding male osprey that had perched in 'Henry's tree' and were putting the finishing touches to a rather mundane diary entry that talked of regular mating between EJ and our new male Orange VS, an adequate daily delivery of fish, and the

hope that we might be able to announce the laying of the first egg any day when the telephone rang.

We always tell our volunteers that they should call us at any time, day or night, if they are worried about anything. The phone call at 3.15 am on 1 April when they advised us that they were worried about running out of tea bags the following day was highly amusing. To them at least.

Anyway, we digress. It was 7.40 pm last Thursday when an unringed male osprey swooped at VS on the nest. It did not appear to be a particularly vicious attack and VS flew off in pursuit of the intruder. The phone call was made at just before 9 pm and the volunteers were worried because VS had not returned. No real cause for concern. Perhaps it had taken a while for him to see the intruder out of his territory. At 9.40 our female flew off the nest to roost, as she does every evening before she lays, but still no sign of VS. We would undoubtedly see him as usual at first light.

Friday dawned and EJ arrived on the nest in what was, to us, almost total darkness. We could just make out her white leg ring in the gloom. The normal routine was for both birds to arrive on the nest within 10 minutes of one another. By 7.30 am with no sign of VS our concern was starting to mount.

In addition, EJ was becoming more and more broody with each passing hour. She was scraping out the nest cup and sitting for long periods deep in the middle of the nest. She had received a fish at around 6 pm the evening before, but by lunchtime she must have at least been feeling a little peckish.

By mid afternoon VS had become conspicuous by his absence. At a little after 5.30 pm our female settled in the cup of the nest. She was sitting low. Very low. Would she get up to fly off to roost at dusk as she had done on every evening since her arrival? Her head silhouetted against the moonlit sky gave us the answer. An answer that would normally have given us good cause for celebration. But not on Friday evening. Not when our male osprey had been missing for over 24 hours.

She sat tight all night. We had snow in the night that later turned to sleet. She sat through it. It was light by 6 am and the setting around the nest looked magnificent. Much of the snow had melted, but pockets of white still lay on the ground. The broom has just commenced flowering and the contrast of white snow, green foliage and yellow blossom looked stunning. But we had a female osprey, who had not eaten for 36 hours, sitting on an egg and no sign of our, or any other male. If she left to fish for herself that egg would chill rapidly.

At 8 am, she left the nest and alighted in the camera tree. We saw the egg for the first time with our 'close up' nest cam. A gorgeous hue of pale pink blotched with rust. EJ remained motionless on the camera tree braving the last of the rain storm. She continued to perch there. All day. She maintained the vigil of her territory until dusk, then flew away to roost at 9 pm. She still had not eaten and the egg had been uncovered for 13 hours and was to get colder overnight.

What we needed was a male osprey. And the answers to lots of questions. We assumed that EJ had stopped incubating the egg as she had no male to feed her. Her mate would normally incubate for up to one third of all daylight hours, in addition to bringing all the fish to the nest. But where was VS? Would she continue to lay eggs? Normally they are laid up to two days apart. Would she re-absorb them into her body? Would we get a new male osprey soon?

All we needed was 1 male osprey. At dawn this morning we got 2. They arrived shortly after 6 am. For over 5 hours one male would land on the nest and within seconds was attacked by the second male. They would both then take flight, chasing each other in the skies and disappear within a few minutes. EJ sat and watched, as did we.

One of the males was unringed, the other bore a red colour ring on his left leg. All would be quiet for maybe half an hour then back they would both come and attempt to defend the nest while the other launched a dive bomb attack. There really can be little doubt about it. In osprey terms our nest and our fertile female are very valuable commodities.

At 12.30 pm EJ flew back to the nest and one of the males approached. She refused to let him land so he perched in the camera tree. It was red ring. We waited for the unringed male to appear and launch his attack, but it never came. It was Red 8T. We checked our records and found he had paid the nest several visits last year. He is a locally born bird, now 4 years of age (see diary entry for 21 May 2004), who apparently did not breed last year.

After 30 minutes our female allowed him to alight on the nest. She shunned his advances to mate and began her food soliciting calls. Unfortunately to no avail. Red 8T sat on the nest beside her surveying his newly won territory. They remained side by side for much of the afternoon. EJ took the occasional flight and Red 8T followed. He refused to leave her or his territory. At dusk they both flew off to roost.

So now we have a new male. But EJ has not allowed him to mate and we are sure she will not do so until he has delivered fish to her. He has to eat some time so will be forced to leave her, and his newly won territory, to hunt.

The question is will he then deliver part of his catch to her? Will she continue to lay eggs? Our research has shown that the egg that is in our nest MAY still be viable for a few days as it was only incubated over night. When will we next see an osprey sitting low on our nest? Keep watching to see for yourself. We hope your tea hasn't gone cold. We did suggest you made a pot.

Fans gripped by osprey antics in RSPB web diary

With more twists, turns and melodrama than most soap operas, the torrid love life of EJ the osprey, is once again unfolding before the eyes of fascinated visitors to RSPB Scotland's Loch Garten Osprey Centre in Strathspey

After arriving back at Loch Garten on 29 March from West Africa, EJ has produced an egg. The question now is, who will help her to rear any chick which might appear? Initially this season, in the absence of last year's mate Henry, she seemed happy with her old flame of two years ago, the ringed 'Orange VS' who appeared on 4 April.

He has been bringing her fish, mating and looking very settled with her for the past two weeks. But he has now disappeared - perhaps spooked by the appearance of another unringed male who tried to battle his way onto the nest.

All alone in cold, wet April weather EJ remained on the nest waiting for the return of Orange VS - who, it is suspected, has another bird elsewhere. Concerned onlookers knew she would soon have to leave the nest to feed and the egg would not be incubated. She cut a forlorn figure until yesterday (Sunday) when yet another potential suitor appeared on the scene.

Identified from his leg ring as '8T', he quickly ousted the latest incumbent and has himself now taken up residence with EJ on the nest. RSPB staff at the site are now more hopeful of a happy outcome one way or another. Perhaps he and EJ will settle as a pair and further eggs might follow.

Senior site manager Richard Thaxton said: 'EJ and this latest new male have tried mating although not successfully as yet. But she certainly isn't repelling him. If he brings her a fish then I think he'll really have his feet under the table. It's proving to be gripping stuff.' The comings and goings at the nest this year have had the many visitors to the centre enthralled. Those who haven't been able to get along in person have been monitoring EJ's progress via RSPB Scotland's osprey web diary, which has attracted fans form as far afield as the West Indies.

Source: RSPB Loch Garten Osprey Centre
18 April 2005 Friday,

22 April 2005

Too much excitement for one day

The two eggs are highlighted in the red circle (Photo Missing)

At the end of our last diary entry we posed a number of questions. Some, thankfully, have now been answered. On Monday EJ and her new beau Red 8T were virtually inseparable.
Although our visitors were delighted to see two ospreys almost constantly on view EJ's incessant food soliciting calls, which went unanswered by our new male, suggested that she was far from happy with this type of close attention.
Her rebuttal of his mating attempts confirmed that she would have preferred to see him disappear fishing, rather than devoutly remain at her side.
At 4.30 pm she sat low in the nest cup, the first time we had seen her there since Saturday morning. Surely she had not decided to commence incubating her egg? Her new male had provided no evidence that he was prepared to bring fish to the nest, let alone deliver any of them to her?
As we watched she stretched herself out, covering the entire nest cup. Then light dawned. Not incubation. We were witnessing the laying of a second egg. After two minutes she rose from the cup and, rather like a magician who produces a rabbit from a hat, with a fanfare and a 'Hey Presto', the 'close up' nest cam revealed the second egg. She had not reabsorbed it! She made no attempt to incubate the eggs and merely resumed her calls for food. Red 8T continued to 'cock a deaf 'un.'
Both birds retired to roost at dusk, providing us with an ample opportunity to discuss the behaviour of our pair and wonder whether we would see any progress on the 'morrow. EJ was obviously not going to incubate her eggs until her new male had proved he could deliver fish to her. Why had Red8T been so reluctant to go fishing?
He had won a lengthy battle for this territory. Was he concerned that the unringed male would return and usurp him while he was foraging? Was protecting his newly won territory more important at this stage than feeding his new mate? A volunteer reminded us that Red 8T had

appeared on our nest a number of times last year so he knew where the nest was.
He had not bred last year so if he was looking for a vacant site this year surely our nest would be one of the first he visited? As we had not seen him this year until Sunday did this mean that he had only just arrived back in Scotland? We found it difficult to find a fault in her logic. If so, was there still time for Henry to appear? So many imponderables.
Tuesday morning's dawn saw both birds on the nest. Can an osprey lose it's voice? Perhaps EJ had been gargling overnight. She was in fine voice again. Finally at 8.28 am we got a breakthrough. Red 8T actually took flight during daylight hours.
A cynic had suggested his wings only worked during the twilight hours of dawn and dusk. Finally peace reigned over the strath. EJ waited and we made a brew. We had time for biscuits too. Thankfully we now have 124 packets of custard creams. The clock ticked. We tidied the display stands of membership information. Another brew was called for. Now it seemed to 'tock' - loudly.
The limited edition osprey print, a free gift if you join RSPB only at Loch Garten (email ospreys@rspb.org.uk for details), hanging on the wall, needed straightening. How can a clock suddenly transmogrify into Big Ben? A drawing pin crashed to the floor and distracted our attention from the nest momentarily.
But our microphones on the nest picked up the unmistakeable sound of the flapping of an osprey's wings. Red 8T was back with a fish? We ran to the hide flaps to see EJ disappearing north west. She had given up on her man.
Seven minutes 23 seconds later he landed with the first ever fish he had brought to our nest. His red ring gleamed in the sunlight as he surveyed his territory and an empty nest. He flew to the camera tree and 8T lustily despatched his fish. He seemed to hardly pause for breath as first the head, then body then finally tail disappeared in under 20 minutes.
He was just cleaning his beak on a branch when EJ landed on the nest. Her crop was still empty but she was wet. She had undoubtedly been for a bath and immediately began her food soliciting calls, blissfully unaware that our new male was now replete with a fish she had never even glimpsed.
After 3 hours of 'nagging' EJ had obviously had enough and left, flying strongly, gaining height. Gone fishing for herself? All the signs suggested so. Within 20 seconds we had an empty nest as Red 8T followed in hot pursuit. We were surprised and delighted by our male's return in less than half an hour with a fish.

The brown trout was on the small side - but hey! Any port in a storm! Where was EJ? We hardly had time to pose the question when she landed on the nest beside the male with a catch which most fisherman would describe as 'the one that got away.' It was a monster and draped over the side of the nest. Would Red 8T realise that size was not important? Its what you do with it that counts.
Despite having caught her own meal EJ began her soliciting calls. Red 8T looked at her catch, surveyed his own, then immediately took flight to the camera tree where it took him less than 12 minutes to completely finish his meal. Thank goodness he did not add insult to injury by attempting to share our female's meal. It took her almost 3 hours to eat, but she obviously was in need of sustenance.
Again the birds left at dusk and before, during and after dinner there was only one topic of conversation. We had seen progress - but was it quick enough? Why was 8T not prepared to give up his catch to EJ? The 'pro 8T' lobby suggested that he was a young four-year-old who had never bred before. For the last four years of his life he had been used to catching fish for himself and protecting it from scavengers such as crows and gulls.
The 'culture shock' of catching a fish and then giving it away was a fight between habit which told him to 'hang onto his fish for dear life' and instinct which told him to 'give it away'. Give him time to let instinct 'kick in.'
The 'pro EJ' faction said if he did not start on the steep learning curve soon those eggs would no longer be viable. This was countered by the argument that he had not fertilised the eggs so why should he need to hurry?
To our dismay the conversation then degenerated when a suggestion was made to place an instruction manual on 'Osprey Ecology' on the rim of the nest - left open at 'the duties of an adult male osprey' page.
This was quickly denounced by us as absolutely ludicrous. In these high winds there was no guarantee that it would remain open at the desired page. If Red8T was left to read about instances of polygyny then that was just asking for trouble.
Talking of which... although we are happy to advise that Orange VS is alive and well - and has returned to his original nest (and female)- it did make us wonder whether his attentions to EJ had, at any time, been honourable?
We would love to report that Red 8T delivered fish to EJ this morning. But, even with our wishful thinking, it would rather be stretching the imagination to incredulity. He eventually gave in to the cacophony of

nagging and left the nest at 8 am. But EJ left at 9 am. She returned with a full crop at around 11.30 am and had obviously caught and fed out of sight.
10 minutes later our male arrived beside her with a headless brown trout. The moment of truth had arrived. Would he at last deliver his prize? EJ didn't wait to find out and snatched it from his grasp in the twinkling of an eye. If a bird could be described as looking astonished Red 8T would be handed first prize. He looked at EJ, then down at her talons which were gripping his fish.
He took one step forward to regain his catch. It could have been his last as astonishment appeared to turn to amazement - he received a hefty peck to the back of his head for his advance. He wasn't going to get this fish back. EJ retired to the camera tree to eat and left our male on the nest.
He started to rearrange the nesting material. A very good sign that he considered this to be his nest. Then he got into the nest cup. He stretched his legs and started to scrape and enlarge the nest cup. Debris from the nest cup flew into the air as he scraped with enthusiasm. An excellent sign of ownership.
We watched in horror as not only debris sailed into the air, but also one of the eggs. It was like a 'slow motion' action replay of a World Cup final goal as we watched the egg sail effortlessly through the air, across the nest, toward the 40-foot drop below. It hit the crossbar - apologies - the rim of the nest - and came to rest inside the nest against the outer rim.
A deliberate attempt to get rid of an egg that was not his? We doubt it - the actions of an inexperienced male. He made no attempt to dislodge the remaining egg in the cup, nor to remove the egg against the rim. Instead he appeared to take heed of our female's food soliciting calls which by now had recommenced, in between taking mouthfuls of the trout that she was still eating!
Two minutes later he took the hint and took flight. Was he starting to learn?
Had our volunteers sneaked a manual onto the nest under cover of darkness? He winged his way high over our heads and our female remained eating on the camera tree. What would she do when she returned to the nest and found one egg out of the cup?
She had just completed her meal when half an hour later she began calling again. But not food soliciting this time. These were shrill alarm calls. We could see nothing. But we had learned our lesson. We kept looking. Then they came into view high in the sky. Both of them. One

circled round her as she sat in the camera tree and the other landed on the nest. An unringed male. No doubt about it.
He landed on one edge of the nest then slowly made his way to the egg close to the rim. We were watching him lowering his head toward the egg and at the same time trying to confirm the presence or absence of leg rings. We had failed to spot EJ leave the camera tree - the unringed male had better eyesight than us and left the nest just in time to avoid EJ's talons on his back.
A wee lad in our visitor centre was obviously a fan of pantomimes - he yelled 'Look behind you!' As the first intruder took flight the second alighted behind our female. It had been a glorious sunny day, but we suspected there must have been a thin layer of ice beneath EJ, as she was able to effortlessly perform a pirouette and lunged at the second bird.
We only had the briefest of glimpses of him before he was forced to take flight. Our own 'slow motion' replay later revealed that he was also an unringed male osprey.
Enough excitement for one day. Time for a rub down with a cold flannel and a couple of 'more than wee' drams. Yet again we should have known better. We were reviewing the recording of the 'invasion of males' and studying legs and confirming the absence of leg rings when EJ proved yet again, not only what remarkable eyesight these birds have, but also how they are able to recognise individual ospreys at a distance.
She began food soliciting and we had time to stop reviewing, start recording, focus the camera and apply in triplicate and post next year's application for the best Wildlife Film before we saw him. Red 8T was approaching the nest with another fish. He alighted next to EJ and this time appeared to offer little resistance, nor express surprise, when she took his catch. And - it was whole!
As we wended our way home we could not help but contemplate. Would EJ lay another egg tomorrow? Why had she not moved that egg back into the cup? Has she now given up on these eggs? How many more fish would 8T have to bring before she would start incubation? Are the eggs still viable? It was easier to consider what would be our response to the inevitable question we would get when we got home - 'How was your day dear?' - That's an easy one - 'Oh, just another boring day at the office.'

Source: Operation Osprey 2005
22 April 2005 Tuesday,

26 April 2005

Nobody does it better

It is now 12.30 am on Tuesday 26 April and this is hopefully the final attempt at writing the latest update to our diary. The previous seven attempts have all been deposited in the computer's recycle bin never to be seen again.
How on earth can one find words to describe the events of the last 24 hours?
We began by reviewing where we had left our last diary entry. Although we write the words the 'headlines' are written by our more than worthy colleagues at HQ. We noticed with a wry smile that they had subtitled our last entry "Too much excitement for one day."
We have received hundreds of emails since the beginning of the season and apologise for not having the time to reply to them all individually, or even acknowledge many. We hope that Stuart from West Yorkshire will not mind us 'singling him out' - his email of 24 March contained the sentence: 'I look forward eagerly to this year but I doubt it can come close to last year's drama, excitement, and incredible outcome.'
At the time we agreed with his thoughts. At the end of today, rather like the last headline, it produced a smile.
Enough procrastination. We left you last Wednesday evening as we pondered a breakthrough. EJ had received a fish and a half, courtesy of our new male. Was this sufficient for her to re-commence incubation? Would she lay another egg on Thursday?

One step forward, two steps back

By the end of Thursday, we felt we had taken one step forward and two steps back. EJ rolled her egg from the rim back into the nest cup shortly after first light. One step forward! Red 8T went 'missing' for two spells in excess of two hours, returning each time with a full crop, but with no sign of the fish he had obviously eaten while he was away. Two steps backward.
No sign of the third egg either. There had been three days between the laying of the first and second eggs. A three-day gap between second and third would have meant a third egg by Thursday. EJ must have reabsorbed it.

Friday was much the same as Thursday. Except Red 8T did bring a fish back to the nest. Or rather to the camera tree - which he proceeded to eat in its entirety in full view of the food soliciting EJ sitting on her nest - but not on her eggs.
Saturday marked day seven of 'non-incubation' for the first egg and day five for the second. Even if she began sitting today, surely the eggs were not likely to be viable?

Gone fishin'

Yet again 8T disappeared fishing and returned with a full crop. After both birds disappeared to roost at dusk, the debate about the instruction manual yet again raised its ugly head, but no firm conclusions were reached.
An opinion poll suggested that the 'pro EJ' faction now had a significant lead over the 'Red 8T' camp. Well, to be precise, the sole surviving member of the Red 8T fan club was beginning to feel a wee bit lonely.
Yesterday, after seeing her new male ignoring her food soliciting calls for two hours, EJ finally left the nest and returned within an hour with yet again a huge rainbow trout. At least she would feed well. 8T had also gone fishing in her absence and his six-inch brown trout really did look pitiful in comparison to her Sunday meal.
That night our team of volunteers due to be relieved at 10 pm were late returning. Gone to the pub no doubt. Nope. Tea-totallers to the last of them. Discussing with the overnight shift where to put all the boxes of custard creams to avoid tripping over them? (Health and Safety gurus at HQ please note we take potential risks to our volunteers very seriously). That must be the answer. Wrong again.
Their smiles and breathless arrival at close to midnight ensured silence in the camp. At close to 9.30 pm EJ had started to walk around the outside of the nest and eventually settled in the middle. By 10.30 pm she was still there. She had resumed incubation of the two eggs! Amazing news.

Back on track?

At first light this morning the 'dancing male capercaillies' were quite rightly ignored by us. She was still sitting there. An overnight incubation! But surely the eggs couldn't still be viable? Why resume incubation after 8T had failed to deliver the goods? She stood up to turn the eggs at a little before 6 am and we saw the answer.

The third egg sitting next to the other two. She sat down again quickly. But there was no mistake about it. She had laid again - and this last egg was being kept warm!
8T had arrived shortly after 5 am and ignored her food soliciting calls for two hours before he left. 'All quiet on the Western Front.' At 10.15 am we hard the unmistakeable sound of a male osprey performing a display flight.
We encouraged our visitors to stand at the rear of the Osprey Centre and it was at least three minutes before we spotted the male. He was at a tremendous height and a mere speck in the sky as he treated us to his rollercoaster display. Closing his wings, dropping like a stone for hundreds of feet before opening his wings again and climbing gradually high into the air, then plummeting as before.
With each descent he got lower and lower toward the nest. It was an incredible sight and the first time we had seen 8T perform this. Perhaps he was celebrating his female's incubation? It lasted 14 minutes.
We returned inside the visitor centre in time to see him land on the nest. Although he had his back to us and was partially obscured by EJ we knew it was 8T. If it had been an intruder not known to our female he would have suffered the same fate as had befallen the two unringed intruders we described in our last entry.

What happened next?

It has taken you probably one second to move from the full stop of the last sentence to the first word of this one. We have a confession. It has taken us over an hour to type them. WE know what happened next. 8T turned round to face us. EJ moved to one side and we saw him for the first time.
Ninety minutes. He had an empty crop and had little body fat. No red coloured ring but the most beautiful metal ring that we have witnessed in over six months. It could not possibly be. One hundred and ten minutes. EJ remained calm. She was in a minority of one.
He flew to the camera tree. We moved the camera. He did not flinch. This was not an intruder. We zoomed in and got a perfect 'head shot'. The eyestripe and its 'kink' brought back floods of memories. The tell-tale slightly 'orange/yellow' iris was a clincher.
Of the hundreds of emails we have received since the start of the season over 300 have asked the same question - 'Where's Henry?' Today at 10.29 am we had the answer. Henry arrived home.

135 minutes. He may be physically almost a shadow of the bird we saw at the end of last season, but he is safe and back with us. He stayed on the camera tree for 20 minutes, then sped onto the nest as 8T landed. 3 ospreys all stared at one another before 8T lunged at Henry who took flight. Thankfully there had been no physical contact but Henry quickly disappeared south at just turned 11.15 am.

Duty calls

Red 8T stood beside EJ for a full 30 minutes before he left. He returned a little after 2.30 pm with a fish and alighted as usual in the camera tree to eat it. Amazingly at 2.50 pm he landed on the nest with half the fish and EJ did not need to be asked twice - she leapt up from her three eggs, snatched the fish and was away to the camera tree to eat.
8T then peered at the eggs and slowly settled on them and started to incubate! Within a minute, he was up again, uncomfortable with this new experience and began nest scraping. Here we go again - déjà vu! This time two of the eggs were propelled upwards. They rolled round the top of the nest cup like balls in a roulette wheel before rolling back down into the cup. We were rather relieved when he left shortly after this and EJ returned to the nest and resumed incubation.
8T surprised us again by returning to the nest within an hour with his second fish of the day. He had not attempted to eat any himself and landed next to EJ with an almost 'resigned' air. Again, she was quick off the mark and grabbed his offering, but made no attempt to start eating. He remained by her side for half an hour before flying to the camera tree. EJ followed him, but ate on a different perch, returning to incubate within 15 minutes.
As we left at 6 pm yet again conversation was confined to one topic. Would Henry have the strength to mount an attack and regain his territory? He certainly looked to be at a 'low ebb' physiologically.
Our best guess was that he had been subject to strong winds on migration, taken out to sea, and had to battle his way back over land and had been blown many miles off course. This would explain his apparent lack of body fat and his appearance over three weeks after we had hoped to see him. How relieved we were to cross him off our 'Missing in Action' list. Perhaps tomorrow would tell.

Battle for Loch Garten

Nope. At 8.17 pm Henry mounted his attack and powered onto the nest in a flat level flight, much to the consternation of 8T who had seen him coming sooner than us and joined EJ on the nest. Again three ospreys on our nest.
After a standoff lasting more than a minute 8T launched himself at Henry who disappeared over the side of the nest. We didn't see him rise again. 8T stopped alarm calling. It had happened so quickly we needed the DVD to come to our rescue with its frame by frame replay.
Phew! No talons involved - 8T had landed next to Henry, thrust out his chest and pushed Henry over the side. But was Henry on the ground injured by the fall? 8Ts alarm calls answered our question. Henry was coming in again at tree top height. This time it was 8T who was forced to flee the nest, narrowly missing Henry's talons. We quickly lost sight of both birds.
Thank you so much to Kate from St. Kitts in the Caribbean for the email complimenting us on the diary, but suggesting that perhaps 'there are a bit too many "wee drams" and not enough tea being drunk by you!!' Sorry, but we would have probably ignored your advice this evening had there been a bottle of single malt to hand.
Anyway, we would not have had time to pour one before hearing the shrill 'peep peep peep'. The heralding of an osprey display flight. We couldn't see him but there was no prizes for guessing the identity of the displaying bird. We marvelled at the sounds for over two minutes before 8T landed on the nest. He alarm called.

Endless determination

The 'peep peep peep' continued way above our heads. At last we saw him. Henry - the 'free falling osprey' - was hurtling downwards and in very good voice. It seemed to impress 8T as well - he took flight a split second before Henry arrived on the nest. 8T exited stage right, heading south at high speed.
Thankfully hardly a feather had been ruffled on either of the males. Henry stood there as the light started to fail, next to his female who was incubating. A sight we never expected to see again. It was almost pitch black when he left to roost, leaving EJ on the nest. 8T had not been back... Perhaps he will tomorrow?
It is perhaps 'jumping the gun' a little to ask if we have seen the last of 8T and whether Henry will recover quickly from his arduous migration. We learned last year how good he was at fishing. Perhaps this year we have discovered what a determined bird he is.

Enough excitement for a whole month

We scarcely dare ask ourselves if he will be prepared to help incubate eggs which have nothing to do with him. If the guys at HQ thought the last diary entry merited a headline of 'Too much excitement for one day', perhaps 'Enough excitement for a whole month' is apt for this entry.
We had to disturb 'the boss' who was in the middle of a training course to tell him our news this morning. He gave us an order. That's most unlike him. But when he does he's always right.
We were told to go buy a box of tissues and put them on an expense claim form. According to him, this morning they could be justified as being a necessary expense to perform the job. He was right.
It's now gone 3 am. We find listening to music can be a stimulus to writing. It has tonight. Until now. The CD player has been randomly choosing tracks all night. Thankfully, this is the first time it has chosen Carly Simon singing 'Nobody Does it Better'. Pure serendipity.
'Nobody does it half as good as you..... baby you're the best'.
Sleep well Henry.

Source: Operation Osprey 2005
26 April 2005

Thursday, 28 April 2005

Just the way you are

Sharp eyed viewers of the web cam will have noticed that EJ has not been incubating her eggs since Tuesday evening. We had no idea that the question raised in our last diary entry - 'we scarcely dare ask ourselves if he will be prepared to help incubate eggs which have nothing to do with him' - would be answered so soon.
Twice we have described Red 8T's vigorous nest scraping which resulted in an egg or eggs being propelled close to the edge of the nest.
On Tuesday at dawn Henry arrived on the nest and EJ got up from her overnight incubation of the three eggs. Last season we saw EJ and Henry exchange places and Henry settle to incubate. On this occasion he looked into the cup, gently lowered his chest then suddenly flailed both legs.

One of the eggs disappeared over the side of the nest and a second hit the rim. He got up, looked down at the remaining egg in the cup, lowered himself again and the third egg took flight, clearing the rim by at least a metre. After looking down again Henry took flight and promptly disappeared - leaving our volunteers, staff and, many would say EJ, stupefied.
The silence was broken by a volunteer 'Well you did say 'nobody does it half as good as you - baby you're the best.' There appeared to be little doubt - this was a deliberate action on Henry's part.

Surely it was just an accident?

After some 30 minutes EJ rolled her one remaining egg into the cup and resumed incubation. We did not see Henry again until 5.30 pm that evening when he arrived on his favourite perch and began to eat his catch. EJ began food soliciting immediately. After almost an hour with only a third of the fish remaining Henry landed on the nest next to EJ who seemed a little reluctant to rise from her egg.
She eventually did so, but remained on the nest for about 20 minutes with the part eaten fish in her talons. No sooner had she flown to the camera tree was Henry down into the cup and the final egg was over the rim in the blink of an eye.
Any doubts that had lingered about the events that morning being accidental were quickly dispelled - even more so when you consider that Henry has not scraped the nest cup in the 48 hours that have elapsed since that incident.
On Wednesday Henry failed to deliver a fish to EJ who remained on the edge of the nest or in the camera tree the whole day. She was however receptive to his mating advances and we counted 10 attempts.
Today both birds were on the nest at dawn and there was more mating. Henry left at around 8.00 am and EJ disappeared some 10 minutes later. It was Henry who arrived back first on his favoured perch. Interestingly he had a whole fish with him, but a full crop. He sat with the fish and it was a full 50 minutes before he started eating.
Another 20 minutes passed and there was a growing feeling that if EJ did not get back soon there would be nothing left for Henry to deliver. Suddenly Henry gave an alarm call and flew from his perch to the nest. He began mantling his wings, looking up and was still calling.
After less than a minute he took flight and rapidly gained height, still carrying his fish. It was a straight and level flight and we saw his quarry - but it was a mere speck in the distance. Henry was heading off the

intruder before the bird got within a mile of the nest. Red 8T? We will never know. They were both quickly lost to sight.
Some 15 minutes later EJ arrived on the nest - she also had a full crop and had obviously been fishing and eating off site. It was another 40 minutes before Henry arrived beside her - but he had obviously not been eating and delivered the remainder of the fish to EJ. He left at around 1.40 pm, whilst she remained until 7.40 pm, probably off to fish rather than to roost judging by her flight pattern.
Where has Henry been?
So, those are the bare facts - well almost all of them. Three more we would like to impart. Firstly the 'whisper on the street' is that EMI sales of 'Nobody does it better' have rocketed since Tuesday. No explanation needed from us.
Secondly we saw something unusual about Henry on Monday, but decided not to comment until we were certain of our facts and had had an opportunity of studying him more closely. Henry's plumage has changed colour. Not everywhere, just on the right hand side of his tummy. These brown markings are asymmetrical and inconsistent with moulting of feathers. In addition his feet are dirty and ingrained with brown markings.
Although it is speculation we think that the markings and dirty feet are as a result of contact with oil. We doubt very much whether he has ingested this in any quantity. It certainly is not impeding his flying ability, nor does it appear to have had any adverse impact on his fishing skills. However it may be an answer to why he arrived more than three weeks after he was expected.
Until 20th April for the previous nine days we had been besieged by strong easterly winds. If Henry had been attempting to cross the Channel on the west coast at the time he could easily have been blown out to sea - and may have even missed Ireland.
Did he find a haven from the sea and the terrible gales on either a ship or an offshore oil rig? To us this seems the most logical explanation. This explains his very late arrival, the oil, and the poor body condition he was in upon arrival.
Thirdly we are more than happy to report that Henry's physical condition appears to have improved dramatically since Monday - he is looking a wee bit more like the bird we remember from last season.
So how to explain his actions in kicking out the eggs? Perhaps it is fairly simple. He is aware that he has not fertilised those eggs and is not prepared to assist in their incubation. Writings such as Richard Dawkins 'The Selfish Gene' would tend to support this theory.

Why has he been loath to deliver fish in any quantity to EJ? Perhaps two reasons here - his first priority is to himself. To regain his condition. Secondly the weather both yesterday and today has been pretty atrocious - high winds and frequent heavy showers - not ideal fishing conditions by any means.

A big thank you to everyone

We could not end this diary entry without again thanking the hundreds of people who have emailed us since our last diary entry. It is perhaps easy to become too 'emotionally involved' with characters you meet every day of your working life for more than five months. It was therefore reassuring to read that Henry's amazing return has also affected you in a similar fashion to the way it affected us.
We feel the following are a pretty representative sample of the emails we received:
'I can understand you people there needed the tissues. When I read that Henry was back I felt pretty emotional, and I still do when I read it again.' - Carola - the Netherlands. '
I can't believe I am actually sitting here alone in my office with tears running down my face... we are making plans immediately for a trip north.' - Shara '
....I thought I was seeing things and had to read and then re-read to make sure that I had taken in the fantastic news. I now need to sit and recover from sniffling into my tissues. Good old Henry, well done. So c'mon EJ what are you messing around with these other chaps for - Henry's back!! Kind regards to all, feel sure you are all celebrating!! More tissues!!' - Pauline.
'We are delighted that Himself has returned and await the next episode with a box of paper tissues!!' - Jim and Ruth
I've just read your latest diary - thank goodness I didn't read it at work! Can I have some tissues please, I'm crying my eyes out! Bloody excellent news. You must be so thrilled..... I WANT TO BE THERE!!!' - RSPB employee
'Oh man...you leave us on a knife edge...Henry - the miracle bird is home....gulp sniff (just a bit emotional here)..... I'm not a big birder or twitcher ...just an ordinary housewife/part time worker who loves nature but has little time to appreciate it...thank goodness for the web.' - Sarah - Blackpool
Thank you so, so much for taking the time and trouble to email. We really do appreciate it.

What does the future have in store for EJ and Henry?
So what of the future of this season? It is VERY rare, but it has been known, for ospreys to lay a second clutch of eggs. This has usually arisen when egg collectors have stolen a clutch of eggs very early in the incubation period.
The eggs in our nest were at that stage. If the male osprey then feeds the female sufficiently well, then the stimulus of having an empty nest very, very occasionally means the female will lay again. The second clutch of eggs is often laid between two and three weeks after the removal of the first clutch.
Could this rare event happen this year on our nest? You will have to stay watching and reading to find out. Perhaps better for us not to speculate. Better for us just to watch, record, write, and to stop noting what the CD player has randomly chosen as we finish writing? Tonight it is Billy Joel -'Just the Way you Are.'
'Don't go changing to try and please me, you never let me down before..... I took the good times, I'll take the bad times, I take you just the way you are.'

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005
Tuesday, 3 May 2005

Love is in the air

Where were we? Ah yes. Wondering if in two to three weeks we would see EJ lay another egg - which would be a very rare event indeed if it were the start of a second clutch of eggs. What we would need to see was Henry regularly delivering two, maybe three fish each day to her. Last Wednesday he had failed to deliver a single fish and the following day she got part of a fish.
On Friday EJ again was co-operative with Henry in his mating attempts and he delivered a whole fish to her around 4.30 pm. On Saturday both birds were on the nest at dawn. We observed mating and nest building until Henry left at around 7 am.
He returned some three hours later and again presented EJ with a whole fish. There was surely time for him to deliver at least one more fish that day and the strong winds of the previous two days had abated - the weather was almost perfect for fishing.
We have a 'whiteboard' in our Visitor Centre and on this each day we write the times and a brief description of significant events. On Saturday we were delighted to write:

13.00 Henry flies south gaining height - gone fishing?
The next entry was written with a rather shaky hand:
13.10 EJ walks to centre of nest, lowers herself, rocks backwards and forwards for a minute, raises herself up and looks at ANOTHER EGG!!!!
She lowered herself back down onto the egg almost immediately and began incubation. We hoped for a speedy return from Henry - preferably with the second fish of the day, but it was not to be.
At a little after 5 pm EJ ceased incubation and flew to the camera tree. She perched there until 7.20 pm then left - too early to go to roost - she was away to fish, and did not return that evening, neither did Henry.

Surprise surprise

Ospreys normally lay a clutch of three eggs - to lay four eggs is most unusual. Our previous female Olive had laid four eggs in our nest in 1999 and this was only the fourth time it had ever been recorded in Scotland. But - before she was ousted from her previous nest in 2003 - EJ had laid four eggs there. So was this the fourth egg of the first clutch? If so why had EJ resumed incubation after laying the third egg? Or was it the first egg of the second clutch?
We did our world famous Scarlett O'Hara impression and 'didn't give a damn.' We were just ecstatic that we had another egg! Simply amazing! What would be Henry's reaction when he saw the egg for the first time on the morrow?
EJ arrived on the nest as usual at a little after 5 am yesterday, but left after only 10 minutes. We had hoped she would wait for Henry who was sure to return soon, but she obviously had other plans.
Her continued absence from the nest by lunchtime was worrying and was the longest she had been away from the nest since her arrival in late March. Even more worrying was the fact that we had not seen Henry for 24 hours. A volunteer sadly walked to our whiteboard, crossed out the word 'fishing' from the entry for 13.00 on the previous day and replaced it with the word 'missing.'
EJ did not return until almost 5 pm. Thankfully she had a full crop and had obviously fed. She made no attempt to incubate her egg and cut quite a sad figure perched on the camera tree battered by the heavy rain. She left to roost at a little before 9 pm.
That day both EJ and Henry had left the nest unguarded for many hours. Very unusual behaviour - and risky too. In 1990 our resident pair of ospreys were ousted by Ollie and his female on 5 May after leaving their nest empty and there were far fewer ospreys looking for nest sites 15 years ago than there are now.

Back in the saddle

At dawn today at last we had both male and female on the nest. EJ and Red8T. He appeared to be delighted to be back and spent over four hours attempting to mate with EJ, bringing nesting material and constantly ignoring her food soliciting cries.
Much to the consternation of our early morning 'capper staff' he appeared to take pleasure in dive-bombing a male capercaillie who was displaying to a rival male. EJ left first at 9.20 am, closely followed by Red 8T. What had happened to Henry?
Our question was answered at 10.30 am by his arrival with a whole fish. He landed on the nest briefly before taking the fish to the camera tree to eat. After 45 minutes he alighted on the nest again and peered into the cup. Was that 'his' egg?
We thought it likely that he HAD fertilised it - our research suggests that eggs are generally fertilised by the male who is mating with the female some three or four days prior to egg laying and only Henry (so far as we are aware) had mated with EJ since Monday evening.

What now?

Henry lowered himself carefully into the nest cup. Would he incubate or kick? Henry was not taking any chances that the egg was not his. He kicked. Not such a good aim as his last attempts - the egg sailed out of the nest cup then balanced precariously on the very edge of the nest. He flew to the camera tree and maintained vigil until a little after 2.30 pm when he left flying south.
We were surprised to see him return as late as 8.45 pm carrying only a stick which he quickly, and perhaps symbolically, deposited on the nest before leaving to roost. No sign of EJ since early morning, nor of Red 8T and the egg was still there at the mercy of high winds.
Have Henry's prolonged absences been due to him attempting to regain his fat reserves? When will EJ return? Will Red T have another battle with Henry? Will EJ lay any more eggs? If she does will Henry treat them in the same fashion? The ground underneath the osprey nest must by now resemble a child's Easter Egg hunt - with more to come by the looks of it.
The more we think we know about these birds the more often they surprise us. What will tomorrow bring? The only thing that we are prepared to say with any degree of certainty is the sun. Judging by our

previous predictions there is probably a total eclipse of the sun scheduled all day.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005
Friday, 6 May 2005

Defender of the realm?

We left you on Monday with an absent EJ, a fourth egg balanced on the nest cup and our Henry determined not to incubate another male's eggs. As we write now three days on, we have more questions after days of sadness, excitement and a renewed hope that 2005 will prove to be just as successful as 2004.
The sun rose early on Tuesday morning and two bleary-eyed volunteers, warming their hands on a fresh brew opened the shutters of our hide to an empty osprey nest. Henry had been silhouetted in our camera tree against a cloudy sky since 4.45 am. He remained there for just a short time before flying off to fish. For the first morning since her return EJ was nowhere to be seen.
At a little after 7 am we were hopeful that a growing figure above the nest would be our female and were certain that EJ had returned when the figure landed on the nest. However, we were surprised when our cameras revealed no leg rings and a very pale complexion. This was a new bird.
But we could not be certain whether this un-ringed intruder was male or female. This is unusual behaviour for an intruding bird and we were surprised that it had landed so confidently on our nest. An unoccupied osprey nest is a rarity in Scotland these days and resident birds are never far away and are less than welcoming to strangers. Prospecting birds are usually very cautious when approaching seemingly empty nests.
However, we had little time to ponder this thought, as a moment later, alarm calls were heard from above, an angry male osprey, with a sizeable trout in his talons, dived at the intruder from above, and our visitor made away rather quickly. Henry followed in hot pursuit.
We had only to wait another 30 minutes before the same un-ringed bird once again occupied our nest. Judging by the pale breast plumage, small size and reaction by Henry, we decided this bird was male. We guessed him to be a young bird without his own nest and clearly no Internet access.
For had he been following the Loch Garten saga over the last few weeks he would be aware of just how determined our resident male can be and

would wisely have been reluctant to persist in his landing attempts. Again, within a few moments Henry was back with his morning catch chasing off this young male.
However, he returned a little after 8 am and we spotted Henry still gripping his fish fly over and then dive low out of sight. We thought this odd behaviour but watched this new bird enjoy some interior decorating. He attempted to make himself at home by rearranging Henry and EJ's nest! He clearly had different tastes than our pair and busied himself with the task in hand. Why was Henry allowing this?
Our question was answered shortly after at 8.45 am when a male osprey landed beside this intruder with a full crop alarm calling and mantling his wings. Our intruder seemed a little cool and unconcerned until he was approached by a displeased Henry who booted him in one swift movement from the nest with his chest.
This seemed to happen in slow motion as the young osprey was almost sent tumbling to the ground over the lip of the nest in the direction of our one remaining egg. We held our breath as it toppled to a lower branch and settled some 6 inches from its original spot. Still safe for EJ if she was to return that day.
Henry clearly had given this osprey enough warnings on his first two fly-overs. This final push was more serious but Henry wished to finish off his breakfast before the final 'booting' of the morning. After all, there is no use scrapping on an empty stomach and we did not see the bird again.
Henry remained on site for most of the day. Was he waiting for EJ to return? Or has he given-up on her for this year? As the season presses on and with each hour and day that passes it seems more likely that EJ will not breed successfully at Loch Garten this year.
Were Henry's absences of the previous weekend a message that he would not continue to feed her? Is he now staying close to the nest to advertise himself to another female? Tuesday did not bring any more answers to these questions.
Yesterday Henry was once again perched on the camera tree at dawn and stayed there for most of the morning. There was still no sign of EJ and it was with sadness that we changed 24 hours to 48 on our whiteboard informing visitors how long she had been missing.
Despite our worries concerning EJ's whereabouts, our visitors shared a rare experience with us at 11 am when we spotted a male osprey displaying above the centre. Henry flew to the nest, mantled his wings and alarm called for a few minutes then chased after this intruder. Both birds left and we did not see our male appear again until 4.30 pm with a

fish that he ate from a new perch in front of the centre. He disappeared an hour later, we saw no more of him that day, and there was still no sign of EJ.

In 2002 Olive, our previous female, disappeared from our nest for a month early in the breeding season after Ollie failed to return. She had five males duelling for her affections but these birds spent so much time fighting amongst themselves that they neglected to feed her and eventually she went.

Has EJ decided to throw in the towel for this year after having VS run out on her, 8T failing to provide for her and Henry kicking her eggs out of the nest? One visitor commented that if birds suffered from depression then EJ would certainly be a good candidate! There is only so much one bird can take!

One thing we can be certain of is that Henry is back and seems determined to keep his nest that he fought so hard to return to, against unknown obstacles. In the past two days he has persistently seen-off intruding males. He intends to keep his territory and is willing to defend it.

The big question appears to be - will we see a new female at Loch Garten this year? We still have a small window of opportunity for Henry to attract a young and fertile female. If a new suitor lands on our nest, Henry offers her a fish and she accepts we may still see more eggs laid. Perhaps Thursday would see us moving forward?

Henry did not appear until 8.30 am today. He arrived with a fish and went through the motions of seeing-off yet another intruding bird. He spent most of the morning perched on the camera tree and disappeared around 1 pm. The number 48 was changed to 72 on our whiteboard and our visitors were starting to notice our concern over the whereabouts of our female osprey.

It was not until 5.55 pm, with just two visitors left in the centre that a bird landed on our nest. A quick glimpse revealed the absence of leg-rings and no oil stained plumage - we realised this was not Henry. This bird was bigger, with a chocolate-brown chest and was making calls that we had not heard since EJ's departure on Monday. She was food soliciting. This was a female osprey. The next bird in sight was Henry as he flew overhead with a fish grasped in his talons and landed on his new perch some 200m away from the nest.

We left the visitor centre with the excited chat of our volunteers ringing in our ears - they were already picking out names for this new un-ringed bird as she was still sitting there, calling and waiting for Henry to deliver the first fish of many?

'I think we should call her Fern.'
'No, she looks more like a Sharon.'
'You know the warden is going to listen to "My heart will go on" tonight?'
'No way will they reveal in the diary they have a closet Celine Dion fan in the camp - they would lose 1,000s of diary readers."
What will tomorrow bring at Loch Garten? A new female with the hope of more eggs and osprey chicks? Or will this new female share a similar experience to EJ?
Perhaps our total eclipse will come tomorrow?

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005

Thursday, 12 May 2005

Magic moments?Could be...

With Perry Como's 'Magic Moments' gently fading to its ending we completed reviewing our diary entry yesterday (Tuesday) evening and pressed the icon to send the email on its way to HQ. Then waited. And waited.
Four custard creams later (our volunteers now measure the passage of time not in minutes but in packets of biscuits devoured) we were still waiting. The server was down. We did not wish to be served. We just wanted to send an email. Six 'CCs' later and still no luck. Hardly a magic moment.
We decided to call it a night and add a brief summary of Wednesday to our completed update on Wednesday evening. Hopefully, it would be a relatively quiet day and we would not have much to write.
Our last entry had described how a new female osprey had landed on our nest and for once her arrival had coincided with Henry being on site - complete with fish. We hoped he would deliver the fish to her to cement their new relationship after he had eaten his share. Most eyes were glued to Henry and his fish. Mistake. The attack was swift and decisive. Even the female on the nest had not seen her coming. No alarm calls.
The microphones in the nest picked up the 'swish' of wings and we turned our attention from Henry to the female to see her hurtling off the nest. We had not heard HER wings - her attacker had skimmed the nest and was climbing to launch another attack. The female on our nest took flight and was hotly pursued by the aggressor.

There was no difference in size of the birds in the air - now we had two females. Both disappeared quickly to the north swooping at one another and we were left pondering the identity of the attacking bird. Was it another new female or was EJ back? It was possible, but she had been missing three days.

Henry appeared completely unconcerned with events and concentrated on his fish. As dusk fell and neither female returned we knew that the identity of the attacking bird would remain one of life's mysteries.

On Friday Henry was only on site for two hours and on Saturday it was the same story. No sign of a female. He is certainly looking much fitter now than when he arrived but still far from at his best. Time was running out for him to find a new female. His prolonged absences suggested that he was spending much time away from the site fishing in an attempt to regain his fitness.

We explained to our new volunteers that arrived on the Saturday that a good place to watch ospreys fishing is the fish farm some 13 km distant. It is a magnet for all the local ospreys. Perhaps the comment of one that 'Henry's off down the fish farm trying to pick up a bird' was not so far from the truth.

Henry's dilemma is that whilst he is more likely to encounter a wandering female at the fish farm, the longer he leaves his nest undefended the more likely he will return to find that an intruding male has taken up residence. Then he will have another battle on his hands. On Sunday, he had presumably decided that defence of his territory was a high priority as he was on site for over six hours.

Monday marked the week's anniversary of the disappearance of our female EJ. It also brought snow. Henry was away most of the day and we could understand that attempting to fish in wintry conditions could not be easy. Although we had no more snow on Tuesday it was still bitterly cold and we were not all that surprised when we only saw our male for two hours.

Time has almost run out for Henry to attract a new female and breed with her this year. We hesitate to put a time limit on it as we have so often been proved wrong, but if he has not bonded with a new female within a week it is highly unlikely that any more eggs will be laid in the nest.

A little disappointing perhaps - but probably a symptom of a very healthy and increasing population of Scottish ospreys as a whole. More birds each year competing for territories.

That's the point at which Perry Como faded and we clicked and clicked the icon. So now a brief resume of what we hoped would be an uneventful Wednesday.
Dawn marked 9 days since EJ had disappeared and saw Henry on the nest for 2 hours, leaving at around 8 am. Some 45 minutes later our predictions about the dangers of leaving your nest undefended were perhaps proved to be correct. Not one osprey, but two landed simultaneously. Had we seen either before? A quick check revealed they were brand new birds to us.
The female was unringed, but had a quite distinctive eye stripe. The male was sporting a shiny red ring '4Y.' Certainly a new bird for us. We are again grateful to Roy Dennis of the Highland Foundation for Wildlife for advising us that this bird was not hatched at a nest in the strath' although he is a Scottish bird, and is 4 years old. As we watched, both new birds made themselves very much at home, rearranging sticks and twigs. In fact they moved a twig that had blown over the 4th egg on the nest rim so we got a much better view of it and were glad to confirm it was still there - even though obviously it is no longer viable. The female started calling to the male to go fishing almost immediately, despite the fact that she had a full crop and must have eaten recently. He decided that rearranging the nest was far more important - although nest tidying for over 90 minutes did not appear to impress his female. Particularly when he moved the same stick 7 times and it finished in the same position as it had been when he landed on the nest.
Eventually Red 4Y took the hint and took flight. We have seen it before - a determined straight flight gaining height. He was off fishing. South west. No need to call the fish farm to warn them - they are used to it and content for ospreys to help themselves to their rainbow trout.
So who would be back first? Henry or Red 4Y? We had little doubt that if it was Henry then he would be a tough bird for Red 4Y to oust. Had we just been thrown a lifeline in our breeding season? Yet again our volunteers were scrutinising the new female and, as usual, deciding 'who' she looked like.
'Her eyestripe looks like she is wearing a mask. Can you call an osprey Zorro?'
'I think that eyestripe makes her look evil - Cruella is far better.'
'Well there's 1 thing for sure - we aren't going to call her Patience - she's just flown off.'
Only 18 minutes (2 CCs) after the departure of Red 4Y we were left with an empty nest. If this new female expected a male to be back with a fish within this time she must be looking for super-osprey.

Hopes dashed again. But were they? At shortly before 3.10 pm again we had a simultaneous landing. They were back.
Sorry not Red 4Y and the unringed female - Henry and EJ. 221 hours had elapsed since we had last seen her, but she was back! We really should stop being amazed at the twists and turns in events here. And Henry had landed at the same time as her! She had an empty crop and immediately began food soliciting.
After five minutes Henry flew to the camera tree and turned his back on her! She continued calling for over an hour before her patience appeared to be exhausted and she took flight, leaving Henry still motionless in the camera tree. How to explain this behaviour? It was 20 minutes later when Henry left, leaving us again with an empty nest.
But only an hour was to pass looking at an empty nest. EJ flew back and stood on its rim and gazed around her. Her crop was still empty. It stayed empty. No sign of Henry all evening. Yet again the debate raged in the forward hide:
'Where has she been for nine days?'
'Has Henry been out looking for her? Did you see they both arrived on the nest TOGETHER! I think that's why he has been away from the nest for hours at a time!'
'If he has been then why did he perch in the camera tree and ignore her? I think he has decided she isn't going to lay again this year and that getting HIS strength back is more important than feeding her.' '
Does she still have time to lay another clutch? That would be a really rare event wouldn't it?'
'Why hasn't he been back this evening? - volunteering here is great but how do the staff cope with all the frustrations?'
We left them to it and headed for home to add our summary of the 'uneventful' Wednesday. We could only answer one of their questions. The final one. We smile, shake our heads in wonder at these birds and did not let the CD player chose randomly tonight. We made the decision to listen to Diana Ross's version of 'When will I see you again?'

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005

Monday, 16 May 2005

Dedication's what you need...

540 CCs. That was the answer. Or 37 hours, for those who continue to measure time in the antiquated measure of the ticking of a clock. To

what question? The question posed by Diana Ross, of course - 'When will I see you again?' What a prophetic choice of music at the end of our last diary entry.
Henry had left at around 5.30 pm on Wednesday. He had not returned by dusk and we hoped for his early return the following day, complete with fish. If he had indeed been searching for EJ during his prolonged absences earlier in the week, surely he would pay close attention to his beau the following day?
EJ was on the nest shortly before dawn on the Thursday, again with an empty crop. We scanned for Henry. During the morning, we scanned in vain. We were growing impatient by mid-morning and we were not alone. Shortly before 1 pm, EJ's patience ran out and she took flight. Was this to be a repeat performance of a prolonged or even permanent disappearance from our female? If it was, then our final chance of more eggs on our nest this year was well and truly dashed. Within an hour she was back. Phew!
The struggling brown trout beneath her talons did not appear to be as happy as us to see her. EJ ate voraciously and finished her meal in less than 45 minutes. She continued to wait for Henry. She waited on Thursday in vain. She flew to roost at dusk. We had not seen Henry all day.
Our volunteer who had suggested on Wednesday that Henry had decided she was not going to lay any more eggs this season was in full voice again, and his audience nodded in agreement. As we said in our diary entry of 3 May, if EJ were to lay another clutch of eggs it would be a rare event indeed.
It appears that there are less than six previous records of this occurring in Scotland in over 50 years. It would certainly be a first here at Loch Garten. We also said that for this to occur, we would need to see Henry delivering at least two, maybe three, fish every day to his female.
It was just not happening. We had to face it, we had seen four eggs laid on the nest this year. That was more than most other nests. And we were not going to see any more in 2005.
Some 37 hours after leaving our site, Henry reappeared shortly after dawn on Friday. He landed on the nest beside EJ, who had already been in residence for half an hour. He immediately took flight again, circled the nest and attempted to mate with her! How strange that she co-operated. Three more times we observed them mate before Henry finally left.
How many CCs till he returned? Would EJ again become impatient and have to leave to fish for herself? Thinking is thirsty work, so we made a

brew. EJ began food-soliciting before the water was poured over the tea bag. Only one reason why - Henry must be back, complete with fish, and in double-quick time.
We found him on 'Henry's Tree' with a brown trout. It was not the biggest fish we had ever seen and he certainly appeared ravenous. We hoped there would be some left for EJ. The custard creams were consumed and the clock ticked. He finally took flight after eating half the fish and delivered the remainder to a very grateful EJ, who took the fish to one of her favourite perches.
Henry almost immediately left and we scanned for the intruder. Not a speck in sight. And he had not alarm-called. He flew south-west, gaining height steadily. Fish farm-bound? Surely not. He had just delivered a fish to his female. She had not given food-soliciting calls and he had only just eaten.
We should have known better than to second-guess Henry. EJ, as usual, saw him coming before we did. With the tail of the brown trout still in her one talon, she flew to the nest. Her landing coincided nicely with Henry's. She took the whole, uneaten rainbow trout from him without difficulty and retired back to her perch, unsure whether to finish the brown trout tail or attack the fresh rainbow.
On Wednesday, a volunteer had suggested that Henry had been looking for EJ during her nine-day absence. He was hopeful that EJ still had time to lay a second clutch of eggs.
It appears that by Thursday evening he had been stricken with laryngitis, as we did not hear him speak. It was a short-lived illness, though, as by Friday evening he had regained his voice. We did not mind that he appeared to have infected his fellow 'no more eggs in THIS nest this year' volunteer with the malady.
On Saturday, both birds were busy on the nest before first light. Rearranging sticks, collecting sticks and as one source, who wishes to remain anonymous (and for fear of losing our jobs we respect his anonymity) put it, 'going at it hammer and tongs.'
Henry ate only the head of the first fish of the day and delivered it to EJ shortly before 10.30 am. After she had completed eating, our volunteers were into double-figures for the day with their record of mating attempts. Fish number two of the day was brought in by Henry shortly after lunch. Not a monster by any means, but nevertheless gratefully received by EJ. She retired to her rear perch and ate whilst our male gathered sticks. He had brought back more than a dozen and had sometimes been absent for more than 15 minutes on each occasion. Henry was obviously very choosy about his nest decoration.

He had been out of sight for more than 18 minutes attempting to collect stick number 17, when we heard the tell-tale 'peep-peep-peep.' A male osprey high above the nest - displaying with a fish. That's all we needed. Another intruding male trying to divert EJ's attention in Henry's absence. EJ agreed and, having just finished eating fish number two, she returned to the nest in an attempt to stop the intruding male landing - we hoped! We have to admit that the display flight of the male was good, even by Henry's awesome standards.

He was certainly putting on a show for our visitors. Dropping like a stone, then climbing rapidly again. The fish looked impressive also. It certainly had an effect on EJ - she had failed to alarm-call as with other intruders. Perhaps her stomach ruled her heart?

We hoped Henry would be back soon, stick number 17 in talon, to see off the intruder. But the display flight continued. We had to take our hats off to this male. It really was an outstanding display.

He gradually descended below the tree line then did something that would surely incur Henry's wrath when he returned - he actually perched in Henry's tree and started eating! Come on Henry! Hurry up with that stick! Sorry. We should not be partisan. Let nature take its course. If the intruding male should oust Henry from the nest, we must accept the fact.

The intruder had his back to us and was perhaps nervous of the prospect of the arrival of the resident male, as he only pecked from time to time at his catch and kept surveying EJ on the nest. Stop food-soliciting woman! Start alarm-calling at the intruder - not asking for the fish. Sorry. We should remain neutral. Soooooooo difficult. The intruder took flight, landed on the nest and now faced us for the first time. No point now waiting for Henry to arrive with stick 17 to chase off the intruder. The 'intruder' WAS Henry - who had just popped off to do a bit of fishing in between nest-building. With one swift movement, he dropped his fish at the feet of EJ and resumed his search for stick number 17. Amazing!

We had just a little time to read some of the many e-mails we have received on Saturday evening. We replied to one that asked: 'what does it feel like to be the producer of your very own soap opera?' by saying that it was '..... frustrating - as a producer, you hoped that at least you might see even a rough draft of the script before filming. For the stars in the drama to just improvise every scene just took the biscuit - and the custard cream as well.'

Another suggested that the events this year had 'all the twists and turns of a Jack Higgins novel.' We disagreed. We have far more suspense than

that - we have to ensure none of our volunteers suffer with heart conditions before we accept them.
The final e-mail we had chance to read suggested that we 'must almost live every second of the bird's lives with them.' Again, we had to disagree. Words are very important to us. Omit the word 'almost' and we would agree. To paraphrase probably the best football club manager ever: 'Ospreys aren't a matter of life or death - they are far more important than that.'
Sunday began just as frenetic as Saturday had dawned. Henry and EJ were on the nest. Well, EJ was - Henry was doing his 'now you see me - now you don't' impression. Stick after stick he brought back to the nest. Why was he piling them all up on the side nearest our close-up nest cam? He did this last year and by the time eggs were laid, the only thing visible on this camera was of interest to students of moss, lichen and Scots pine branches. Mating attempts were into double-figures before the 8 am shift of volunteers arrived.
The three fish of Saturday had been of average size. Fish number one of Sunday was immediately christened 'Nemo'. Henry spent over an hour eating its head and part of its body. When he delivered it to EJ, it was still at least 30 cm in length and she took nearly two hours to finish it. An hour later, one volunteer was certain he had seen a female osprey with 'hiccups' from eating too fast just as Henry delivered fish number two - without eating any for himself - in mid-afternoon. We left the volunteers to it, still debating about what would happen over the next week. Was this going to be only the sixth time a second clutch of eggs has ever been recorded in Scotland? The latest ANY egg has ever been laid on our nest and hatched is 17 May. Are we destined to break even more records? Talking of records, the e-mails we have received recently seem very interested in the track playing as we finish writing our entry. Sometimes they appear relevant - at other times perhaps not. OK - it was randomly-chosen tonight. Perhaps its relevance, if any, is not immediately apparent. Franki Valli and the Four Seasons - 'My eyes adored you':
'My eyes adored you,
Tho' I never laid a hand on you,
My eyes adored you.
Like a million miles away from me you couldn't see how I adored you
So close, so close and yet so far...

Funny I seemed to find, that no matter how the years unwind
Still I reminisce about the girl I missed and the love I left behind.'

You never know, someone out there reading may understand its relevance.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005

Thursday, 19 May 2005

It's something to talk about

Many units of biscuit time had passed, and we are now into record breaking territory. Any more eggs now, and it would be an all time, palpitation inducing, first.
However, the rest of Monday brought some encouraging news. After delivering fish number two to EJ, Henry departed once more - a bit more sick collecting we assumed. As EJ sat on the nest looking extremely contented with herself, we decided to run the highlights DVD from last year to a packed visitor centre.
These damn ospreys - they have no sense of timing - the presentation was cut short - as the familiar cry of 'osprey' brought us all rushing to the windows. Henry was back with a third fish! And once again in impeccable time! Boy was this guy good. He flew to 'his tree' and began to tuck into a none too small rainbow trout, whilst EJ, obviously still full from her previous feast, only managed some very half hearted food soliciting calls.
In due time, once Henry had devoured all but the tail and about three inches of fish, he took it to EJ, and attempted to mate. 'No chance with a fish that small', said one visitor - and she was right - the attempt was unsuccessful, and Henry again flew off at about 17.40, perhaps to get a more suitable offering.
He was not seen again until much later that evening. So much later in fact, that dark was beginning to fall, our volunteers were making the final brew of the day, and considering whether to put the lid on the biscuit tin, or perhaps have one more....
At 21.57 as the heaters kicked in and the flaps were being closed to keep out the chill - guess who's back? Henry, looking almost ghostly in the gathering mist, soared to the nest, and delivered fish number four! ' Well, better keep the biscuits out for now eh?' So EJ had received four fish today. Did this mean Henry is back to his excellent form of last year

and has finally shaken off the ravages of his journey? And if he keeps this up what will happen?
Tuesday, unlike Monday, was not the best weather if you want to go fishing. Probably not the best weather for doing anything much at all in fact, as we awoke to heavy snow showers and blustery winds. If Henry was indeed back on form then this was the day he could prove himself. The wind was whipping up all local waters, and at times, the snow was at near white out, so for a predator reliant on sight, conditions were tough. Couple this with the fact that cold temperatures cause fish to retreat to deeper waters, we imagined we may not have a plethora of fish. Or indeed visitors.
A few hardened osprey fans braved the weather and were rewarded at 13.15 when Henry brought back fish number one. A rather small frozen popsicle, but fish nonetheless, and he dutifully gave it to EJ. Now expecting the high standards of yesterday, EJ was back on the nest in 15 minutes having gobbled the lot, and he was away again after putting up with her 'nagging' for 15 minutes or so.
As we waited for him to return, many visitors commented on how plump and contented EJ was looking. Sure she was a bit fluffed up - it was snowing after all - and no girl likes to be called plump - but we all agreed she was looking fantastic.
But does looking fantastic mean looking fertile? They were certainly going through the right motions for it. Well fed, plenty more 'hammer and tonging', and sitting tight saving energy. This is exactly what we needed to see.
At 16.15 the weather had relented somewhat and Henry returned with fish two. After EJ took it away to eat, Henry took to his favourite activity, moving sticks around the nest with them all ending up where they started, but then something strange happened.
Henry looking very smug lowered himself into the nest cup, and sat for several minutes as if incubating an egg! Is there something we don't know? We knew there was no egg in there, so what was he up to? Practicing? Viewers of the webcams got a fair old shock when that picture popped up on their screens, and the office was bombarded with emails and phone calls - 'is there an egg?' 'I spat my coffee out when I saw him sitting there' 'May I please have a £3 refund as I dropped a plate on the floor.' Not yet. Or should we say not this time. But is it a sign of things to come?
Today looked good. It wasn't snowing for a start. The volunteers' discussions in the hide overnight had revolved around running a sweepstake for when the 5th egg will be laid. We are all optimists, but if

we were to run a book on whether this will happen, we don't think any of us would like to guess the odds.
It was at 5.30 am that our volunteers still bleary-eyed and chilly caught their first sight of Henry, and of course, how could he not arrive without a fish? We've come to expect it. They couldn't quite believe it, but there was EJ tucking in to a very early breakfast.
Perhaps Henry was keen to make up for lost time after yesterday's awful weather. He flew south after two successful mating attempts, perhaps to get some 'elevenses'. Meanwhile EJ busied herself on the nest with a bit of general housework, including piling still more sticks in front of our camera.
However she wasn't alone for long because Henry returned with fish number two at 10.15 - a 'pre-elevenses' snack.
Henry with all these fish you are really spoiling us! As Henry flew south once more, we concluded he is surely now back on top form - there was nothing stopping them now! Just the small fact that she already has 4 eggs 'under her belt'. As one of our volunteers aptly said, 'if any pair can do it, these two can do it'. We certainly hope so.
EJ was alone on the nest until 12.15 when another osprey was seen circling high above the nest - and EJ began to mantle her wings. As the bird flew lower she got increasingly agitated - we knew this was not Henry.
Was it a female? If it was we would soon see EJ off the nest chasing her away, which we really didn't want to happen - a woman in her condition? She needs to be saving as much energy as possible. As the bird made high speed passes above the nest, getting lower and lower, and then hovering above the nest, we knew we would soon find out.
EJ remained on the nest as the intruder touched down. She didn't seem too agitated - so was it a male? Is this a bird we have seen before, or someone new? And whoever it was, would it disrupt this precarious situation? hen there it was. Clear as a clear view, on a clear day, in clear land. Red leg ring. White letters. 4Y. We knew who this was and we didn't like what we saw. This was the male who spent a few hours on the nest with an unringed female last week while EJ was AWOL. But where was this female now, and was 4Y going to 'try it on' with EJ?
Just as we were in the process of trying to answer these questions, whilst thinking of at least a hundred more, EJ resolved the situation. With one wingbeat and an enormous peck 4Y was dispatched from the nest, and didn't return for a second try.

Phew! Too many cooks and all that. Whilst pondering whether EJ could be 'in the zone' so much that she WAS the zone, we were slightly distracted, and the suspense of this encounter was diminished.
A swallow - perhaps a kamikaze swallow - flew through one of the centre viewing flaps, skimmed a few heads, and began fluttering at the upper windows. Luckily the visitor that was absolutely terrified of small birds near her, had left just a few minutes earlier, or we may have needed to mobilise the first aid kit. Luckily our expert ladder climber who had ringed our chicks last year was in the centre - 'fancy popping up there then? Its only 20 feet or so!' He did suggest throwing rolo's at it to tempt it lower, but we had just eaten them.
So up with the ladder and the swallow was caught safely and let go, none the worse for wear. This could be the first time we've had a 'swallow evacuation' before! Someone piped up: 'That was a Close Encounter of the BIRD Kind' Groan!
All was quiet at the nest for some while, so while EJ sat on the camera tree we marvelled at the technology that was giving us live pictures of a nearby great tit nest, containing five eggs. Debate raged at shift changeover at the forward hide - if you could put a ring back on Henry what letters would it be (Henry's coloured leg ring HV cracked and fell off in 2003)? 'I think TF for Top Fisherman', 'Good one, what about LE for Loves EJ?' 'Nah that's far too soppy, how bout 1O for no.1 Osprey?' But the winner was definitely LG for LoveGod of Loch Garten!
But the debate was over at 15.45 when Henry delivered his third catch of the day, a good sized brown trout. EJ took it to the dead trees behind the nest, but was back within 15 minutes. We thought she had dropped it on her way back to the nest it had gone that quick, but no, she had just eaten it extremely quickly - do ospreys get indigestion?
So as we left our volunteers on the evening shift, we pondered the facts, which brought up ever more questions:
EJ is in fantastic condition, thanks to Henry's hard work. But will this be enough? Is EJ getting broody, and how can we tell? Henry seems back on form. But can he keep it up? How long will we have to wait? Which are nicer - bourbons or ginger nuts?
At shortly after 21.30 our evening shift volunteers called us - they had exciting news - a packet of hobnobs, once thought to have been lost for ever, had mysteriously appeared in the port-a-loo. They required immediate guidance on Health and Safety implications and consumption after the sell by date. They eventually added that EJ had not gone to roost on an empty stomach - Henry had yet again brought in a fourth fish as daylight started to fade.

In the words of Badly Drawn Boy: 'It's something to talk about'. And it certainly is. As speculation grows and the clock ticks on, our hearts are still full of hope. We can but wait and see.

Monday, 23 May 2005

It's too late, baby...

We had hoped to be able to settle the $64, 000 question in our next update - will she or won't she? We still don't have a definitive answer. Despite our advice to dispose of them in an environmentally friendly manner the volunteer who found the hobnobs in the port-a-loo has still not made a decision as to whether she should eat them or not. We will keep you posted on this important issue.
As to our birds..... There has to come a time when we have to accept that no more eggs will be laid this year and it is fast approaching. The latest record of eggs for all Scottish osprey nests is 27 May and it now appears highly unlikely that EJ will lay a fifth egg this year.
Henry really could have done no more than he has since EJ returned. Since our last diary update he has continued to deliver to his female a minimum of 2, frequently 3 and occasionally 4 fish each day. If his female had been sitting on eggs she would only need to share 2 fish each day so we were hopeful this abundance of fish meant that at least Henry believed she was capable of laying a second clutch.
We have said it before - if we want to try and understand what is happening then study the behaviour of the birds - they will tell you. His frequent attempts at mating were also excellent indicators of a possible second clutch.
However, perhaps today (Monday) in hindsight will prove to have been a watershed. Henry delivered the first fish of the day to his female at 9.15 am and then disappeared for an hour, returned briefly, then was away again for an hour. On his return he was again 'fishless' and EJ began her food soliciting calls immediately.
He left at 12 noon and we hoped he would return with the second fish of the day soon. EJ waited in vain all afternoon and evening for that second fish and slipped off to roost having not seen Henry for 9 hours. Has Henry now decided it is too late for a second clutch?
We will continue to study their behaviour as we are sure they know far more than us.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005

Thursday, 2 June 2005

Plenty of fish, but no eggs...

Firstly, apologies. We try, whenever possible, to update the diary twice a week but were not able to do so over the course of the last week. Fear not - nothing of 'major import' has occurred - if it had we would have burned the midnight oil to ensure you were among the first to know...
Our current volunteers read the first draft of this update and begged to disagree with us. Despite kind donations from visitors of biscuits in assorted shapes and sizes, there does appear to be an imminent CC crisis which we hope to avert with a visit to Tesco tomorrow. So be it. We have done what they asked and kept you up to date with developments.
Now we CAN answer that $64,000 question. The Hobnobs found in the port-a-loo were not consumed - they were disposed of in an environmentally-friendly manner - although it was only decided by a slim majority of volunteers. The plumper minority, perhaps unsurprisingly, were all for unwrapping and testing.
We can also answer the other important question. It IS now too late for EJ to lay more eggs this year. Her 'body clock' would have told her that there is insufficient time to incubate eggs and for the young then to leave for Africa before autumn and winter are upon us. We are now into June and there are no records of ospreys in Scotland laying eggs in Scotland in June.
In our previous update we posed the question 'Has Henry now decided it is too late for a second clutch?' We had our answer the following morning. He arrived on the camera tree shortly after dawn. A monstrous pike glistened beneath his talons. It was thin, but approaching 50 cm in length. It was fairly fresh, well to be honest very fresh (our volunteers, bless them, recorded the number of times its tail lashed against Henry's right leg during its death throes - apologies for the graphic detail, especially if you are eating breakfast, but this is, after all, nature and what our visitors see from our Visitor Centre).
EJ, who was on the nest only 12 metres from Henry, had a grandstand view of the struggle between bird and fish, and began food soliciting immediately. It really is the closest noise a bird can make to 'nagging.' Undeterred by the barrage of noise, Henry tucked into breakfast. Within 10 minutes he had a headless pike. The volunteers had to turn down the volume of the microphone on the nest. EJ was becoming frantic in her

calls. Four CCs later, the pike had been reduced to about 35 cm and Henry stopped eating.
Time now to deliver the remainder to his mate. Nope. Wrong again. Time for Henry to allow his crop to empty. He sat motionless for 23 minutes. If EJ had been frantic up to this point, now she was frenetic. Our volunteers asked if there was a technical expression that could be entered in their log to describe Henry's behaviour in ignoring her pleas. We advised them that there was - it is known as 'cocking a deaf 'un.'
Over the next half an hour, the 35 cm rapidly diminished into 12 cm. Surely Henry would at least let her have the tail? The volunteers were hard pushed to describe EJ's behaviour at this stage but did ask us how to spell 'apoplexy.' We didn't know.
But Henry knew what was going to happen to the tail and in full view of his female for the first time this season he completely devoured the fish, adding insult to injury he swallowed a huge swathe of skin and with that cleaned his beak on a branch, took flight and that was the last we saw of him that day! Yes - Henry had made HIS decision about eggs.
Presumably to make up for this on Wednesday 25th, Henry delivered a share in two fish to EJ, as he did on Thursday. On Friday it was back to three fish! The final fish of the day was particularly large - so much so that at dawn the following morning our female was still finishing the remains when Henry delivered fish number one of Saturday.
She sat for an hour before starting to eat the new offering and had barely finished when Henry brought in fish number two of the day. This was graciously accepted by EJ who then held it for 93 minutes before commencing a late lunch. Saturday evening saw Henry deliver again a third fish to his mate.
Since then Henry has been delivering two, sometimes three fish each day to her, despite some days of driving rain. Let us hope other male ospreys in the area, who now need to catch so chicks can be fed, have skills that at least come close to our male osprey in the fishing department.
Many of our visitors ask if our pair will leave early on migration. Based on previous experience we doubt this. Although the nest is not being used to raise young this year they will want to protect it for the rest of the season and will not wish another pair to get their 'legs under the table.'
There are still birds without territories wandering the Highlands ready to stake their claim for next year on an unguarded nest. This was amply demonstrated yesterday. Our female was on the nest and began alarm calling. It was over a minute before we saw the other osprey which approached at tree top height and, despite EJ's protestations, it landed

on the nest next to her. It was unringed and the size of the bird suggested it was probably a male. Within 20 seconds we had three ospreys on our nest as Henry landed on the other side of EJ with a monster of a brown trout. It was EJ that then lunged at the intruder which took flight, circling the nest.
Moments later, Henry was also in the air, but not to chase off the intruder, he had other things on his mind as he took his trout to a nearby perch to eat. The intruder then settled in the camera tree. EJ was torn. One moment she was alarm calling at the intruder, the next food soliciting for the fish. She obviously had difficulty in deciding whether food or nest defence was the top priority.
The unringed intruder remained in the camera tree and appeared totally oblivious to the events unfolding around him. A visitor who had never seen an osprey before asked for an explanation of the behaviour of all three birds. We were about to go into detail about intruding ospreys looking for unguarded nests when she decided for herself what was happening - 'Look - that intruding bird has taken off to join that flock of ospreys above the nest.'
Visitors are most interesting people and those who have never seen an osprey before have to be politely told that there is no such thing as a flock of ospreys. We were about to explain that you might see finches in flocks, but never ospreys, when we did indeed see the intruder gaining height - to join not one, nor two, not even three, but yes, four other ospreys circling a few hundred feet above the nest.
EJ had also seen them and was furiously alarm calling. Henry glanced momentarily skyward, then returned to the far more important task of despatching his trout. After two minutes, EJ, her patience obviously severely tested by this mass intrusion took flight and sped toward the now 5 circling intruders. They scattered immediately and 10 seconds later we were left with just one osprey in sight who was unconcernedly eating with gusto.
Yes, we think our birds will remain for the rest of the Summer. We also know that the excitement for the season has not ended. And yes we now accept you can get a flock of ospreys. And to try and settle a debate that has been raging both in your e-mails and amongst our volunteers and visitors the majority appear to hold the view that when EJ disappeared for nine days and Henry also went AWOL - he was indeed looking for her.
The music tonight? Our choice and there could only be one. A cover version of 'Baby, Now That I've Found You' by Alison Krauss and Union Station - complete with the most haunting violin solo you have EVER heard:

'Baby, now that I've found you I won't let you go
I build my world around you
I need you so, baby even though
You don't need me now

Baby, baby, when first we met
I knew in this heart of mine
That you were someone I couldn't forget
It seemed right to bide my time
Spent my life looking for that somebody
To make me feel like you
But now you tell me that you want to leave
But darling I just can't let you'

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005

Osprey nest cam (photo missing)

Friday, 10 June 2005

Henry, please come to the Diary Room

Summer has well and truly arrived at Loch Garten. The sun has been shining strongly this week in clear blue skies. The staff have removed their winter fleeces as the temperature in our hide has risen by more than a few degrees, bringing with it a sense of the passing of time and the realisation that we are now almost halfway through our osprey season. With spring gone, the forest is alive and there is new wildlife around, and within, every Scots pine tree.
Oh, and talking of 'wildlife' - the occasional Hobnob can still be found since it came to our attention on Tuesday that our volunteers actually failed to dispose of the aforementioned tea-time snack. The offending biscuits were offered-up to the pine martens who, it seems, were happy to oblige, and the adult chaffinches around the centre are looking particularly plump. Last week's crew have failed to comment...
Our visitors have enjoyed fine views, through a camera set-up in a great tit nest box deep in the forest, of five wee chicks with gaping mouths as mum and dad make frequent appearances with grubs, flies and all manner of tit-bits for the youngsters. We are also enjoying sights of

newly fledged chaffinches joining their parents on branches by our feeders and happily accepting slivers of peanuts and seeds.
The young siskins are becoming old-hat at feeding themselves, having made a very early appearance this year, and the scampering of claws on bark of the baby red squirrels is an inspiring sight for anyone not used to seeing one of our country's rarest mammals. We are eagerly anticipating the first views of the juvenile great spotted woodpeckers and, of course, the fledging of young crested tits which should be only a few days away. Hatching, fledging and new wildlife is everywhere, everyday.
But there are no osprey chicks, and we are the 'Osprey Centre' after all. A question that we are asked almost daily now and one that we should address is - 'Are we disappointed?' Well, we hope you will agree that it has been an exciting season so far and we never anticipated any of the bizarre twists and turns that have befallen our birds at the nest. But now with the possibility of a second clutch of eggs ruled out, why do we still have smiles on our faces and why are we still excited about sharing our 'osprey experience' with visitors to the centre? Let us try to explain...
Sunday 5th started as any routine day on the nest with both Henry and EJ sat together. EJ's calls finally proved too much for her mate and he flew south at 9:46am and was gone for little over an hour. He returned at 10:52am with a sizeable rainbow trout, which we estimated at around 17 inches. No prizes for guessing where his breakfast had come from. Thank you once again to the fish farm.
EJ spotted her mate before we did and it was her renewed calling that alerted us to Henry's presence. He was perched behind the nest hidden from sight but framed in one of our cameras and visitors enjoyed views of both birds - a feasting male and a hungry female for not one, not three, not five, but six hours!
For 360 minutes, Henry sat feasting and resting behind his nest, occasionally changing perch and managing to ignore the female nagging from above. He is clearly more skilled at this than us. We have a highlights video that we play in the centre, to which the staff provide commentary. Twice we stopped our presentations 'mid-flow' to turn down EJ's microphone as her song was somewhat less that sweet!
Eventually at 5:06pm our male flew from his hiding place, alighted on the nest beside EJ, who wasted no time in snatching the remaining two inches of fish and flew off to the camera tree before we could say 'Join the RSPB!' She was in no mood to entertain his mating attempts after she returned to the nest when her meal was finished.

An unappreciated male osprey flew off shortly after, returning at 7:32pm with an eightinch brown trout which he delivered to his female, who gladly accepted and enjoyed a late supper.
On Monday Henry delivered two fish, two on Tuesday, and three on Wednesday. Yesterday was perhaps a 'three-fish' day because the activities of our pair on this particular day required a little more energy. In the afternoon our visitors were treated to a show of osprey-bonding. Although they are not laying more eggs, the pair are still mating and they demonstrated just how friendly they can be three times in a period of ten minutes. 'Why do they bother?' asked one of the volunteers. The answer is an encouraging one.
Although the birds are not breeding this year, they are still defending their nest site. The pair are still seeing off intruders and un-paired birds are arriving almost daily. This evening, after closing, the staff were treated to a private show of Henry demonstrating just how determined he can be, when an un-ringed bird landed on the nest beside EJ. He immediately flew from his perch, with fish, and joined his female on the nest. He was off quickly again but we were unsure whether his intention was to chase off the intruder or to avoid loosing his fish to EJ's determined grasp!
Our question was soon answered as we enjoyed an aerial display by two ospreys and we were able to distinguish our male by the half-eaten trout still gripped by his powerful talon. Henry, of course, won the aerial battle. The unrelenting defending tells us that although they are not using the site this year, they have plans to use it again next year. Henry is feeding his female, he is attempting to mate and she is allowing him. The feeding, defending of the site and mating, all maintain and strengthen the pair-bond. They bred successfully last year, Henry has proved himself to be a more than adequate provider and is continuing to prove this to EJ by ensuring that she doesn't have to fish for herself.
When ospreys pair-up, the pairings are usually for life but if they fail to breed successfully in their early breeding attempts they may 'divorce' their partners. We saw EJ do this in 2003 when she 'divorced' Orange VS in 2004, preferring to return to our nest rather than the territory held by him. (Perhaps after the events of our early season we should look upon this as a trial separation?)
However, they are less likely to divorce if they have bred successfully in the past, as Henry and EJ have. Our nest site is a valuable, sought-after site and Henry and EJ will be reluctant to give it up. The behaviour we are seeing strongly suggests that they will be back for another try in 2006.

There is also a more serious matter to consider. When Henry arrived back late, he was in very poor condition and it is only now, almost seven weeks later, that he is back to almost his full strength and we are seeing the Henry who played such a crucial role in last year's successes.
How difficult would it have been for Henry to raise three young again this year? He is catching two or three fish each day but with three hungry chicks to feed he would be required to step-up several gears and deliver five, six or seven.
Could a bird in his condition manage such a physical feat? Would he have managed to fly up to two hundred miles each day, carrying perhaps up to two thirds of his own body weight on the return journey to provide for the youngsters? If he did manage this, could he then survive migration to Africa or would he have died as a result of exhaustion?
These are questions we cannot answer but the implications are grave. Ospreys live for an average of 14 or 15 years. Henry and EJ are both seven. They have successfully fledged young together and probably still have seven more breeding seasons to go. For a bird like an osprey, a blank year is not a major disaster. From our point of view, we would rather see a healthy Henry back in 2006 ready to breed again, than worry about whether our male had made it safely back to Africa and wonder whether we would ever see him again.
Wild creatures have hard lives. The struggle for survival is not an easy one and only some make it. We are blessed to have Henry back and safe and for this we could never be disappointed. We are very excited to have a healthy pair of birds who inspire us each day by just being around and giving us a glimpse into their world and their struggles.
We think of the other species in the forest trying to make their way. The female capercaillie have hatched their chicks now and it's a struggle for survival for these young birds. They run the gauntlet of predators and bad weather as mum attempts to lead them safely over the forest floor, through the heather, to the blaeberry that is a rich feeding ground full of the insect food that they need to grow quickly.
The first damselflies are being spotted along our trails and the faint buzzing of dragonfly wings, one of the forests most fearsome predators, has been heard. They have spent four years underwater waiting to emerge as adults and only have six weeks to lay eggs and pass their genes onto the next generation. This perhaps puts our ospreys' predicament into perspective? We wonder how many more years Henry and EJ will return to Loch Garten? Hatching, fledging, life is everywhere.
Tonight, as we write it is not the stereo but the television that entertains

us during our custard cream breaks. Another sure sign that summer is upon us is the arrival of 13 new contestants in the Big Brother house. Not unlike some of the great British public, the osprey camp regularly tunes in to hear about the daily goings on.
And we asked ourselves tonight - Are they really, any different from the birds we see everyday at Abernethy? How are they behaving? Who is in danger and facing the public votes? Who has survived eviction for another week? Only the strongest and most determined will make it and claim the prize...
Isn't 'wild-life' a funny thing?

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005

Monday, 20 June 2005

The wrong trousers

Another diary entry, another sunny day! Today sweatshirts, as well as fleeces, were removed in what has proved to be a Highland heat wave - over 20°C! However, the previous few days have not been so good.
Last Sunday dawned bright and clear - the midges were swarming - and we knew we were in for a hot one. The staff had become confused by the sudden appearance of a strange ball in the sky - visitors referred to it as 'the sun'. We celebrated by pushing the boat out and getting some chocolate cookies in. Unfortunately these started to melt, so we had to eat them in double quick time - a sorry state of affairs.
Henry, however, did not share our lethargy, and by 8.30 am he had arrived with the first fish of the day - a beautiful rainbow trout glinting in the sunshine. Our volunteers were already developing a squint as no one had thought to bring their sunglasses.
He perched behind the nest in his preferred 'dining area' and proceeded to eat over half of the 15 inch monster before delivering it to EJ. 'That is well stingy!' said a volunteer as he tucked into his breakfast. But perhaps Henry was forming a plan for the rest of the day and needed some extra energy.
When the centre opened at 10 am the public were greeted by the sight of Henry clutching fish number two, whilst EJ was still eating fish number one! Quite an unusual sight - our ospreys were dining together.
EJ appeared somewhat surprised by Henry's efficiency, and gulped

down the rest of the fish - even the tail - after which he duly gave the rest of his fish to her.
If there were chicks in the nest, Henry would be expected to bring at least four fish a day, but one fish each is plenty to keep an adult osprey going for the day. As Henry flew south at 10.30 am, we concluded that we would see no more fish delivered to the nest that day - they'd had plenty already - a most hearty breakfast!
The volunteers put on a brew, put their feet up, and began counting chaffinches to pass the time. EJ, her crop looking uncomfortably full, sat on the nest digesting her meal(s).
By 3 pm, Henry had delivered fish three and fish four to the nest! We could hardly keep up, Henry had turned back into the fishing master of last year. This must mean that, at last, Henry is back to the peak of physical condition, and we were delighted. EJ appeared so full she uttered a mere squeak of a food soliciting call - no need to turn down the microphone this time! She half heartedly picked at the third fish, whilst the fourth lay languishing on the nest - a very unusual occurrence.
One of our younger visitors piped up: 'She looks too fat to be able to fly!' - and we almost agreed with her. EJ appeared to be in such a satiated state she was almost wobbling around, much like the heat haze behind the nest. And before 10 pm, another two fish had been delivered. Six fish in a day! Henry, you are going way overboard my son!
However this behaviour serves to strengthen their pair bond, and enforces to EJ that Henry is a top-class fisherman, so she can put her trust in him when the time comes to breed next year. So as the sun set, cuckoos cuckooed and snipe drummed, two very full birds flew off to roost. One of them in particular having a bit of trouble getting that uplift.
If EJ was a human, her trousers would be tight today! We all wondered, would Henry, flushed with success, put on a repeat performance tomorrow?
By Monday night, we hypothesised a possible reason for Henry's amazing feat the day before. Monday was rainy. It rained a lot. The sweatshirts were back. The fleeces were mobilised. Heaters were deployed. Umbrellas were flapped.
It wasn't just rain. It was that unrelenting, depressing rain, and it went on all day. EJ spent most of the day huddled on the camera tree, the water dripping off her feathers. Henry disappeared for four hours and came back with some moss. Err, no, Henry! Get the big flappy things, not the green fluffy things!

So what had Henry delivered by the end of the day? Not a sausage. Not even a fish. We pondered whether Henry had been receiving the shipping forecast. Or perhaps a sneaky look at the TV just after the news? Had he perhaps known that bad weather was approaching and that he should go all out the day before to compensate?
It has been suggested that other animals can sense changes in air pressure - could this be true of ospreys? An interesting theory. As usual our volunteers (who are frequently glued to BBC TV weather forecasts) summed things up much better than us - 'Henry is in training to be the next Michael Fish.' Their biscuit ration was cut after that quip.
On Tuesday and Wednesday, all was back to normal - grey cloud and light winds - perfect fishing conditions. And Henry duly brought back two and three fish respectively. A much more sensible number!
On Thursday morning, as usual the staff entered the centre and began to hoover, and fire up the TV screens. But wait - disaster had struck! Someone had stolen our Great Tit chicks! They had all fledged successfully that morning, and we had missed it! The day before their three week birthday - and we were going to give them a party - the ungrateful little s***!
After a grumble, we got on with our jobs, and our spirits were lifted later that morning by our first sighting of a juvenile Great Spotted Woodpecker - its bright red cap a dead giveaway. By 7 pm, Henry had delivered three fish, and EJ was considering buying bigger trousers.
On Friday morning war was raging. 'Where are my hobnobs?' 'There were three packets of biscuits when we were on shift yesterday - where have they gone?'... 'I really fancied a Jaffa Cake!' Another custard cream related incident, requiring some supreme diplomacy by the staff. The situation was diffused by the waggling of a tin of shortbread.
In the furore an osprey appeared to have slipped under the radar. Why was EJ on the nest alarm calling? And since WHEN had EJ acquired a red leg ring? PRESS RECORD! PRESS RECORD! A very streamlined and sleek-looking osprey had landed on the nest.
And it appeared to have good reason to alarm call, as EJ was now heading to the nest at top speed. She stooped to dive bomb the other bird, who flew away with what seemed like only a millisecond to spare. EJ banged onto the nest having missed her target.
A red leg ring. Could this be red 8T, the four year old male who Henry ousted when he returned? Could it be red 4Y, the male last seen some three weeks ago? We replayed the footage, holding our breath and going through frame by frame. Was that red 72 or red 74? It certainly was not 8T or 4Y.

We had a new bird. Red 7Z. He is a four year old male, born some 50 km north of Loch Garten. The questions reeled in our heads - why was he here? Had anyone else seen him before? Did he have a territory of his own? Where did all those Hobnobs go? Should we go for some kind of sponsorship deal with a biscuit company? Questions we feel, that may remain unanswered, as red 7Z was not seen again that day.
It has become clear over the last few days that it is especially important for EJ and Henry to defend the nest, and hold onto their territory so it will be theirs for the taking next year.
Red 7Z almost certainly did not breed last year, as many ospreys do as three year olds, else he would have returned to the same nest. He has not bred this year - he would have been far too busy fishing to take any interest in our nest. Like red 8T and red 4Y, he will be at least five before he breeds.
The osprey population appears to be doing so well now, that there are fairly large numbers of rogue birds around to 'spice things up'. Birds without a nest, without a territory. Rebels without a cause. And they want a piece of Loch Garten fame. Big Brother is watching them...

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005

Sunday, 3 July 2005

Henry - expert angler - shows off his skills

Another 10 turbulent days have gone by at Loch Garten; whoever it was that said 'without chicks life would be quiet' is now banned from the biscuit tin and on liquid refreshment duty.
Quiet? What a laugh - the record button is becoming worn on our DVD remote control and our volunteers are developing nervous twitches every time an alarm call is uttered from our pair.
That was reflected in last Tuesday's activity as the first intruder of the day attempted to close in on the nest. Much to our surprise, EJ kept this one quiet as she took to the wing - we watched her sail over the nest and only then saw the intruder, most likely a female. Once EJ made it clear that this was her territory the intruder didn't even attempt to land.
The rest of the day followed a feeling of disappointment as Henry failed to bring as much as a stick to the nest. After hours of EJ's food soliciting, Henry finally left and returned an hour and a half later. Much to the excitement of everyone present, he seemed to be carrying something.

Could it be that he had finally caught a fish? He headed for the nest and the food soliciting calls warmed up nicely.
Henry circled, landed on the nest and EJ lunged forward expectantly, only to be confronted by some lichen-covered bark - not quite what she had in mind, although we thought it one of the more aesthetically pleasant decorations he has brought to the nest.
Henry's popularity on the nest however appeared to have plummeted like a lead brick and if he had been a contender in Big Brother, he would have been pretty scared had EJ had the casting vote.
Second chances are given and the following day Henry made the best of it. At 7 am, he arrived with a good size brown trout. EJ took the fish to a perch only viewable on camera, wolfed it down, and began her return flight to the nest. Whoa, she must be hungry - before touchdown, we could hear her food soliciting! Henry eventually relented and took flight. He managed to deliver three fish over the course of the day and was left with one satisfied female.
Thursday proved to be much the same - only with the edition of a male intruder (two, if you count the redstart perched on the nest while EJ was in the camera tree). At 5.06 am our volunteers woke early as red squirrels rained cones on the roof of their hide - they were once again able to see Henry defend his territory - not letting the intruder get within a kilometre of his nest.
Friday saw Henry deliver a fish before 7 am and then he wasn't seen again until just before dusk - perhaps this was a difficult fishing day. During lunchtime, we had an intruding male who, seeing that no male was in the vicinity of the nest, was only too willing to try his luck. This Male we already know... Red 8T.
If you were wondering what became of Red 8T, well it seems he hasn't found a territory so far, as once again he landed on our nest - much to our female's annoyance.
It seems that EJ has a particular disliking for this bird. Could it be that it is because:
1. he wouldn't feed her
2. he tried to mate with her head, and then
3. proceeded to kick her eggs around the nest?
Pick a number - ANY number - she really doesn't need to explain herself. EJ decided very quickly to send him packing.
Henry seemed refreshed the following day as, come 10.30 on a fine Saturday morning, he had just delivered fish number 3. What an osprey! With the long day light hours, our ospreys start their day at about 4 am.

The tranquillity continued until lunchtime when, once again, Chaffinch song was interrupted by osprey alarm calls.
EJ and Henry were on the nest 'ready for action' as an intruder landed beside them. ANOTHER ringed bird for us to marvel over and add to the 2005 saga. The new 'stranger in town' was Red 4V. He, like Red 8T, was a four-year-old male. Our phone call elicited that he was a bird hatched in Perthshire, and was last recorded in 2003 on the Loire valley in France.
Henry and Red 4V were back to back on the nest, but our male didn't seem to be demonstrating overt aggression toward the intruder, contenting himself with mantling his wings.
Henry's tolerance eventually wore very thin as at last Red 4V was shown the sharp end of Henry's talons. With a few flaps of the wing he gained a few metres in height above the nest and Henry thrust his talons toward the intruder, forcing Red 4V off the nest. Go on, Henry, that's more like it! It's not that we don't love all ospreys - it's just that we love Henry that bit more.
EJ is now being sponsored by Weightwatchers as Henry's fishing quota rises above EU permits. What's going on, are we heading for a fish drought, or has Henry seen the weather forecast for the coming week? Heavy rain and possible storms - well, it is Scotland, Henry, not the west coast of Africa.
Today, Henry had a busy day. Having delivered his fifth fish (say that quickly five times), Red 4V again landed on the nest next to Henry. We expected Henry to repeat his talon demonstration but he surprised us by taking to the air, ignoring the intruder and disappearing from view. It left the visitor centre full of very confused people - where did Henry go? This was soon answered as the 'Peeeep Peeeep' high above the visitor centre got louder. We suggested our visitors leave to watch from the rear of the building what we knew would enthral them. We weren't wrong.
At about 1,000 feet above us, Henry was performing his 'big-dipper' display flight. Even EJ stopped eating her fifth fish to watch.
Folding his wings, dropping, then soaring again. From about 500 feet he commenced his final dive, folding his wings in and hurtled towards Red 4V. We dashed back into the centre and were just in time to see Red 4V look up and 'run for the hills.' Henry landed on an empty nest, missing the departing intruder by a whisker. Henry had treated him very politely during his first intrusion - this second obviously warranted a much sterner lesson. And Red 4V got one!

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005

Monday, 25 July 2005

Red 8T makes his reappearance...

Has it really been three weeks since we put fingers to keys and provided our diary readers with an EJ and Henry update? (We wonder what ever happened to the romantic gesture of putting pen to paper?)
Apologies, first of all, but we are afraid it is that time of year again and even the osprey camp goes on summer holidays! We have enjoyed the opportunity to explore life away from Abernethy and been watching Sea Eagles on Mull, otters on the west coast, seabirdsa-plenty on Handa, surfing in the south of France, schmoozing at the Highland Show, heading for the southern beaches of Bournemouth and even jetting off to Romania to get married!
However, we have been glad to come back to the sandy shores of Loch Garten, the almost worn-out biscuit tin and the friendly faces to learn just what our pair of ospreys have been getting up to in our absence. For Henry and EJ, life has been ticking along nicely with yet more intruders to keep our birds on their toes (or perhaps their razor- sharp talons?)!
However, before we get down to osprey business, there are a few new faces at the osprey centre that have been making quite an impression on our visitors. One such character is a young great spotted woodpecker that has been visiting our peanut feeders daily for the past six weeks. He has been fondly named 'Woody' by our younger visitors. One of our volunteers told us 'I like great spotted woodpeckers because it is easy to tell the difference between males, females and youngsters. It's the red spots you see!'
This youngster, with his red head crest, is proving to be quite a brave character and has even been known to challenge our red squirrels. One such display of courage happened just the other day when a red squirrel was happily gorging himself on our feeder and young 'Woody' quietly crept upon him from behind the tree.
The pair quickly became engaged in a staring competition that our young bird appeared to win after a tense few minutes. Then just as the unconcerned squirrel went back to chewing his nuts, the young woodpecker swiftly stole a few mouthfuls before flying off with what our volunteers believed was a cheeky smile! We look forward to many more such incidents!
Our ospreys have been rising to similar challenges and have been working harder than ever to defend the site and ensure their return next

year. Yesterday, 23rd, was the first day in the past week that we have not been bothered by intruders to the site. Could these constant challenges be a sign that some of these rebel birds are becoming concerned that they have failed to win their own territories and are now upping their attacks in a last-ditch attempt to win a breeding sight for 2006?
We have already seen some familiar faces, or legs, return time after time and they just don't seem to be getting the message - thanks for dropping by, it's really lovely to see you, I'm glad you're fit and well but this just ain't your nest buddy and we'd like you to leave now!
Let us share an incident that happened just last week... Another misty morning at the osprey centre and EJ arrives on the nest at 6.15 am. She did not have to wait for long before Henry who arrived almost immediately. Our volunteers had a wee nip of single malt, 'We are in Bonnie Scotland after all', the previous night and were intending on having a lie-in but were awoken by those familiar food-soliciting calls. After just six minutes, Henry got the message VERY loudly and clearly and flew south. After 147 minutes, he delivered a few inches of fleshy brown trout and tail to EJ that she took to a perch behind the nest. Henry then flew out of sight. It took our female just 15 minutes to eat her breakfast in swift and sharp mouthfuls then she came straight back to the nest and recommenced food soliciting. She quietened after 10 minutes, her mate having understood his orders.
The rest of the day was quiet until 4.37 pm. There had been no sightings of Henry since EJ quietened earlier. She left her perch in the camera tree, flew to the nest making short and sharp alarm calls and began mantling her wings. As usual, EJ had spotted the bird before we did and it took another two minutes before a dark dot on the horizon began growing and turned into a brown and white mass of soaring osprey.
It was another few minutes before the intruder appeared above the nest and made itself comfortable in a perch above where EJ had sat just minutes before in our camera tree. EJ was still mantling her wings but had stopped calling and was watching this intruder with interest. We believe this was almost certainly due to the 12-inch rainbow trout in the intruder's talons that it was happily tucking into in full view of our hungry female.
When we have a new bird, we are always very careful not to spook it by the movement of our cameras but could not resist an attempt to read the coloured ring on the leg of this intruder. The camera had been trained on EJ just a couple of minutes before so we decided to risk a slight upward movement.

We were also slightly puzzled as to why EJ had stopped mantling her wings and was now making a very loud and unmistakable food soliciting call. What was she thinking? This bird is not her mate and we wondered if this could be considered infidelity in the osprey world? EJ, please behave!

We could wait no longer and keeping an eye on the intruder through our telescopes, we slowly moved the camera up... Alas, a flutter of wings and the intruder took flight and we had just missed reading the ring. However, EJ was still calling and he was obviously enjoying the attention as within 30 seconds, he was back on a lower perch and we had a clear line of sight to his shiny leg ring.

'Quick, zoom in!' shouted an excited volunteer. All visitors were silent, eyes glues to the telescopes and binoculars, then after a few moments of intense concentration from the information assistants, we read the ring. With a fond smile, we were able to announce 'Red 8T!' He was back... again! EJ had clearly forgotten all about his three crimes of the previous entry!

Surely, if there was an award for persistence then this young bird would be a contender? We are pleased to tell you all that it is official - the Red 8T lobby have re-launched their support for this character and are considering printing his picture on next year's Loch Garten postcards. He has not been seen this week, but there are those in the camp that are confident he will re-appear before leaving for migration.

Oh, and what happened to his fish? Surprisingly, he did not deliver it to EJ. After 30 minutes, Henry arrived with a fish, saw him off and delivered the whole fish to his female who took it looking slightly sheepish. We did not see her at the nest for the rest of the day and Henry delivered no more fish.

The next few days passed quietly, with Henry delivering fish to his mate, having forgotten all about Red 8T and seeing off each new intruder as they arrived. Some attempted to land on the nest and were shown the back door by EJ, some were chased off by Henry. Today we saw an aerial display by both our male and female in another splendid show.

EJ arrived on the nest at 5.42 am. Henry arrived on a perch at 8.30 am and took his time over breakfast before delivering the fish at 10.30 am. EJ then took the fish to a perch out of sight as Henry busied himself with stick collecting and nest-rearranging until flying off at 2pm.

There was still no sign of EJ and we began searching with the main osprey camera that had been trained on Henry for the past few hours. We did manage to spot her, as a small brown dot sat in a dead tree some

200m behind and left of the nest. Then at 3 pm, Henry arrived with fish number two of the day and took it to a perch below EJ.
We had both birds sitting eating in the same dead tree. This was a rare treat for Henry to be allowed a meal without EJ's food soliciting calls. They were sat for half an hour before both birds took flight, Henry still with his lunch, and EJ having just finished her breakfast. A third osprey was seen circling in the distance and was quickly joined by two more birds - EJ and Henry. Our visitors watched with excitement as the intruder was chased over the hills and far away.
EJ left for migration on 11th August last year after the youngest chick had fledged and Henry stayed behind still delivering fish to the chicks until he was confident all three had left. He finally left on 13th September after 'the wee one,' the youngest chick, finally left home.
It is usual for the female to leave first after doing her share of nest defending, incubating eggs and then feeding the young and the male is left behind to continue bringing fish back to the nest. We expect EJ will leave before Henry this year and we expect her to leave in the next couple of weeks. With the shortening days, her body clock may already be hinting that it is time to think about flying south.
We wonder whether she would have already left, had there not been so many intruding birds around to challenge her? Will Henry leave early - almost certainly earlier than 13th September - but will he hold off for as long as possible to ensure his place at Loch Garten in 2006?
Well, we certainly hope so, but for now we look forward to each new day with our pair, anticipate each new intruder with excitement and intend to enjoy the last month of our osprey season with our volunteers and visitors.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005

Thursday, 11th August 2005

Is it time to go yet?

Well, we've reached August in what's been an interesting season at Loch Garten, leaving us mere weeks until the end of the season. Not a happy thought for any of the staff or volunteers, for the end of season also brings the departure of Henry and EJ.
As they start to consider their 3,000 mile migration, it's certainly a daunting prospect. They will face many dangers as their journey south

progresses but the upside is that both Henry and EJ are experienced in migration so have a high chance of doing just fine. EJ will be the first to leave and sadly since our last diary entry, her appearances at the nest have been decreasing. This poses our final question of the season:

When will our Ospreys migrate?

We'll answer this with a bit of history - EJ first took the territory in 2003, and that year she left to start her winter migration on 5 August. In 2004, after EJ and Henry reared three chicks, she was last recorded on 10 August.

Although she and Henry have failed to rear young this year, research has shown that failed pairs will stay on breeding ground as long as successful breeding pairs. This suggests that any day now, we will see the last of EJ for this season.

Well, if that doesn't send you to the chocolate stash, I don't know what will! All is not lost, however, as we expect to see Henry around for at least a few more weeks and he's showing no signs of slacking in his chores.

While EJ sits far in the distance contemplating her departure, Henry has been a busy boy of late, treating us to three display flights over 2-5 August. On all occasions, he brought in a lovely fish - that should make any female Osprey weak at the knees. Perhaps a last-ditch effort at bonding for the following year?

Although the flight display on 5th was met by grumbling volunteers woken by Henry's 4 am calls as he impressed EJ, but at least it wasn't alarm calls, guys - small mercies and all that, eh?

The fact that there are fewer intruding ospreys on the nest has also lead to quieter times, with Henry still maintaining protection of his territory, as well as doing the house work. He adds at least two sticks a day, carefully placed in front of our close-up nestcam. Oh Henry, is that really necessary?

On 10 August, Henry was absent for several hours in the morning, returning in the afternoon with a fish. Our female had also, with the help of our cameras, been followed as she departed the area. Once Henry had eaten his fill, he returned to the nest to hand the rest over to his usually ravenous female. However, EJ did not show any signs of moving from her distant perch.

Has EJ developed stage fright? Well no, actually, as after close inspection (and some eyeball strain), it appeared our female already had a fish! Yes, for the first time since Henry arrived back on 23 April EJ has fed herself.

This is a sure sign of her readiness to migrate and our need for more chocolate. Yet another reminder that time is ticking away faster than we care to realise.
As not only the ospreys fly south for winter, all staff members will, too - some of us only by 25 miles or so. Come September, we will have the sad task of saying goodbye to Loch Garten and the six months of highs and lows as we watched and interpreted for EJ and Henry.
When we arrived in mid-March, little did we know that osprey mania would grip us to such an extent (it only took one night shift to develop)! At this point, on our days off, we found ourselves logging onto the webcams just to satisfy our need to know what was happening in the world of EJ and Henry. The obsession grows from here as every holiday and weekend trip happens to combine areas we can osprey. We got it bad. Perhaps we, too, should consider migration to the west coast of Africa. Let's face it, that would definitely beat a Scottish winter...

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005

Tuesday, 30th August 2005

Farewell until 2006, EJ!

Our last diary entry noted a change in behaviour of our female EJ. For the first time since Henry's arrival, she had caught a fish for herself. We suggested that this was a sign of her readiness to migrate and, for once, we were correct...
Over the ensuing week she continued to perch close to the nest and Henry resolutely brought fish back to our site. Until recently we did not have to watch for Henry's arrival with a fish - EJ told us of his impending return a good minute before we were able to spot the growing speck in the sky.
If she had been perched away from the nest her landing on the nest would herald the start of deafening 'food soliciting' calls which would only cease once Henry had delivered his prize to her.
During the week following our last diary entry, we had to rely upon OUR eyesight to spot Henry. He would frequently arrive and perch on the camera tree with breakfast, lunch or dinner whilst EJ maintained an unheard of 'silent vigil' on another perch. Yes, she was no longer relying upon Henry to be fed. Then, just when you decide that that you understood the bird's behaviour, it's 'about turn!'

On Thursday 18th August, Henry's arrival on site was heralded by EJ flying to the nest and calling for food! Breakfast was delivered to her, untouched by Henry, who immediately left, returning with elevenses an hour and a half later. EJ again began food-soliciting, but had to content herself with half a fish as Henry decided that he was (quite rightly) entitled to decapitate his trout.

After delivering the remainder of the fish and a spell of moving the nest furniture, Henry was away again, returning within an hour with fish number three of the day, which yet again was delivered whole to the eagerly awaiting female.

The afternoon and evening heralded a spell of inactivity for both our birds until Henry left to roost at around 7.50 pm. EJ was certainly looking extremely fit as dusk started to fall - her silhouette on the camera tree against a darkening sky was a picture in itself.

The silence of the evening was shattered 25 minutes later, as EJ flew back to the nest. In the growing gloom she had almost missed Henry's arrival with fish number four and scarcely had time to alight on the nest before her mate landed and relinquished the struggling pike to her. What a male osprey!

Henry soon took flight and this time we were certain he was off to roost. He left EJ in the camera tree gorging on her late supper. As dark enveloped our female, her outline became just another branch on our camera tree, only distinguishable as an animate object by occasional movements of her head and fluffing of wings. We half expected dawn to reveal our female finishing the last of her pike.

Instead, a thick mist at first light was slow to clear. Once it did clear, it revealed a camera tree bereft of an osprey. Other favourite EJ perches were scanned to no avail. At the end of Friday 19th August we were sure. Bon voyage EJ - there are thousands who are wishing you a safe migration to and from your wintering grounds.

'Instead, a thick mist at first light was slow to clear. Once it did clear, it revealed a camera tree bereft of an osprey. Other favourite EJ perches were scanned to no avail. At the end of Friday 19th August, we were sure.'

One down and one to go. Henry did not arrive on site until late afternoon on 19th - and yet again treated us to a 'Henry special' - no matter how many times we see his display flight high above our nest we will never tire of watching his aerobatic skills. He landed on the nest with his fish and did not seem unduly surprised by the non-appearance of our female.

On Saturday and Sunday 20th and 21st August, our first sightings of the day of Henry were also marked by his sky dance. This visual and vocal display has evolved to attract any female osprey within about 10 km. By Sunday we were certain that EJ was considerably more than 10 km from our nest and it appears that Henry has now accepted that his female has departed as this was the last display flight we have seen from him.
Since the departure of EJ, we have seen no intruding ospreys at or around our nest. It appears likely that virtually all of these birds which did not breed this season have decided to commence migration. We knew it would only be a matter of time before Henry realised that not only had his female left, but that also it was no longer necessary for him to remain to protect his site.
So it was that on Friday 26th August Henry left the site to roost at 8.40 pm. Our last volunteers of the season arrived on Saturday 27th and their induction started at 4 pm, with the news that we had not seen Henry all day. Most unusual. Since EJ's departure Henry had spent much more time on site, no doubt aware that it was now his job to repel any intruders.
The evening shift of volunteers handed over to the night shift, not having made a single entry in the osprey log. The night shift duly handed over to the Sunday morning shift having only managed a single entry in the log: 'Sunday 28th August 6.10 am. Winds: Light. Weather: Dull and overcast. Volunteers' Mood: Depressed - no sign of Henry.'
As the Sunday afternoon shift handed the baton to the evening shift, we really did feel for our new volunteers. Some had travelled hundreds of miles and would not see Henry this year. The log had only one further entry: 'Sunday 28th August 6 pm. Winds: Still Light. Weather: Still dull and overcast. Volunteers' Mood: Still depressed - STILL no sign of Henry and can't even pick up the Test Match on the TV monitors.' Sorry guys. Book early and volunteer in April 2006 - we feel it in our bones that Henry WILL be back!
So what news on Monday 29th? England had won the test match, of course. Oh, and Henry arrived at 9.35 am with a glistening brown trout and stayed in full view of the visitor centre until 2.45 pm, departing south west. Fish farm bound or Africa bound? Only time will tell. Good on 'yer Henry!

Posted by Operation Osprey 2005