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THE LOCH-AN-EILEIN OSPREYS.

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AMONG Scotland's many beautiful places, the Rothiemurchus Loch-an-Eilein deservedly takes a high place; for here are present all the picturesque elements of Highland scenery—great mountain mass, steep crag, narrow pass, forest of fir and birch, tangle of juniper and heather, rushing stream, and placid loch with its solitary island crowned by the ruins of an old castle. And these elements are so arranged and combined as to make a picture that satisfies the fastidious eye of the trained artist, and delights the less sophisticated lover of nature. An additional item of interest is afforded by the fact that the southern turret of the ruined castle has often been the home of the Osprey (*Pandion haliaëtus*), one of the rarest and most beautiful of our birds of prey. There is, perhaps, no other of our raptors at once so interesting and so easy to observe. The dark, stern golden eagle will not brook observation, but sails off indignant on majestic wing; the smaller falcons and hawks dart in arrowy flight from the presence of man. But the Osprey allows of moderately near approach, and permits itself to be inspected as it stands or sits on its nest, or as it soars in wide curves above the loch. At rest or in motion, it is indeed a beautiful bird; the varied light and dark of its plumage, the large dark gleaming eye, the handsome, alert pose, the wide-spread wing, broad fan-tail, and powerful, easy flight—all

mark it as a bird of noble type, and make it very attractive and charming. Certainly its presence at Loch-an-Eilein gives the crowning touch to the beauties of that place; and, should the bird not come, one feels its absence as that of an intimate friend, and wishes the words of one of our minor poets were true—

“King Pandion is not dead;
Loch-an-Eilein to this day
Sees each year his wings outspread,
Hails his coming, owns his sway.”

In “The Vertebrate Fauna of the Moray Basin”, 1895, Mr. Harvie-Brown gave a summary of the history of the Loch-an-Eilein Ospreys up to that date; and I purpose here to supplement his records from notes made by me from that time to this, premising, however, that my jottings are merely those of a holiday-maker, and not the records of a professed naturalist.

I first saw the Ospreys in August, 1894. I was staying for that month at Loch-an-Eilein Gate, and had many opportunities of seeing the birds, either when I went for a morning swim in the loch, or in the afternoons, which were often spent at the loch side. When I was in the water the bird would fly above me, uttering its screaming cry. I was at first somewhat apprehensive of attack, but afterwards came to regard the flight of the calling bird as adding pleasure to the morning swim.

That year the birds had nested at the castle, and hatched two young ones. I saw the parent bird, presumably the female, feed the young with fish, and noted the gradual growth in the strength of voice of the young birds. On August 24th I saw one of the young birds make its first flight, and the other one trying its wings without rising from the nest. The next morning all the birds were flying. There was but one on the nest when I went to the loch just after 7 A.M., and that one at once rose and flew away. On August 26th, in the forenoon, three birds, I suppose the mother and her two young ones, were flying about near the nest when a heron flew across the loch and was driven away by the mother bird.

In 1895 I was in the same neighbourhood during August and part of September, but saw the Ospreys only once, as far as I can remember. They had built on the castle, but I have no certain information as to whether they had bred. About the middle of September a cormorant put in an appearance at the loch, and there were fears lest its presence should disturb the Ospreys. Mr. Hinxman, who was there at the time, advised that the cormorant should be shot; but I am told that its departure made this unnecessary. I understand that cormorants, though not previously unknown at Loch-an-Eilein, are somewhat rare visitors there.

In 1896 I was at Loch-an-Eilein during August, and saw the Ospreys several times. They had nested at the castle, and had hatched. I saw three birds flying together, but did not ascertain whether there were two young or only one. The probability is, however, that the three birds were the mother and two young, for I think that the male bird was less tolerant of observation, and usually kept out of sight.

In 1897 I was at Loch-an-Eilein during the latter half of April and during the whole of August. I am told that the two birds arrived on March 29th. They were still at the castle in the summer, and I often saw them. There was then certainly one young bird, and there may have been two. On August 9th, when I was near Loch Gamhna, the tributary loch to the south of Loch-an-Eilein, I saw the two Ospreys flying. One of them alighted on a dead tree near the loch, and was eating an eel. It seemed to grasp the eel between its claw and the tree, and tore at it with its beak, the eel dangling below the bough. At the foot of the tree I afterwards found the débris of fish. On August 18th I saw one bird fly to the nest on the castle, and shortly afterwards a second bird came to it, bringing a fish, which it carried in its characteristic fore-and-aft manner. Then the second bird flew about, dipping into the water, once somewhat deeply. I suppose it was attempting to catch fish, but it did not get anything. While I was watching the bird did not dive, but, flying

along just above the surface of the water, dipped its feet and legs. Once the under surface of the body touched the water, and several times just the points of the wings did so. The first bird rose from the nest, carrying the fish, and both birds flew away. On August 21st I twice saw the pair of birds flying very high. They rose so high that they were lost in the vertical distance. I have similarly seen herons circle upwards over Loch-an-Eilein till the eye could distinguish them no longer, and have often wondered what birds might be high above us and looking down at us.

In 1898 I was at Loch-an-Eilein during most of April, and in the neighbourhood all August and part of September. The Ospreys came on March 29th, and were busy building on the castle when I first saw them on April 9th. On April 11th, in the early morning, I watched them busy with stick and turf, and was amused to see difference of opinion between them as to "furnishing", the female not approving of the male's selection and placing of turf, he, of course, meekly permitting his arrangement to be altered. That morning I saw the male twice attempt to couple, but apparently without success. The following morning I saw the action a third time, and apparently successful. The male bird rose on wing a few feet above the female, and gently dropped towards her, she rising high on her feet to receive him. The action had about it a gracefulness and delicacy that was entirely in keeping with what I feel to be the general dignity that seems to belong to these birds.

In the summer I did not see the birds at all. Apparently they did not hatch at the castle nest; but four birds were seen flying together near Glen Feshie, and it seems probable that they had nested in that neighbourhood. In September, when it was certain that the birds were not using the castle nest and had apparently gone away, I obtained permission to visit the nest, and found it empty and bare, made of branches and twigs, with no lining of any kind.

In 1899 I was at Rothiemurchus during August and

part of September. This was the year of the forest fire, which began on August 24th and so seriously damaged the stretch of hillside on the south-east of Loch-an-Eilein (see *Cairngorm Club Journal*, January, 1900). I did not see the Ospreys that year at all. A pair of the birds came to the castle on or about April 3rd, and nested there. They were followed by a third bird. Opinions differ as to whether the third was a male or a female, the former seeming the more probable. There ensued much fighting, in the course of which the nest was damaged, and, according to one witness, the eggs were smashed and knocked down into the loch. The result of the fighting is not known; but after it the castle nest was deserted. It is said that another nest was used, of which I shall make further mention; but, as far as is known, there were no young ones produced. It may be noted that in May of this same year an Osprey was shot at Knoekespoek, and it has been suggested that the third bird was the mate of the one shot.

In 1900 I was at or near Rothiemurchus during most of April and all August. Several times in the spring I saw one Osprey at the castle nest, but apparently not building; and towards the end of the month I saw the two birds on the tree which I thought had been described to me as the one on which they had nested in the previous year. But they were not then nesting there, nor was there any trace of a nest in the tree, and no one seemed to know where they were nesting. At the end of my spring holiday, being desirous to know about this, I devoted one day to a careful search. Knowing the district well, I was able to choose a point that commanded a wide range of the possible nesting country. Here I spread a plaid, and lay on my back, field-glass in hand, carefully scanning the heavens. I was rewarded; for in the afternoon one of the birds flew into sight, carrying a fish in its claws, and settled on a tall tree. I watched it through the glass, and after a time it flew off to another tree, in the top of which I was delighted to see the nest. The bird remained there awhile, and then flew away, still carrying its fish. I made my way to the tree, the position of which I had carefully

noted, and scrambled up to the nest, which was built of biggish twigs, many of them nearly a yard in length, and was roughly lined with heather, loose straw, and the straw wrapper of a wine-bottle. Retiring from the immediate neighbourhood of the tree, I concealed myself among the heather, and remained on watch. After a time the two birds flew into sight, one of them still carrying a fish. They sailed about for some time, the one with the fish continually calling; but they did not go to the nest. I reported what I had seen to the Laird and to the keeper, and promised to keep the position of the nesting-tree a secret.

In the summer I did not see the birds at all, but I ascertained by inspection that they were not using the nest I had found in the spring. No one seemed to know anything of their nesting.

In 1901 I was at Rothiemurchus during April and August. In the spring I learned that an Osprey had arrived on April 1st, and I saw the one bird several times. It seemed to be building at the castle, and apparently had not visited the other nest. I was told that the men floating the timber from the burnt forest had seen this Osprey and a "black", *i.e.*, golden, eagle fighting over Ord Ban. In the summer I did not see the birds at all, and apparently there was but the one in the district.

In 1902 I was at Rothiemurchus in April and in August. A single Osprey came on April 4th, and I saw it several times at the castle nest. It had not used the other nest, which, indeed, was somewhat fallen to pieces. In the summer I did not see the bird at all, and apparently there was again but the one in the district.

This year I was at Rothiemurchus in April. The season was late, and the weather continually cold and stormy. The Osprey had not returned, and up to the time of writing it has not appeared.

Summing up these observations briefly, the record stands thus:—1894, two adults, two young; 1895, two adults, probably young; 1896, two adults, and young, probably two; 1897, two adults, and young, probably two;

1898, two adults and two young; 1899, three adults, no young; 1900, two adults; 1901, one adult; 1902, one adult; 1903, no Osprey.

When the birds resume their nesting at Loch-an-Eilein—as it is to be hoped they will do—they should, if possible, be protected even more carefully than in the past, for there is some reason to fear that their alternative nest has been plundered. It is also to be desired that a systematic record should be kept of such points as dates of arrival, of hatching, and of departure. This could probably be done by arrangement between the keeper and the tenant of the Loch Cottage.