Osprey Diary 2006



Last year, the ospreys at Loch Garten had people across the world gripped in their tale of violence, adultery and... well... fishing. The 2006 diary picks up the saga where we left off...

Wednesday, 29 March 2006

The return of 'EJ' and 'Orange VS'

Spring comes late to the mountains and glens of Strathspey and there were still patches of ice on Loch Garten as the new team arrived for the first day of work.
We were greeted warmly with a smile from our site manager: 'Welcome to Loch Garten!' and we got that familiar feeling that something very special was about to happen.
Another osprey season is beginning and as we write, newly-arrived ospreys are returning to their nest sites throughout the UK, having completed the uncertain journey from Africa.

We have spent the past two weeks readying the visitor centre, the osprey camp and the biscuit tin for new volunteers and visitors, hoping that 2006 will yield the same excitement and drama of last year.

What happened last year?

For new readers, and as a reminder to our readers of old, we'll recap on 2005 when EJ and Henry delighted visitors, staff and volunteers with spectacular displays, monster fishes and their turbulent relationship!
EJ returned on 29 March and we expected our male, Henry, to arrive soon after. However, the first male to arrive was Orange VS, an old flame of EJ's and they soon got back into old habits. Unfortunately, Orange VS was scared off by an intruding male and fled.
EJ then mated with a young bird, Red 8T, who failed to deliver any fish to her, though she laid three eggs.
Henry was three weeks late, with little body fat and covered in an oily substance. He arrived to find another male and three eggs in his nest, but quickly regained his territory from Red 8T after a spectacular display flight and battle. But there was just the matter of those three little, round, speckled objects...
The next day, Henry delivered a fish to his mate but she was very reluctant to leave the nest and allow Henry to take over incubation. Eventually, EJ flew to a nearby perch with her fish. Henry kicked the eggs out one by one by one - we were stunned!
A few days later, to our delight and surprise, EJ laid another egg. This was Henry's but he did not seem to realise and wasted no time in kicking it out. EJ laid no more, but was fed by Henry and successfully defended the territory from intruder after intruder

What will 2006 hold?

So what news from Loch Garten? At 2.45 pm on Sunday 26 March, a female osprey with a white leg ring inscribed with the initials 'EJ' landed on our nest.
'He was swooping up with deep and powerful wingbeats, reaching the top of an arc before folding his wings and dropping like a stone, all the while calling'
Our female has safely returned and she is looking very well and in fine condition. Staff and volunteers gathered in the hide to watch her begin readying the nest. After just 10 minutes, she began making a sound that had not been heard since last season. A food-soliciting call.

Almost immediately after, a distant 'peep peep peep' was heard. The wardens rushed outside and scanned the skies. Nothing. Still, that familiar 'peep peep peep' could be heard getting closer and closer. EJ was still food-soliciting.
We became elated to see a male osprey performing a sky-dance display flight above the visitor centre. Swooping up with deep and powerful wingbeats, reaching the top of an arc before folding his wings and dropping like a stone, all the while calling 'peep peep peep.'
As he neared the nest, we dashed back into the hide and watched through the cameras, as he landed, not on the nest beside our calling female, but on EJ's back! We recognised him immediately. This male had an orange leg ring with the initials 'VS'.
A thrilling start to our season - we are pleased to have EJ back and just a little surprised to see Orange VS return after his exit last year. This pair has a long history together and EJ has accepted him once more, but will he stay around and settle at Loch Garten or return to his own nest? When will Henry return? Will he be on time and arrive before EJ lays more eggs? Will he regain his mate and territory from Orange VS and will EJ ever settle with just one male osprey? All these questions and more will be answered throughout the summer season ahead.
But for now, it is important that the osprey site remains quiet and the newly-arrived birds undisturbed to give them time to settle and reacquaint themselves with the area. The Osprey Centre will remain closed until Saturday 1 April. Watch out for the return of our webcams in the next few days.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Monday, 3 April 2006

EJ and VS brave the cold

On Saturday 1 April, we opened our doors to the public for osprey and capercaillie viewing and the first few days of season have proved to resemble the usual pattern. COLD!
Staff and volunteers have been sporting scarves, hats and gloves. At times we have huddled around our single, warmth-providing heater to thaw, giving rise to many jokes about how many information wardens it takes to hide a heater? At last count, it took three info wardens, one osprey warden, seven visitors and a chaffinch!

However, if ospreys don't like the cold, our pair have shown no signs of complaint. By 'our pair,' I refer to EJ and Orange VS, because their behaviour over the past seven days has been like that of a pair of birds who know each other very well and are very comfortable together.
They have been building up the nest, mating regularly and he has been feeding her. A slight touch of déjà vu?
Today has resembled each day since the pair's return, starting early with EJ arriving on the nest just after 6.30 am. Orange VS arrived shortly after and perched in the camera tree.
After 10 minutes, he flew to the nest and attempted to mate. He was not successful and EJ seemed unimpressed as she began her food-soliciting calls. They fell on deaf ears as Orange VS continued to preen, stand on one leg and take short flights.
He brought back sticks to build up the nest and moss to line the eggcup that has been slowly scraped out by both birds. But no fishes. After a few hours, he made another mating attempt and was successful. Perhaps spurred on by his success, he flew south and out of sight. EJ remained on the nest, quietened and patiently waiting for breakfast.

So where's my fish?

She waited for over an hour, flying from the nest to the camera tree but spending little energy, and this is exactly what we would expect her to be doing at this time. Sitting tight, advertising her presence to other young, newly-arrived prospectors and using all her reserves to produce eggs. She is beginning to look very settled in her fourth season at Loch Garten.
'Sitting tight, advertising her presence to other young, newly-arrived prospectors and using all her reserves to produce eggs. She is beginning to look very settled in her fourth season at Loch Garten'
At 2.20 pm, Orange VS arrived with a modest, nine-inch brown trout. EJ took his catch to the camera tree and began to eat while he rearranged the sticks he had delivered that morning.
After 25 minutes, EJ's crop was full and she sat watching her mate on the nest, the trout still in her talons. As she rested, she was joined by VS, who sat very close, admiring his catch and attempted (unsuccessfully) to steal a bite or two.
It was a full hour before she started eating again, resting well between strips of fish. Again, a positive sign for a breeding female osprey and taking time over her meals

At home

The pair stayed on site for the rest of the day. A few more mating attempts were successful, a few failed and a second fish was delivered around 6 pm. Our female finished her supper as the light was fading into another sleepy Abernethy evening.
At 8 pm, she flew off to roost and was followed by Orange VS, who for today, resembled the model male osprey.
The pair are at home and there were hints today that staff, volunteers and visitors are beginning to wonder whether we should give him another chance? We are starting, despite our memories from last year and although he has performed no more sky-dances, to look forward to his returns.
If their behaviour continues in this way for a few more days, EJ will begin to lay eggs. There is still no sign of Henry and with the weather forecast for snow, we are uncertain of when we will see him. What will he do if he returns this year to another nest full of eggs?
At the osprey centre, we work on 'osprey time' and the staff and volunteers have learned to be patient. The day-to-day habits of a pair can often seem slow but when the action comes, it never disappoints, and the return of Henry promises to be a thriller!

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Three's a crowd - third osprey returns to Loch Garten

A third osprey has returned for the breeding season to the RSPB's Loch Garten Osprey Centre in Strathspey.
The male known as Henry appeared yesterday (10 April), two weeks after the arrival of a female known as EJ and a male, the ringed Orange VS.
The birds have all made the epic journey to breed in Scotland from west Africa.
'Henry is well known to us here at Loch Garten. He has proved to be a good parent osprey in the past and I think we're now in for a tense and fascinating few days,' said Site Manager Richard Thaxton.
'EJ and Orange VS had spent the past couple of weeks establishing themselves at the nest and then Henry turned up to spoil the party.
Visitors to the Centre were enthralled when the two males began a three hour long aerial battle trying to establish supremacy, but eventually

Henry claimed the nest back and has been confidently standing his ground at EJ's side.
'The big unknown is - what will Henry do if EJ lays eggs as a result of his rival's breeding efforts? Last year he booted the eggs out, which was something we have not seen before with ospreys. Whatever happens, with a busy Easter weekend ahead, visitors are in for a treat.'

Source: RSPB Scotland regional office
11 April 2006

Wednesday, 12 April 2006

Let battle commence...

As the early days of 2006 pass into the first week, the new team has begun to settle into the routine of greeting new volunteers, welcoming visitors and opening the shutters in the hide to early morning views of EJ and VS.
While we never expect quiet moments to last, we still find ourselves daydreaming about an easy, uneventful and smooth-running breeding season for our birds. But surely, this would not be in keeping with Loch Garten tradition? After all, in our last entry, we promised a thriller and our birds never do let us down.
The early part of last week passed without incident, with EJ and VS mating and nest-building (VS brought a modest 24 sticks back and a handful of mossy clumps). He regularly made fishing trips and excitement came when EJ made an alarm call when a buzzard passed a distance behind the nest.
This was followed by homemade banana cake that found its way into the centre for the staff and volunteers. The info wardens also brought in a whole box of Jaffa Cakes, and are lobbying for them to become a permanent feature in our biscuit tin. Do they really taste better than a custard cream? The debate still rages...

Fishy business

On Friday, we saw an unusual event at our nest, but one that had happened a few times over the previous days. Around 10 am, VS brought a fish back to the nest. An impatient EJ took it from him and flew to the

camera tree where she sat for just 20 minutes eating the odd piece, clearly not hungry.
Then our female flew back to the nest, shortly followed by VS who took the fish from her. He took off and landed on a ground perch where he disappeared from the centre view for another hour, but visible to our volunteers from the forward hide, he continued to eat.
On the nest, EJ was quiet, and made no food-soliciting calls, seemingly un-fussed about the tasty fish that her mate had taken back! Then after having a second fill, VS returned to the nest and EJ where she took the tail, retreated to the camera tree and finished off. An osprey SWAP!
Over the weekend and on Monday morning, this continued but after 16 days of mating with VS, EJ had not laid. The staff and volunteers were well prepared for our first egg, having written a rota for staff to sleep over in the hide and volunteers had agreed to fight off sleep and stay awake all night to guard the nest and ensure the ospreys are undisturbed at this crucial time.
'That rollercoaster sky-dance that we've seen Henry perform on countless occasions in the past. Those deep and powerful wing beats lifting the bird into the air, up in an arc, pull in wings, drop like a stone. Lift, pull, drop'
We would normally expect to see our first egg around 14 days after the pair mated. Perhaps the cold weather had delayed laying? Perhaps EJ was not quite in breeding condition when she arrived? Or perhaps VS had been catching insufficient food? Whatever the reason, we are very pleased that she had waited.
He's back!
At 2.30 pm on Monday 10 April, our quiet was broken with the return of Henry. Fresh and fit from his journey north with just one thing on his mind - get rid of VS!
At first, he was just another intruder and landed briefly on the nest beside EJ and VS. EJ was unfazed and merely contact-called, a 'chip' of a greeting for her mate. VS, a little more upset, mantled and alarm-called before ousting Henry off the side of the nest.
He obliged but didn't fly away. Still unaware of the identity of this bird, visitors were then treated to a familiar sound that told us instantly who was calling. 'Peep peep peep peep,' could be heard from a thousand feet above the hide.
That roller-coaster sky-dance that we've seen Henry perform on countless occasions in the past. Those deep and powerful wing beats lifting the bird into the air, up in an arc, pull in wings, drop like a stone. Lift, pull, drop. 'Peep peep peep.' Lift, pull, drop. This continued for 20

minutes, delighting all who watched and VS then knew that Henry meant business!
A battle ensued with Henry on the nest, VS diving, Henry ducking. VS on the nest, Henry diving, VS ducking. Aerial chases, alarm-calling and more displays. A real test of endurance and strength where only one bird can be the victor. Talons flailing, feathers flying and all the while EJ watched, as her two knights fought a perilous battle for the prize of our princess and the Loch Garten throne.

The battle is over - for now...

After three hours, we had a winner and for their fourth year, Henry and EJ sat side-by-side on our nest. They are both now eight years old and look fit and well. Henry has returned to full strength, bearing little resemblance to the oil-stained and ragged bird he was at the beginning of 2005. EJ accepted him without question and the rest of the day was spent nest-scraping, collecting sticks and undoing the work of VS from the previous weeks.
The next week at Loch Garten will be a tense one. Had Henry arrived a week earlier, the pair could have started the breeding cycle from scratch, but EJ is still due to lay eggs within the next few days.
The difference between this year and last is that there were no eggs when Henry landed? If EJ lays, will Henry accept them as his own? Or can he add two and two together? Will we see him playing football with her clutch or can our female delay laying for long enough to dupe Henry into believing her eggs are his? Will we once again hear the pitter-patter of tiny talons? The clock is ticking, the world is watching and Henry and EJ are back!

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006
Glyn PHOTO MISSING)

Wednesday, 19 April 2006

Who's the daddy?

For our readers who watch our webcams, you will have noticed a change in the behaviour of Henry and EJ over the Easter weekend, and this has caused a stir of excitement at the osprey camp.
Our volunteers have upped their vigilance and are now walking round with small dark rings around their eyes. They have taken to afternoon

napping and staff have even been spotted at the visitor centre on days off.
What on earth can have happened to have caused such behaviour? Could it possibly have been the huge sack of biscuits delivered by some of our visitors on Easter Sunday? Or a change in the weather? We will explain...
The early part of last week saw EJ and Henry getting back into old habits and reminded us of why we were so pleased to see our male back at our nest. Last Tuesday morning, early visitors coming to see the capercaillies were treated to a renewed flurry of activity as Henry set about the important task of readying the nest for EJ's eggs. Our newly-returned male attempted several times to mate with EJ but was rejected each time.
'No fish, no fun!' claimed one of our volunteers. It was true that Henry had not yet delivered a fish and EJ was not to be won over quite so easily this time.
Undeterred, he continued to try, each time without success. Around 9.59 am, just as the centre opened, Henry flew south and left the nest site.
The morning was spent with staff and volunteers excitedly telling visitors about Henry's dramatic return and all anticipated his return with fish number one of the season. Would it be a tiddler? Or would it be a whale?!
One o'clock came, no Henry and the morning visitors left. Afternoon came, more visitors arrived.
'Where's Henry?' they asked, and we had no answer. Where was Henry? When he arrived last year, he disappeared for two days and we were worried that he would do the same this year, return after EJ had laid her first egg and kick it out!

What a whopper!

But at 5.59 pm, just as the last visitor left and we were closing the windows in the hide, we heard EJ begin food-soliciting. We rushed to the forward hide and as we arrived, Henry landed on the nest with the biggest fish we had ever seen - a 15-inch rainbow trout that he proudly delivered to EJ.
Our female had trouble lifting the fish from the nest and it took several attempts to steady herself and the fish in her talons. She circled behind the nest before aiming for a low branch of the camera tree.
We held our breath as she neared the branch; wobbling with the fish, collision looked certain! But EJ pulled up at the last minute with

powerful wing beats before skilfully landing and tucking into her meal.
'He looked down at the egg as we watched silently. He cleaned his bill on some lichen from a nest twig. Looked at the egg again. Scratched. Looked again. He didn't curl his talons and stepped towards the round object, hidden from our view and the nest cam...'
Henry stayed onsite for the rest of the evening and flew off to roost at 8.30 pm. We hoped he would be here for visitors to see the following day.
On Wednesday, Henry was around for most of the day and delivered fish number two to EJ around 12 noon. Thirteen inches of brown trout - another whopper! Visitors were delighted to see him back in action and were pleased to hear that EJ had finally allowed him to mate!
'What a difference a fish makes!' chorused our volunteers (between cups of tea and Jaffa Cakes).
Henry flew off to roost around 8.30 pm again but EJ stayed later. We got an after-hours phone call at 10 pm from the forward hide to say that EJ was still on the nest and was sat low in the cup. Had she laid her first egg? We wouldn't know for sure until the following morning. It was a tense night as we wondered if enough time had passed for Henry to believe they were his eggs?

It's unbelievable

The next morning, another out-of-hours phone call, early morning out-of-hours, announced that EJ was once again stood upright in the nest. No egg... A sigh of relief - only two days had passed since Henry's return. The following evening followed the same pattern, with EJ late on the nest and staying until after dark.
Friday morning came, but there was still no egg. EJ arrived early and sat on the nest waiting for Henry to deliver fish number four. It arrived, she ate and Henry tidied the nest, collected sticks and made a few more mating attempts and continued for the rest of the afternoon.
After closing, we went home, wondering when she would lay, but pleased that Henry had this time to settle and make himself at home before the difficult job of parenting more osprey chicks. However, almost as soon as we arrived back at the osprey camp another out of hours phone call came and the volunteers asked: 'Are you watching the webcam?'
We switched on the computer, clicked on osprey webcam and saw our female sitting low in the nest cup with Henry watching from the side of the nest. She remained in the cup for the rest of the evening and when

we opened for capercaillie viewing the following morning, she was still sat tight.

Sure as eggs are eggs...

On Good Friday, EJ laid her first egg. But what would Henry's reaction be? Had enough time elapsed since his return? Would he bring her fish and help incubate this egg? It may not be his?
The likelihood is that the egg was fertilised by Orange VS, but would Henry know this?
It seemed like hours before Henry brought back fish number five but it came just before 10 am and EJ accepted it quickly and flew to the camera tree, allowing Henry his first view of the first egg of 2006.
He looked down at the egg as we watched silently. He cleaned his bill on some lichen from a nest twig. Looked at the egg again. Scratched. looked again. He didn't curl his talons and stepped towards the round object, hidden from our view and the nest cam.
In slow motion, Henry balanced on his chest and wings and began to scrape. Flick! We caught a quick glimpse of the first egg, knocked by Henry's talons! 'GASP! No, Henry!'
But our view only lasted a brief moment because he then settled, made himself comfortable and began to incubate EJ's egg.
A huge cheer and round of applause erupted from the volunteers and staff who arrived early! There were hugs, a few tears and the tension of the previous four days disappeared as we watched, swelled with pride and excitement for our birds.
As we made our way back to the visitors centre, the volunteers chatted:
'That's ma boy!'
'Henry's back!'
'The warden's going to be a mum!'
'Can we name one of the chicks after me?'

We’re not home and dry yet...

We had trouble sending home the week's volunteers and many would have been happy to stay on to keep night watch on the nest. But we had to make room for the new arrivals that afternoon and it was with sadness that they left, promising to keep in touch and watch the

progress of our pair. The new volunteers arrived, heard our news and the excitement continued over the Easter weekend.
Then, on Easter Monday, EJ laid a second egg and we now await the third, or fourth.
For now, our pair looks settled. Henry has accepted her first eggs and is once more proving that he is a worthy mate for our EJ, but with a minimum of five weeks of incubation ahead of them, their work has only just begun.
Young ospreys are arriving each day hoping to win a territory for themselves. The Highland spring can bring wind and rain and we have not seen the last of the snow. Abernethy is a haven for pine martens that have been known to predate osprey nests, and disturbance could have serious consequences for our pair.
It's a tough job to be an adult osprey attempting to rear young. Henry and EJ have succeeded in the past and this year we will watch, wait and wish them well for whatever is sent their way.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Wednesday, 26 April 2006

For DIY nest repairs, leave it to EJ

For the past week, the osprey camp has settled into the routine of arriving early to be greeted by the sight of Henry or EJ sitting incubating their clutch.
The volunteers have even darker rings around their eyes and even some staff members are developing bags. Those late nights in the hide playing poker and drinking Bovril are taking their toll. 'It's worth it, though,' say the hardy few who enjoy views of an Abernethy sunrise with our female osprey silhouetted against the beautiful red skies.
The last seven days have passed smoothly, but have certainly not been without the odd hiccup here and there. Again, we are reminded that a breeding season with our birds is never without its dramas...
Today started early with a blustery sunrise and just after 5 am, EJ was visible again through our cameras. She took the night sitting but Henry arrived a little after dawn to relieve her.
When he landed on the nest, she shuffled up and flew to the camera tree where she perched and preened with Henry keeping a watchful eye and sitting tight on the first two eggs. We had still not seen a third egg

in the nest, but were certain that EJ must have laid again since last Monday.
Our close-up nest camera promised views into the nest cup but since Henry's return, he has deepened the cup and the nest sides have been built up, obscuring the eggs from our view.

High winds trouble Henry

The winds picked up and the visitors for the early morning capercaillie watch struggled to see the capercaillies lekking behind a sea of trees blowing this way and that.
Henry was having his own troubles and volunteers watched as sticks from the nest sides threatened to knock our male off his duties. He persevered with his feathers being ruffled in the high winds.
After about an hour of this battle with the wind, with EJ still stood in the camera tree, there was a moment of calm and Henry was offered some peace. Then a huge gust knocked branches from the nest flew into the air, landed on Henry's back, there was a loud alarm call and Henry took flight.
Clearly shaken by his ordeal, as he flew off, we looked into the nest cup that now stood a little lower and we glimpsed a third egg. But only for a short moment because EJ flew straight from the camera tree and began the task of repairing the nest. She moved the blown branches back into place in front of our close-up nest camera and took Henry's place. 'Leave it to mum,' were the volunteers' words when they rang later to tell their tale.
The winds calmed, Henry had not returned and when the visitor centre opened, EJ was sat contently on the three eggs.
'The osprey figure was getting bigger and EJ's alarm-calls were getting louder and louder until the intruder was right above the nest. With folded wings, it dived talons-first at EJ...'
Around 10.30 am, Henry returned and landed on the nest next to EJ with a huge branch in his talons. He clambered with the branch around the nest, treading on EJ's head at times before finally resting it on the nest edge. He flew off, EJ got up, replaced the stick then sat back on the eggs. We didn't see Henry for another few hours and assumed he had gone fishing.
The next osprey to arrive on site was not our own male and this was quickly given away by a loud alarm call from EJ. Still sat tight on the nest, her head turned towards the sky as the osprey figure came closer and closer. EJ mantled her wings, un-budging.

The osprey figure was getting bigger and EJ's alarms were getting louder and louder until the intruder was right above the nest. With folded wings, it dived talons-first at EJ who ducked her head just in time to avoid the sharp end of the other bird.
Within seconds, Henry was back on the nest mantling, alarm-calling and eventually taking flight after the intruder. EJ remained on the clutch, folded her wings again and re-settled without lifting a feather.
All was quiet for the next hour until at 2.30 pm, a second intruder was spotted approaching. Again, EJ turned her eyes skyward and alarm-called, but as the intruder approached, she settled and seemed unbothered by its presence. Until it was allowed to land on the nest next to an incubating EJ...
She stood up, madly flapping her wings and alarm-calling loudly. The intruder stood for a few moments, just enough time for us to read the leg ring on his left leg. He jumped to the side of the nest before finally being shooed off by our female. He then flew off into the distance and was not seen for the rest of the day.
His leg ring was red, with the initials 8T! Red 8T returns! Our inexperienced young male from last season who briefly held the territory before being booted off by Henry. I wonder if EJ was pleased to see him?
At 5.30 pm that night, she was certainly glad to see Henry as he was seen approaching the nest with a 14-inch brown trout. It still had the head and was immediately delivered to EJ who gladly accepted and flew off to a nearby perch with her meal as Henry resumed incubation.
Twelve days have passed since EJ laid her first egg and EJ and Henry have been model parents. EJ sits tight in all weathers, un-budging when challenged and coming to the rescue when Henry decides he's done with incubation. Henry takes his turns, arriving at EJ's side when intruders arrive and has his unfailing knack of delivering whopper fishes on a daily basis. Their trials are just another day in the live of two ospreys and long may those days continue.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Tuesday, 2 May 2006

What does Henry get up to in his spare time?

Hooded crows have been giving the ospreys and volunteers sleepless nights... (Photo Missing)

This week has involved bumps in the night, noisy neighbours and you guessed it... more intruders.
Late into Wednesday night, our volunteers were alerted to the sounds of heavy flapping and EJ alarm-calling. This carried on sporadically until one in the morning and required many hot Bovrils to calm the nerves.
The volunteers, bleary-eyed and anxious to get a good glimpse of the eggs to check all was well, were amused at Henry spending much of the morning chasing crows. Perhaps the birds had been attracted by the smell of broken eggs and were eager for a feast?
However, at 5.30 am, all three beautifully mottled eggs were seen and our trusty guardians sighed with relief. Not Henry though, he was too busy chasing crows in and out of the camera tree and this carried on until 8 am! Those pesky crows!
Having chased off any threats, Henry flew south at 10.30 am for the morning's snack. An hour later, EJ was food-soliciting but it was not until 12.30 that Henry flew into view with his trophy. It was a further hour and a half before our hungry lady received her portion.
All was quiet until 5 pm, when for a good half hour, a hooded crow perched on top of the camera tree and cawed at the top of his voice, much to the annoyance of EJ.
On Friday, EJ was not relieved from her night shift on the nest until 10.30 am and then it was only for ten minutes! She has the patience of a saint!
At 3.30 pm, Henry arrived with a 15" rainbow trout, fresh from the fish farm and once delivered in style to EJ, he took over incubation until 6 pm.

Bank holiday chores

Saturday morning brought blue tits chasing butterflies, jolly otters in the Loch, common lizards scuttling across the path and a heat haze below the nest. We suspect our pair have a calendar bestowed within their abode because, just in time for the bank holiday visitors, they set about a spring clean and finishing those annoying minor little jobs you leave until the last minute.
From 6.30 to 7.30, Henry brought in moss and two foot-long sticks, leaving EJ to give the nest a bit of a tidy. They must have expected the rush of public but did they have any idea of the intruders that were to make an appearance...?
By mid-morning, with Henry absent, EJ had already become quite agitated by an annoying buzzard riding the thermals above the nest. An

unringed male osprey then attempted to mate with her, but her protests quickly drove him off.

'Since EJ has been on eggs, Henry has been spending longer and longer time away from the nest. He is obviously bringing in fish, but this does not account for the extra hours spent away.'

An hour later Henry, absent since 7.30 am, took over incubation for a few minutes. During this short time, a female osprey attempted to land beside him, but with EJ quick to join the ranks, the intruder was soon seen off.

After Henry flew off to go fishing, EJ resumed incubation from 12 til 3 pm and within that time, yet another osprey was seen flying south-east of the nest. Seeing these intruders is a good sign that the population is doing well here, but we're constantly biting our nails that the eggs might get damaged.

To the delight of the centre's visitors, Henry came in at 3 pm with a 15", headless brown trout. Little did the public know that this sight lit the fuse for a rift that has begun to appear within the osprey camp!

Since EJ has been on eggs, Henry has been spending longer and longer time away from the nest. He is obviously bringing in fish, but this does not account for the extra hours spent away.

One side believe Henry is perched, annoyingly for his fans, out of view behind the nest. The other, more heartless, folk believe our boy is playing away. Although ospreys are considered monogamous, 'extra pair copulation' is known.

Once the female is bound to the nest during incubation, the male, satisfied in his mind that within these eggs are his genes, will illicitly visit other nests in the hope of spreading his seed a bit further. This does not tar his character in any way - this is how all males of any species are programmed - but this view has certainly ruffled some feathers!

At this point the writer will try to appear neutral, despite her strong opinions on the subject. Ahem. The threat of lawyers being called in is enough to quieten anyone down. So, he's innocent until proven guilty! Perhaps he is just spending longer periods at the fish farm, revelling in the gentleman's club atmosphere?!

We still don't know if EJ has laid a fourth egg or whether she has completed the clutch at three. During the week, there have been moments when staff members have believed they have seen four eggs nestled in the cup. Wishful thinking, perhaps? Or just an excuse to jump up and down in the kiosk, waving their hands around?

It will have to be a question of waiting to see those wee heads craning their necks above the nestcup before we know for sure. EJ is not the only one who requires patience...

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Wednesday, 10 May 2006

Countdown to hatching time

Butterflies, bumblebees, and blossoming flowers are surely a sign that summer is well and truly here at Loch Garten.
Today, staff and volunteers discarded their fleeces and arrived early at work wearing sunglasses and flip-flops (just kidding about the flip-flops). Surely not! we hear you cry - it is only May! Nevertheless, even with snow still on the mountain peaks, the warmer weather is rolling in.
Monday found our EJ sitting on her precious cargo of three eggs, panting as a mirage of haze floated above the nest. Without any sweat glands, our favourite female osprey needs to pant like a dog to expel excess body heat. Sitting tight as the morning sun beat down upon her, EJ looked as if she had been on a double migration!
'5.30 am saw Henry appear with a fisherman's dream - an 18" brown trout. He settled down on the eggs while EJ flew off to have her breakfast'
During the changeover, we got a perfect view of the three eggs sitting snugly in the nest cup. Any hope of the fourth should be laid to rest by now. Although EJ has been known to lay a fourth in the past, her reasons are just. Last year Henry kicked the first three out giving her time to salvage the chance to lay a fourth and maybe raise a chick.
In 2004, EJ's first egg was broken in a scuffle with another female but she and Henry still had time to raise three chicks. This year everything is going like clockwork and we are hoping that we are on our way to a successful year.
Intruders are still trying to lay claim to the most sought-after nest-site in the Spey, but Henry and EJ are making sure they are not staying around long. An unidentified osprey attempted to land on the nest on Tuesday but with Henry and EJ both scowling, the intruder got the message and flew off.
But what next for our couple? Like doting grandparents, we watch our feathered children daily, holding our breath whenever a strange bird causes discomfort to the pair, biting our lips in anticipation as the clock

ticks down to when we can have a baby shower (I'm sure my mother is knitting already).
Waiting patiently for the first chick, but eating an unhealthy amount of home-baked muffins out of sheer excitement, it won't be long before we hopefully see the first little head pop up around 21 May.
Champagne at the ready!

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Thursday, 18th May 2006

Anxiously awaiting the new arrivals

After the sunshine of last week, the osprey camp has been in high spirits.
The champagne bottles are still un-opened and we are still awaiting the new arrivals. The volunteers are still on night watch, looking forward to hatching and the promise of sleep filled nights while the staff plan summer holidays to explore the highlands and enjoy wildlife away from the shores of Loch Garten.
Dates are carefully chosen so as not to coincide with important events and breaks away are kept short to absorb every moment of the season's excitement.
Alongside this activity, Henry and EJ are making preparations of their own and the arrival of their second family is almost upon us...
Friday saw Henry deliver a good sized trout to EJ around dinnertime and our female happily accepted the offering and flew to a perch out of sight to eat. Henry took over incubation and made himself comfortable on the clutch as he has done many times before over the past five weeks. It took EJ just over an hour to finish. She flew back to the nest and took over from her mate. He flew south and out of sight. It was 6:18pm. The rest of the evening passed without incident and the sun went down with EJ incubating.

In bad books

The sun rose on Saturday morning to EJ incubating the clutch. Morning past and afternoon came - No Henry. Afternoon became evening - No Henry. The sun went down on EJ incubating - Still no Henry.
The sun rose again on Sunday morning to our female alone on the nest. At 7:29am, after an absence of 37 hours Henry arrived with a fish. A very

hungry EJ quickly took the meal and disappeared out of sight leaving Henry on the nest for a little over two hours. What on earth was Henry thinking? Visitors worried he would not return, volunteers hoped he would be back on their shift and staff began to twitch nervously - where on earth had our male osprey gone?
He was not a popular bird for the rest of the day, but went part of the way to redeeming himself by stepping up a gear and delivering three fish to EJ throughout the day. Then on Monday he delivered two. Today became a stunner having started with cloudy skies that slowly separated to reveal of patches of blue. Henry took advantage and delivered four fish to EJ.
After his disappearing act over the weekend, Henry is back in force, and is surely up to the challenge of delivering fish to EJ and his chicks. With just days to go, both birds are taking their turns and readying themselves for what lies ahead.

Will it be Sunday?

Will it be Monday?
Keep fingers crossed and stay tuned!

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Ospreys get their moment of fame!

The spectacular fish-eating Scottish osprey will get its moment of fame when images of their day-to-day lives are broadcast across the UK on BBC Springwatch.
Pictures from the RSPB's osprey webcam at Loch Garten, on the Abernethy Forest reserve, will be shown during the three week series allowing viewers to see the osprey soap opera unfold.
It could provide exciting viewing for people as they watch the birds rearing their young, especially as the species has only quite recently returned to the UK to regularly nest.
Breeding ospreys were extinct in the UK by 1916 due to persecution, mainly by Victorian egg and skin collectors. Although they re-colonised in the 1950s, progress was slow with just 14 pairs having nested in Scotland by 1976.
The RSPB bought the Loch Garten site specifically for the conservation of the ospreys after they started breeding again in 1958. It has since

gone on to acquire more land to benefit other species such as capercaillie.
Today there are 200 pairs of ospreys in the UK and although the bird remains an Amber List species, it is well on the way to recovery.
Ospreys winter in West Africa and come to the UK to breed which means the public has an opportunity to see these amazing birds for themselves.
The RSPB operates viewing schemes at Loch Garten, at Bassenthwaite Lake in the Lake District and Glaslyn in North Wales which are open through the summer (click on the Aren't birds brilliant! link to the right for details). Why not go along and see the ospreys for yourself?

Source: RSPB Public Affairs Department

12 May 2006 Monday, 22 May 2006

We've hatched!

6:50 am. A phone is heard in the warden's chalet.
6.51 am. Volunteer, ready to go on duty that morning, wiping sleep from eyes, picks up and says: Good morning (yawn) - RSPB Operation Osprey...
An excited voice on the other end of the telephone: Can I speak to the warden please?
Volunteer: I'm afraid the warden is still asleep.
Excited voice on the other end of the phone: Well wake her up! We've hatched!
And the news has spread.
At 6.40 am on Sunday morning, we saw our first hatched chick. We have had a question mark over this day for the past few weeks, having counted 37 days from when the first egg was laid.
'All at the osprey camp are thrilled and we are celebrating the new arrival. Our first chick - tiny, precious and not a day too early'
After yesterday's unsettled behaviour from Henry and EJ, we were sure that today would be the day. The hatching was witnessed by a hide full of capercaillie viewers and visitors throughout the day caught quick views of a little head in the nest cup struggling to reach the tiny scraps of fish offered by the proud parents.
At the time of 'the call', the chick had already had a first tiny meal consisting of no more than two or three tiny lumps of fleshy trout. We really hope it likes how it tastes!
After feed number one, Henry flew south to catch the second and it came just before the visitor's centre opened. By 10 am, EJ was settled

back on the remaining two eggs and the little one, keeping her treasures warm and safe.
Meal number three came around lunchtime and EJ took the fish from a proud Henry who watched as yet more scraps were given. Our close-up nest camera offered stunning views of EJ, Henry, the chick and two unhatched eggs.
Exhausted from the hatching, the chick fought fatigue, seemingly flapping his tiny wings to rear up to take food from his mother before slumping back into the nest cup.
After just 15 minutes, EJ was back on her chick and eggs and Henry flew to a perch in front of the hide and finished his catch. He flew off around 3 pm and EJ sat tight. There she remained until the centre closed at 6 pm.
The champagne corks have popped - all at the osprey camp are thrilled and we are celebrating the new arrival. Our first chick - tiny, precious and not a day too early.
Well done Henry and EJ! You've made us proud!

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Tuesday, 23 May 2006

Two hatched, one to go...

The arrival of the first chick on Sunday had staff, volunteers and visitors alike walking around with silly grins. All went to bed happy (except for volunteers on night shift!) because after two years, a chick had hatched at Loch Garten. However, we were unprepared for what we witnessed on Monday morning.
We opened the centre, got out the hoover, filled the feeders and turned on the nest camera. EJ was tearing off bits of fish and we breathed a sigh of relief that the first chick had survived its first cold Scottish Highland night in the big wild world.
We looked closer. Something stirred beside the first chick and a squeak of delight was heard from the information wardens - the second chick! A second little head was rearing up towards EJ, desperate for the first bite of fish.
'Something stirred beside the first chick and a squeak of delight was heard from the information wardens - the second chick!'

What a start to the week! With two chicks and one to go, we are hopeful that the spirit of 2004 will be mirrored with the arrival of the third chick. It may be Wednesday that it lifts its wobbly head?
Henry is bringing back more and more fish every day while EJ takes care of the family. So for now, let's sit back, relax, grab a home-baked muffin and await the arrival of the final osprey chick to complete the 2006 set.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Loch Garten osprey eggs hatch

Two osprey chicks have hatched at the RSPB's Loch Garten Osprey Centre in Strathspey, Scotland.
The first chick was seen for the first time on Sunday 21 May at 6.40 am, with the second chick seen for the first time at 11 am on Monday 22nd. Proud osprey parents Henry and EJ have been very attentive at the nest and have been seen feeding the newly-hatched youngsters.
Henry arrived late this year from West Africa, by which time his mate EJ had paired up and successfully mated with another male osprey. Though Henry swiftly sent this male packing, and began mating with EJ himself, the timing of the eggs being laid is such that they must surely belong to the vanquished male and not Henry.
Eggs are laid at intervals of a few days and it is just remotely possible that Henry did fertilise a third egg - which is yet to hatch.
'Thankfully, there was enough uncertainty in his mind for Henry to accept the eggs this time and not kick them out as he did last year, but our feeling is that he has helped incubate and hatch young ospreys that are not his,' said Loch Garten site manager Richard Thaxton.
'Eggs are laid at intervals of 1-2 days and hatch 1-2 days apart, so all being well, the third egg should hatch sometime on the 23rd. It is particularly exciting and a huge relief to have chicks this year for two reasons: one because we did not have chicks last season and secondly, because BBC Springwatch are broadcasting from the site this year. There will be daily updates on BBC 2 from 29 May until 15 June, following the fortunes of the growing osprey chicks.
Visitors to the Osprey Centre can see the nesting ospreys from the Centre direct, plus live pictures from nest cameras, relaying close-up images of osprey family life. The newly hatched chicks are very small, but can be clearly seen on the monitors, being fed by the parents.
The ospreys will be on view until they leave for West Africa in late August. The Osprey Centre is open daily from 10 am to 6 pm.

Source: RSPB Scotland office
23 May 2006 Wednesday,

31 May 2006

The family is complete

Having had one egg hatch Sunday and the second hatch Monday, staff and volunteers rushed into the osprey centre Tuesday morning, puffin' and pantin' for a glimpse of the chicks beneath EJ.
However, in their excitement they had forgotten to check the weather report and the rain had well and truly set in for the day.
As they put the Hoover away and opened the doors for the first visitors at 10 am, EJ had still not budged. She was taking no chances that her precious brood would get wet. Therefore, as the visitors arrived keen to catch a glimpse of the chicks, we had no idea if there was still two or whether the third and final egg had hatched.
Henry flew in at 11 am with a rainbow trout, courtesy of the fish farm, and EJ wasted no time snatching it off him. Silence fell over the visitor centre as everybody waited for EJ to stand and reveal the chicks.
As if in slow motion, she stood up and gently edged herself up onto the rim of the nest. We craned our necks but alas, despite our ardent prayers, there were still only two little heads bobbing about in the nest cup, plaintively calling for a piece of succulent trout.
'Two little grey heads eagerly rose up from the nest cup and then... a THIRD! Still very weak and wobbling to and fro, it was clear that Henry and EJ had managed a hat trick!'
Staff and volunteers all rushed home from the centre at the day's end, eager to put on their glad rags for the 2006 Hatching Party. As toasts were made to the two chicks and their unborn sibling, little did we know that up on the Loch Garten eyrie, concealed by the Highland darkness, inside the third and final egg, a little chick was preparing to greet the new dawn.
The following morning at 7.45 am, the entire osprey camp was jerked awake as phones started ringing in every chalet. Our keen-eyed volunteers had watched Henry fly in with the first of many fish for the day. They did not blink as EJ started tearing off strips of flesh to gently pass to her offspring.

Two little grey heads eagerly rose up from the nest cup and then... a THIRD! Still very weak and wobbling to and fro, it was clear that Henry and EJ had managed a hat trick! Quickly, the volunteers grabbed the phone to call the warden and although the message was garbled by their excitement, the meaning was clear. The third and final egg had hatched!
Days off and trips away were forgotten as everybody rushed to the centre, keen to see the full clutch. With 7-8 weeks to go before the chicks will take their first flights, Henry is going to be kept very busy to-ing and fro-ing with fish cargos, but, having brought in five fish by closing time today, he looks well and truly up to the challenge!

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Wednesday, 7 June 2006

Osprey chicks obscured by sticks

Our most avid viewers will have noticed that this week there has been a conspicuous increase in the number of sticks piling up in front of the nest cam.
In a similar style to previous years, EJ has been developing her frustrating technique of building up this particular side of the nest! We apologise for any obstacles blocking your view of the rapidly-developing chicks but sometimes fame can go to a girl's head.
As the clouds part and the days warm up, EJ has been standing at the side of the nest allowing the chicks to soak up the sunshine and stretch their wings. On a number of occasions the chicks have seized this opportunity to indulge in squabbles.
If the youngsters weren't getting enough food, this sibling rivalry could have more serious consequences. However, Henry, reliable as ever, is delivering up to seven trout a day so these tussles are akin to brothers and sisters swiping each other over the head with pillows.
2004, the first time our pair raised chicks, saw Henry astounding the public by going against the textbooks and getting down to feed the chicks himself.
This year has been no exception and on a number of occasions, visitors and staff have been mesmerised by the sight of this awesome raptor flying in with a huge fish, ripping its flesh, gingerly stepping towards the chicks and with the utmost delicacy passing morsels to them with EJ looking on.

'visitors and staff have been mesmerised by... this awesome raptor flying in with a fish, ripping its flesh, gingerly stepping towards the chicks and with the utmost delicacy passing morsels to them'
We won't mention the times Henry has bought in a live, flapping fish and caught the chicks over the head with it...!
Sunday brought wonderfully sunny weather and as we took our first look through the scopes in the morning, we were greeted by three gaping mouths panting in the heat!
The staff were stunned at just how big it seemed the chicks had grown since the previous evening, because this was the first time we had glimpsed them craning their necks above the parapet of carefully-piled sticks without the use of camera aids.
The youngest chick is still noticeably smaller than the oldest two and a lot lighter in colour. This is merely because it is a few days behind in development but soon it too will develop their more distinctive, darker markings.
The oldest chicks have entered their black, scaly 'reptilian stage'. The word 'cute' seems no longer appropriate when referring to them! Soon it will be possible to see 'pin' feathers (growing feathers covered in a sheath) emerging amongst the down and before we know it they will be stretching those wings in anticipation of their coming migration down to West Africa...

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Monday, 19 June 2006

We apologise for our ospreys' 'projectile-pooing'

Over the past few days, the sunshine of last week has slowly faded to drizzle, grey and clouds. For EJ and Henry, this turn in the weather has presented a new challenge - keeping the family warm, dry and well-fed despite the poor conditions.
But once again, our birds remind us that they have had practice and are doing a champion job of feeding, brooding and looking three growing chicks.
The past week saw gorgeous sunshine and with little need for shelter, the three chicks, now about the size of a jackdaw, were up and about, stretching wings, scratching with their growing and sharpening talons with a proud EJ keeping constant vigil. Feeding times came regularly and Henry is still delivering six or seven fish every day.

The routine goes as follows: EJ begins calling for fish, Henry appears within moments and hands over the fish. The chicks gather round and each in turn gets fed, Henry flies to the camera tree to rest where he stays for an hour at a time, taking a well-earned rest before flying off to catch another.

'The whitewash has frustrated staff, volunteers, visitors and the viewing public of Springwatch, but alas it has been baked on in the heat of last week'

Often we are seeing two chicks being fed, while the third sits on the other side of the nest, seemingly uninterested. On closer inspection though, we usually see a full and bulging crop on the third chick. Busily digesting an earlier feed, the little one leaves the new meal to siblings. This is encouraging and suggests there is enough food to go round and prevents too much squabbling.

Tussling is inevitable, however, and family squabbles are common place but the young soon tire and turn their attentions to digestion, rather than aggression. The oldest chick has often turned its bill to EJ, pecking her wing and while mum seems unfazed at the moment - perhaps the youngster should watch out!

Of course, the quantity of meals the chicks are receiving has its drawbacks. The waste from these feeds has to go somewhere... and the chicks have chosen to aim for our nest camera. In our last entry, we apologised for EJ's nest building in front of the camera, and this week we must apologise for the youngsters' 'projectile-pooing!'

The whitewash has frustrated staff, volunteers, visitors and the viewing public of Springwatch, but alas it has been baked on in the heat of last week and we will be unable to do anything about this until we go to ring the chicks in a couple of weeks time!

We may get the use of our camera back if the rain showers of yesterday continue and we did see some improvements, but rain showers are no good for our three chicks.

Wet weather leaves the young in danger of getting cold and presents difficulties for Henry when he goes fishing, but we have seen some real teamwork from our pair. EJ has been spending hours at a time using her wings to shelter and brood the chicks, only resting when food comes. Yesterday, despite the showers, Henry delivered five fish, his shortest trip taking just 13 minutes. With EJ brooding, Henry fed the chicks.

Hopefully the following days will see a turn for the better in the weather, but if not, Henry and EJ will do their best and continue to feed and shelter the hungry and growing family.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Wings? What are they for?

Five weeks have passed since our chicks entered the big, wide world. Every day they are getting bigger and bigger and this week saw our eldest chicks trying to imitate Mum and Dad. As if to say, 'what are these for?', he or she spread their fluffy wings and flapped awkwardly.
Monday saw our nest become a target for an intruding male osprey. EJ became agitated and started alarm-calling while the chicks lay huddled together, motionless in the nest cup.
After several passes, the male retreated off into the distance. Henry was absent, away fishing, so the male returned twice more throughout the afternoon, but with EJ standing guard over the chicks, the unknown male gave up. With two parents present, the intruding male would not have considered returning after the first encounter.
'We will also find out if our chicks are male or female (and hopefully we'll also get a chance to clean the camera!)'
This week will see our chicks meet the 'neighbours' as we take the opportunity to climb up to the 40-foot nest and place coloured leg rings on them.
Although the parents may not appreciate this, we will be able to help our chicks in the future by monitoring their progress via their unique identification rings. We will also find out if our chicks are male or female (and hopefully we'll also get a chance to clean the camera!).
Once we are finished and the chicks are back safely in the nest, EJ and Henry will be at their side immediately.
Not hindered by the extra weight of their leg rings, our chicks will continue to get stronger and stronger and will be flying the coop sometime in mid-July.
So, although it is: 'One tall step for man, it will be one giant leap for osprey kind!'

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Monday, 3 July 2006

Yellow 8U, Yellow 8V, Yellow 8W

On Thursday morning, EJ suddenly started alarm-calling. She mantled her wings, then took off from the nest and circled in the air. Who was the intruder?
Well it wasn't another osprey, it was us! The three chicks were now old enough to be ringed and Thursday was the chosen day.
The assistant warden drew the short straw (funnily enough, he drew the short straw in 2004 as well...), and climbed up the ladder to bring the chicks down one by one. EJ's alarm calls had made the chicks instinctively play dead and they were no trouble to bring down to the ground.
They were all given metal leg rings on one leg and plastic yellow rings on the other. The oldest chick is now known rather unromantically as 'Yellow 8U', the middle chick as 'Yellow 8V' and the youngest as 'Yellow 8W'.
'The oldest chick is now known rather unromantically as 'Yellow 8U', the middle chick as 'Yellow 8V' and the youngest as 'Yellow 8W''
Wing and tail measurements were made and each chick was weighed. It was eventually decided that Henry and EJ had three little girls this year (or perhaps 'big girls', as female ospreys are larger than males).
Blinking in the morning sunlight and wondering what all the fuss was about, all three chicks were lined up for the photo shoot and then taken back up to the nest one by one.
Keen to see EJ back on the nest, we quickly packed up the ladders, and puffin' and pantin' we dashed back to the osprey centre, eagerly scanning the skies for a glimpse of EJ.
As the minutes passed, tensions rose. Surely EJ wouldn't be away from her girls for much longer? And we were right! Within an hour of the chicks being ringed, EJ was back on the nest to inspect her daughters' new bracelets and reassure them that all was right with the world.
Time passed and there was still no sign of Henry. Where on earth was he? Had he gone to visit his Welsh cousins? However, three hours later, our fears were allayed, when Henry finally arrived back home.
He delivered a trout to EJ, gave his three girls a quick check, then retired to the camera tree leaving EJ to feed the chicks. A big sigh of relief went up in the centre as life on the Loch Garten eyrie returned to normal.
It is now less than two weeks before the oldest chick (Yellow 8U) should be taking her maiden flight and, although those two weeks may seem like a lifetime, they will surely fly by (if you'll pardon the pun).
As the sun set on another Highland summer's day, our volunteers watched the three chicks settle into the nest for the night. Henry and EJ

could be seen silhouetted in the camera tree, side by side - proud parents that they are.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Wednesday, 12 July 2006

Life returned to normal at the Loch Garten Osprey Centre following last week's ringing.
The chicks were quite proud of their leg rings, showing them off to the general public via the nestcam, and this gave the osprey staff the perfect opportunity to spot which chick would be the first to fly.
Throughout the week, EJ and Henry went about their daily tasks, with Henry bringing in his usual early morning rainbow trout from the local fish farm and EJ bringing in pieces of twig and moss to keep the nest neat and tidy.
The chicks did their usual stuff, too, until one day one of them started to behave in a strange manner. She started to hop on one leg and shake the other, then she started to stamp on her own foot.
'A few frantic wingbeats, a nice breeze and she was off the ground. However, she then discovered gravity for the first time and dropped back into the nest cup'
What was happening? Was there a problem with the leg ring? Had her brief TV career gone to her head? No... she had a bit of bark stuck to her talon, and just like you and I trying to get the sticky toffee wrapper off our shoe, she was trying to remove the bark.
Eventually, she succeeded, then started to jump into the air. Was this in celebration of her newly-acquired bark-removing skill? No... she was trying to fly. A few frantic wingbeats, a nice breeze and she was off the ground.
However, she then discovered gravity for the first time and dropped back into the nest cup. The leg rings showed her to be 8U - teasing us, enticing us, tantalising the osprey staff into thinking we had a flier...
All week this continued. The staff had a sweepstake as to when she would fly, and each day our chicks would hover above the nest cup but go no further. That was until 2.15 pm on Monday 10 July, when she finally went!
After a week of preening, frantic wing exercises and staff teasing, 8U took her maiden flight. Fifty days after poking her tiny beak through the eggshell, she was up in the air.

She took a brief, circular route towards the camera tree and back to the nest. It was only 1 minute 30 seconds in total, but a flight all the same. 8U became our first fledgling and the proud mum sat in the camera tree looking on, a satisfied glow on her face: 'That's ma girl'.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Monday, 17 July 2006

Anything 8U can do...

It was once said that 'a week is a long time in politics' - well, it is also true in the life of an osprey chick.
As of Monday morning of last week, none of our chicks had fledged, they were still being fed by EJ and they had never experienced being mobbed. All that has changed for two of them.
Since her maiden flight on Monday, 8U has been going on longer and longer trips, and to give her the full experience of being an osprey, a few smaller raptors decided to mob her on Tuesday morning. She was OK, a bit spooked, but survived - just as well her sisters didn't see or they may think fledging is a bad idea.
Henry is starting to bring in more and more live fish, and EJ is beginning to let them feed themselves, on the whole, though she does pop in now and then to lend a hand.
The eldest sister is now a proper grown-up, flying, being mobbed and feeding herself - surely the others want to follow suit? '
On Wednesday, our second chick took her maiden flight. Not content with just jumping onto the nearest branch and hanging on as if her life depended upon it, she decided to make a glorious flight up and around the nest, a far better maiden flight than her elder sister made two days earlier - who said sibling rivalry was a thing of the past?
Everyone expected a similar show from 8W. Surely it would be Friday? Nope... Saturday? Nope... When?
On Sunday 16 July, the Osprey staff were sure 8W would fly. The weather conditions were perfect, there was a beautiful breeze blowing over the top of the nest and the centre was full of expectant visitors. She almost flew - there was a lot of wing-stretching and hovering over the nest, but unfortunately all she did was go up and down, landing back in the nest cup every time.
One visitor stayed for over five hours waiting for that maiden flight, only to be dragged off kicking and screaming by his partner. In true Arnie

spirit, he told me 'I'll be back' and sure enough... at 10 am on Monday morning, he popped up at the kiosk, only to be disappointed again - no flight today.
Either 8W is scared of heights, she likes having the plaice (groan) to herself, or she needs some Red Bull.
So when will she fly? Tuesday? Wednesday? Whenever it is, you can rest assured that you will be the first to know, until then... tempus fugit, or should that be Pandion haliaetus fugit? There's hoping.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Friday, 21 July 2006

'The [fish] eagle has landed [in the camera tree]'

'Thaxton... We don't have a problem...'
'This is one small step...'
...enough already. But I am excited, we are all excited. It happened at 8.58 am on Wednesday - our third and youngest chick, 8W, fledged . 'A full three minutes of glorious, beautiful flight, circle after circle around the nest as if to say 'What took me so long...?'
What a maiden flight it was! There were no frantic wing beats, no jumping and stretching - she simply hopped up on the post which houses the nest cam and took off.
A full three minutes of glorious, beautiful flight, circle after circle around the nest as if to say 'What took me so long...? I love it', then she landed as elegantly as she had took off, in the camera tree, and settled down next to her two sisters.
Richard Thaxton, Site Manager at Loch Garten, said: 'Phew! What a relief to finally see our third chick take to her wings, having kept us waiting an extra week after her sisters fledged. It was simply marvellous. The tension in the Osprey Centre recently has been palpable, with visitors spending hours waiting and watching, willing her to fly.
'After the huge disappointment of last year with no young fledged, it is wonderful to be back on track at Loch Garten with three more young ospreys entering the Scottish population - 84 in total from our nest now since it all began. My staff and I, our volunteers, as well as our visitors, are just completely thrilled by it all.'

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Friday, 28 July 2006

Fishing frenzy

On Friday, we saw the first fish to be caught by one of our chicks.
We see a bird flying in carrying a fish; it's Henry... but wait a second... we're mistaken - it's 8U! She lands on the nest with the fish and then flies off to the adjacent camera tree to enjoy her catch.
All the staff and visitors at the centre watched as she ate her 8'' brown trout from head to tail - it took her 15 minutes to devour it, but I'm sure she enjoyed every beakful. As every fisherman knows, the one you catch yourself always tastes the best.
Fresh from her fishing success, 8U decides that she will eat 'her' next meal from the same perch, so when Henry delivered a headless, 15'' brown trout to the nest, she stole it from her sisters and somehow flew off and landed on the camera tree and tried to eat the fish.
'The weight of the fish started to pull her one way, but she tried to compensate by pulling the other way... the fish slipped and 8U ended up falling from the branch, upside down.'
It was too big, too heavy and too awkward and as a result, she ended up straddling the branch, legs either side (ouch!). The weight of the fish started to pull her one way, but she tried to compensate by pulling the other way... the fish slipped and 8U ended up falling from the branch, upside down.
Fear not, it was only a split second before she corrected herself and flew off - it was funny... HONESTLY.
So funny so that I am sending the clip to 'You've Been Framed' and will claim £250 - we show it to our visitors and they laugh... and no ospreys were hurt in the making of the clip. Hopefully, 8U will have learnt a valuable lesson to not bite off more than she can chew.
Since then it has been a fishing frenzy. Henry is bringing in fish, EJ is bringing in fish and we know that 8U can fish too - at this rate, the rivers and lochs will be empty come August.
In between feeding, EJ has been kept busy with fending off intruders, well, unwelcome ospreys to be exact, who fly over the nest. I suspect they are just making their way off to west Africa early and EJ is making sure that they don't get any designs on her nest for next year.
Until next time... Adieu.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Sunday, 6 August 2006

If you want something doing properly...

Well since we last wrote, we have been inundated with people asking if EJ is still here. From our lads in Afghanistan to families in Canada, the question of when EJ will depart for west Africa seems to be on the tip of everyone's tongue.
As we closed up the centre at 6 o' clock this evening, EJ was still sitting in the camera tree.
Throughout the breeding season, EJ hasn't caught one single fish herself. Yet in the last two weeks, she has been catching at least one fish a day and that's only the ones that we see her bring back to the nest to share with the chicks.
On Tuesday, Henry had only brought back two fish by 3 pm - not many at all by his standards. The chicks should now be honing their fishing skills in preparation for their 3,000-mile migration in just a few short weeks, and it seemed as if Henry was trying to encourage them to head off to the fish farm.
'EJ arrived back on the nest - having been gone only 20 minutes - and deposited the BIGGEST brown trout we have ever seen. She looked over at Henry as if to say 'shouldn't this be your job?''
The three chicks were frantically food-soliciting from the nest but Henry sat in the adjacent camera tree, calmly preening his feathers. However, we had to laugh when 10 minutes later, EJ arrived back on the nest - having been gone only 20 minutes - and deposited the BIGGEST brown trout we have ever seen.
She looked over at Henry as if to say 'shouldn't this be your job?'
Having been shown-up by EJ, the next day Henry set out to prove that she might have speed, but he had stamina. Our volunteers phoned up at 9.30 pm to say that Henry had just delivered the 10th fish of the day!
At this point, all three chicks were clutching remnants of the day's catches, and none of them flew back to claim the fresh delivery from Henry. We know that the oldest chick, Yellow 8U, can now catch her own fish but the other two have yet to prove themselves.
With only a few weeks left before their body clocks will urge them on their migration, they will need to get their skates on (if you'll pardon the pun).

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

RSPB webcams keeping spirits up in Afghanistan

EJ and Henry have been online following the instalment of a CCTV camera overlooking their nest at the RSPB's Loch Garten reserve in the Highlands of Scotland.
The RSPB's online video footage of osprey chicks has been entertaining the troops in Afghanistan.
Birds of prey EJ and Henry have been online following the instalment of a CCTV camera overlooking their nest at the RSPB's Loch Garten reserve in the Highlands of Scotland.
The RSPB has received emails from soldiers serving in war torn Afghanistan, thanking them for the web-based coverage, which allows them to keep in touch with the wildlife of home.
Similarities between the behaviour of ospreys and humans is fascinating, and avid viewers have watched extra marital affairs, spats, feasting, the first flight and play over previous weeks.
The RSPB has received emails from soldiers serving in war torn Afghanistan, thanking them for the web-based coverage, which allows them to keep in touch with the wildlife of home.
Soldiers in Afghanistan have been keeping abreast of the latest sagas as they unfold with the use of in-depth narrative and images, meaning they can follow their interest and hobby whilst being many thousands of miles from home.
One serving officer, who has asked to remain unnamed for security reasons said, 'Thank you so much for the fantastic narrative about the Loch Garten ospreys, it is great to still be able to follow the sagas whilst serving in Afghanistan and we hope it will continue.'
Stuart Housden, Director of RSPB Scotland said, 'It makes us extremely proud to think that our osprey footage, beamed to the world from our beautiful reserve at Loch Garten, is keeping up the spirits of our troops in Afghanistan.
'We ensure that the camera coverage is enlivened by a regular and in-depth narrative to accompany the footage, as so many people have taken these fascinating birds to heart and want to know more about their domestic arrangements.'
The chicks will soon leave the nest for good to make their own way in the world. Firstly, they will migrate via the South of England and then to Spain and finally West Africa.

Source: RSPB Public Relations department
8 August 2006 Monday,

21 August 2006

EJ's our Freebird

I was having dinner with my friends, Ian and Jean Mustade, last Monday evening, relaxing on my day off from the Osprey Centre, when we decided to put on the 'Best of the 70s' CD.
The first track was The Chi-Lites 'Have You seen Her?' - my mind immediately turned to EJ (I need to get out more), and I realised I hadn't seen her. It was noon on Sunday when I last saw her - had she left? I thought I'd keep faith for a couple more days and see if she would surprise me (EJ, not Faith) and return to the nest.
My mind then began to wander to sunnier climes: The Gambia, Senegal - that is where she'll be heading. I don't know how long I was daydreaming but a elbow in the ribs brought me back to reality and a more prophetic moment I can't imagine... the next track on the CD was Hall and Oates 'She's Gone'.
I returned to the centre on Tuesday and it was confirmed, no sign of EJ - Wednesday morning... nothing. That's it then, her journey south had started.
'it was confirmed, no sign of EJ - Wednesday morning... nothing. That's it then, her journey south had started. '
Wednesday was pretty quiet really. Henry brought in a few fish and 8W took them. As I shut the gates on Wednesday evening, I couldn't help but think about EJ. I got into the car, put the radio on and was greeted by the guitar solo of Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'Freebird'. How appropriate.
If 'The Winner Takes It All' is the first thing that greets me tonight, I'm playing the lottery this week.
It has now been confirmed that both 8U and 8V have left for Africa, too. I can just imagine 8W sitting all alone on the nest singing 'All By Myself'...

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Thursday, 31 August 2006

All gone

I walked into the centre and all I could see were Branches. I looked closely - I saw two large Branches and two smaller ones.
It wasn't the tree I was looking at, it was the Branch family who had travelled all the way from southern England to be told that the osprey had just flown... they had missed them by minutes...
That's right, 8W eventually started her migration early last week. She had spent several days just sitting in the camera tree or on the nest, food-soliciting. Henry was bringing in fewer and fewer fish in an attempt to make her go and fish for herself, but we didn't see any evidence of this - then one day she was gone.
Had she flown off on a fishing trip? Had she started her migration? The jury was out, but after 36 hours without seeing her, I think we all agreed that she had started her trip to Africa. Good luck 8W!
Henry made his last appearance on Friday when he decided to visit the nest for one last time just to see that all of his little ones had flown. He sat majestically on top of the nestcam post and surveyed his domain.
'Henry made his last appearance on Friday... He sat majestically on top of the nestcam post and surveyed his domain'
He sent out a few calls, but there was no reply, they have flown. He then gave the visitors at the centre a display of flying which they will never forget. He rose from the nest and started to circle. As he rose higher and higher, his circles got larger and larger; he spiralled upwards into the sky until he became a small dot.
Then he was gone, heading due south with one thing on his mind... Africa.

Posted by Operation Osprey 2006

Monday, 4 September 2006

We thought it was all over... it is now

After we confidently proclaimed that Henry had taken flight to Africa on 25 August, he decided to appear again a full week later, to prove us all wrong.
On 1 September at 1 pm, our adult male chose to land on the nest, much to the surprise of the osprey staff and the glee of our visitors. He stayed on the nest for a full two hours before flying off in a south-westerly direction. Is he heading for Africa? Surely he is this time, but you never can tell with good old Henry.

Our staff will keep an eye out for him over the next two weeks whilst they prepare the Centre for closure but unfortunately, for our visitors, that is it for another year. The Centre closed at 6 pm on 3 September and as such, it is a time for fond farewells and thank-yous.

Farwell to EJ, Henry and our three young ospreys 8U, 8V and 8W - I'm sure you'll join me in wishing them all a safe journey to West Africa. They will remain in Africa for 2-3 years before returning to Scotland as adult birds, to look for a nest site of their own. It could be 2010 before they are seen again.

Ospreys head south on a broad front and will need to break their journey to feed. So if you live further south from Strathspey - whether further south in Scotland or further south still in England - ospreys might just turn up on your local patch. Check out lochs, lakes, reservoirs, fish farms and estuaries, and you never know, you might see our birds in passing. If you do see an osprey on migration south this year, if you get a chance to see the leg-ring and discover that it is one of our chicks - please feel free to contact us, we'd love to know how they are getting on.

All being well, both Henry and EJ will be back next year for another season. Being both eightyear-old birds, they have many a breeding season ahead of them, continuing their reign at Loch Garten.

And the thank you's... go firstly to the 100+ volunteers we have had the privilege of working with this year, from Alex to Yvonne, and all those in-between. We really could NOT have achieved the successes of 2006 without your invaluable help - THANK YOU ALL.

Thank you too, to all the people who came along to see us here at the Centre - every one of you added to the experience and the questions and feedback left by our visitors will only lead to a better experience for those visitors in the future.

And finally, our thanks go, in no small measure, to all our readers. Thank you for reading the osprey diaries, for your e-mails of support and encouragement (and suggestions!) and for generally supporting Operation Osprey 2006 by proxy - from our lads in Afghanistan, to Alan and Prue from just around the corner - your support and interest in our work is greatly appreciated.

We look forward to being back in touch with you all in March for the advent of Operation Osprey 2007!

Please note that, though the osprey webcams will stop running today, we hope to keep the squirrel feeder cam running through winter. There are also other webcams in different locations:

http://www.rspb.org.uk/webcams Posted by Posted on behalf of all staff and volunteers on the Operation Osprey 2006 team