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**White-Tailed Eagles on Exmoor**

by Exmoor National Park Ranger Charlotte Wray, for Exmoor Magazine

At a team away day at Pinkery in June 2021, we were working through our regular agenda: deciding work priorities, sharing ideas and having a good old catch-up. After lunch we took a wander down to the stream below when some of us spotted a huge bird flying over from Chains Barrow through the combe. “What the hell was that?”, “That’s too big to be a buzzard?!” The bird flew over the Barle and alighted in a beech tree. Luckily Ranger Rich had his thermal scope and we found the bird nestled in the trees where it remained frustratingly still – the size of its form on the scope was the only way to confirm the team’s first sighting of a white-tailed eagle.

I’ve seen a video of a farmer ploughing a field close to Simonsbath, when he spots a bird in the field. Perplexed, he thinks first that it’s a turkey, until it takes off and is lost for words — or rather lost for any words but expletives! Which is understandable when you see one for yourself. They are huge.

The white-tailed eagle – or sea eagle as it is sometimes known – is the fourth largest eagle in the world, with a wingspan up to 2.5 metres. These colossal birds, famously described as a flying barn door, are returning to our landscapes after a 250-year absence, with releases on the Isle of Wight by the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation (RDWF) and Forestry England, beginning in 2019. Many of these recently released juveniles have been exploring Exmoor, with six being spotted since 2020. Satellite tracking data by the team at RDWF show the eagles’ favourite spots include Hoaroak, Farley Water, Filleigh and Landacre.

For those of us who have been lucky enough to see the birds on Exmoor, to watch them move about the landscape so effortlessly, it is easy to imagine more of them in our natural spaces, joining other charismatic birds of prey like red kite, merlin and hen harrier – all of which I saw on Exmoor in the month since writing this (in May 2024). But, as with all
reintroductions, we have to wonder why their numbers dwindled in the first place.

Place names across the UK indicate a large and widespread presence throughout the country’s history, from Shetland’s Ernes Hamar (from the Norse meaning Eagle Rock) to Devon’s Yarnacombe (from the Old English meaning Eagle Valley). While loss of suitable habitat has inevitably played a part – draining of wetlands and changing use of land to increase food production – the primary driver of the bird’s demise seems to have been active persecution by humans from the sixteenth century onwards, perceived as they were to be competitors for food.

Juveniles up to around the age of five are nomadic, touring huge distances before eventually returning home to their place of birth to find a mate and breed. During this time they will mostly feed on mammals and birds, with carrion making up a sizeable portion of their diet, especially during their first winter. As each year passes, the eagles become more reliant on fish and other sea creatures.

This predilection for fish seems to have particularly aggrieved the Tudors, who set in motion various parliamentary acts related to the ‘preservation of Grayne’ and natural resources. Alongside this they published a list of ‘vermin’ with a fixed bounty paid for each head. Wildlife which consumed fish were particularly prized, with kingfisher, otter and white-tailed eagle bounties set between one penny and one shilling a head. Such persecution can quickly have an extreme impact on population numbers for a species who raise only one to three chicks per year (and only 40% reach adulthood).

Luckily we have moved on from most of the customs and laws which dominated Tudor life, and with reintroductions like those in Ireland and on the Isle of Wight, as well as healthy populations in continental Europe and in Scotland, it is hoped that this exquisite bird of prey will once again become a common sight across the UK. So don’t be surprised if you start to see them more regularly out on the moor, and mind your language as and when you do!

If you spot a white-tailed eagle on Exmoor, email details of your sightings
to seagles@roydennis.org.

Photograph caption

*Sea Eagles 01
The photo shows a white-tailed eagle with a pike.* (Photo copyright Trevor Goodfellow.)