

Orkney Field Club

Founded in 1959



Aim: To encourage the study and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the County

Orkney Field Club's third indoor meeting of the season attracted an audience of no less than fifty to the St Magnus Centre on Friday, 20th October to hear the first presentation of an informative and beautifully photographed talk by Eric Meek – with a considerable debt in the preparation to Aileen Hall – on “Orkney's Birds of Prey”.

Eric set his look at Orcadian raptors in the context of the total “British list”, and a remarkable fact to emerge was how the great majority of British birds of prey have been seen in these islands: of a total of 35, only three owls and six “diurnal” raptors – those that hunt by daylight – have never been spotted here.

Those accustomed to the owls of England may find it surprising that neither the Little Owl nor the Tawny Owl has been known to grace these shores, not least as the latter breeds as close as Caithness. But many owls, as Eric reminded us, are sedentary creatures, prospering through intimate knowledge of their territories: in strange lands, they cannot quickly learn enough of the countryside to feed well.

Of the six owls known to Orkney, each has its story to tell. The Scops Owl and Tengmalm's Owl have been extremely rare visitors, neither seen for a dozen years or more. On the other hand both the Snowy Owl and the Barn Owl are recorded in most years, albeit in very small numbers: perhaps the latter is the more likely to breed here one day, as they are now in Caithness and we have the habitat to suit them.

A much more regular visitor is the Long-Eared Owl, typically arriving in October or November from northern Europe, even as far as Russia. Good numbers may roost together, the record being 25 once in Binscarth Wood. They have bred occasionally but, perhaps reflecting climate change, seem to visit us a little less frequently.

Our one regular breeding owl is of course the familiar Short-Eared Owl. Eric explained the dominance of the Orkney Vole in its diet, and introduced us to the mystery of how the owls prosper on Hoy where there are no voles!

Turning to the diurnal raptors, Eric told us that all but one - the splendid Pallid Harrier – had been seen in a single location, on Rendall Ridge. Small birds and voles stock that larder well, and the steep eastern escarpment provides uplift for those crossing the waters of the North Sea.

A minority of these species are rare visitors, with less than one record a year: even within this group, some such as the Honey Buzzard and powerful Goshawk may be becoming more common. The latter is now a not uncommon breeder in mainland Britain, birds having originated from falconers' escapes and releases and having originally been of Czechoslovakian origin. Of the two species that have been the subject of proper reintroduction programmes, the Red Kite is an infrequent visitor; and another, the White-Tailed Eagle, was once a regular nester on Switha and Hoy. The Golden Eagle nested regularly on Hoy for 15 years from the mid-1960s, regularly raising

young – every one of which disappeared, as Eric put it, into the Black Hole of Caithness! Ospreys have never nested in the islands but are regularly seen on passage, especially in spring.

Marsh Harriers have bred here in the last ten years; and perhaps most familiar to drivers is the Buzzard to be seen around Binscarth. This species has enjoyed particular success south, and with a juvenile seen this year on Rousay, surely more regular breeding on Orkney is likely.

Thus Orkney has five regular breeding diurnal raptors:

A woodland bird, the Sparrowhawk has had to adapt its southern diet, with the meadow pipit replacing the blue tit and other songbirds which feed its English cousin. Large, flat nests are characteristic, and the coniferous plantations of Hoy are a stronghold.

Nationally, Peregrine Falcons have bounced back enormously after the damage of pesticides, but although we have some 15 pairs the number is more stable. What is holding them back? Eric surmised that there may still be contamination in the marine food chain, so that the kittiwakes and arctic terns that they take may slowly poison them. Equally likely is (literally) the impact of fulmar oil, as the young peregrines sit on the cliffs!

The Kestrel is having problems nationally, and here it is a very secretive bird, with its nests hard to find. They may nest in old buildings, on inland crags and sea cliffs and, uniquely in Orkney, on the ground in long heather; Eric had even found an underground nest, in desiccated peat!

The Merlin is a characteristic moorland raptor, and on Orkney the Meadow Pipit and the Skylark are its main food. Eric showed us population figures, with breeding pair numbers going from 15 to 6, then back up to 20 and now only a dozen – but this is unexplained. Might it be a cycle reflecting availability of prey, or perhaps weather-related?

Finally we came to what must surely be Orkney's "national bird", the Hen Harrier. This is well researched, with Eddie Balfour's great study the starting point, and much of interest to recount. The males are polygamous, the record male achieving seven mates – we saw a photo of two females sharing one nest! For all that, the females can be very aggressive to researchers, and Eric told us of strapping his rucksack to his head for it, rather than him, to be attacked by an angry bird!

Hen Harrier productivity was recognised as an issue in the 1990s, and subsequent PhD and undergraduate research has focused on rising sheep numbers, and the impact of spring weather, as important determining factors. In recent years, numbers have recovered to their level of twenty years ago, with some 70 breeding females, and birds on Rousay if not yet Eday.

The audience responded to Eric's talk with a range of thoughtful questions; and finally he and Aileen were warmly thanked for bringing together the beauty of nature, the rigour of science and splendid photographs into an excellent talk.