

## HISTORY OF THE LOCH AN EILEIN OSPREYS.

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IN July, 1903, I had an article in this Journal giving an account of my observations of the Loch an Eilein ospreys from 1894 to 1903. I little thought then that I was perhaps writing the requiem of these noble birds, but it is the regrettable fact that ospreys have not re-visited Loch an Eilein since that time, and some of our best ornithologists are beginning to fear that the bird may be lost to our fauna. There is a vague rumour, which I have not been able to trace to any definite source, that ospreys were somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Cairngorms last year, and that their nest was robbed, but enquiries made then and since have quite failed to bring me any confirmation of the story.

The early history of the Loch an Eilein ospreys is mainly contained in Harvie-Brown's "Vertebrate Fauna of the Moray Basin," 1895, but there are also occasional references to the birds in other published writings. Unfortunately not a little of the information supplied to Harvie-Brown suffers from vagueness, inaccuracy, and confusion, and so his story is not as satisfactory as could be wished. I propose to attempt here a chronological analysis of what is known as to the history of the Loch an Eilein ospreys, with occasional references to their neighbours in Glenmore, drawing my information from Harvie-Brown's book, from my own observation, and from other available sources.

It may be noted as somewhat curious that Lachlan Shaw's "History of the Province of Moray," 1775, has no mention of the osprey, though it contains a special chapter on the Fauna. Also in Sir John Sinclair's (old) "Statistical Account of Scotland," 1791-99, there is no mention of ospreys, though other birds are named. Much of Harvie-Brown's information was obtained from Lewis Dunbar, who several times took ospreys' eggs at Loch an Eilein and at Glenmore.

Dunbar gave his information partly by word of mouth to Harvie-Brown at Loch an Eilein in 1892, and partly in two manuscript reports written in 1886 and in 1892; his statements, however, are not uniformly consistent among themselves, nor do they always agree with written contemporary records elsewhere; it was, indeed, scarcely to be expected that he would have precise and accurate recollection of all his nest riflings.

**1804.** The earliest reference that I know of is in Colonel Thornton's "Sporting Tour"; he heard of ospreys at "Loch Morlaix," in Glenmore, but apparently did not hear of them at Loch an Eilein.

**1808.** Mrs. Smith, (Elizabeth Grant), in "Memoirs of a Highland Lady," 1898, writes, "A low square tower at the end of the ruin supported an eagle's nest. Often the birds rose as we were watching their eyrie, and wheeled skimming over the loch in search of the food required by the young eaglets, who could be seen peeping over the pile of sticks that formed their home."

**1824.** John MacCulloch, the geologist, writing of the Castle of Loch an Eilein, says, "The eagle has built his eyrie on its walls."

**1842-48.** Ospreys built on the ruined lodge at Loch Merlich, seemingly the lodge on the south side of the Allt Mor; its ruins, or those of its successor, were cleared away last year.

**1843.** In this year Roualeyn Gordon-Cumming went to South Africa. Before this time—years uncertain, probably not long before—he had taken ospreys' eggs at Loch an Eilein.

In this year R. Carruthers, in his "Highland Note Book," says of the osprey and the castle, "She has long been a denizen of the ruined tower, and still remains."

**1844.** Thos. Macpherson Grant wrote to Dr. Gordon reporting ospreys at Loch an Eilein, and at other lochs in Badenoch, specially mentioning Loch Insh, and also saying that there were several pairs in Abernethy Forest.

**1845.** "The New Statistical Account" says, "The osprey

builds her nest and nurtures her young on the top of one of the turrets of Loch an Eilein Castle, and supplies herself with food from the neighbouring lakes and streams."

**1846.** Lewis Dunbar said that in this year he first took eggs from the Loch an Eilein nest. It seems, however, that this really occurred in 1848, as Dunbar's reported dates are all two years wrong.

**1846-7.** There are no records for these two seasons.

**1848-52.** For these years some of the information is chronologically uncertain, and the different statements irreconcilable. One year the ospreys deserted Loch an Eilein because of timber-floating, went to Loch Morlich, and built there, and had their nest robbed by Dunbar. But Harvie-Brown also says that the birds went to Loch Gambna, and built on a tree by its south-east shore, a tree that was blown down about 1879. In another of these years, or more probably in each of two or three other years, perhaps 1849, 1850, 1851, both the Loch an Eilein and the Loch Morlich nests were occupied, and Dunbar took the first clutch from each nest. At this period it is said that there were no jackdaws at the castle, though many occupied the neighbouring cliffs. It is quite doubtful whether the Loch an Eilein ospreys and the Loch Morlich ospreys were ever the same pair.

**1848.** Dunbar's first harrying of the Loch an Eilein nest really took place in this year. He swam across to the castle, and carried off the eggs in his bonnet. The woman living at the neighbouring cottage saw him come from the water, and fled. The eggs were sent to Charles St. John. The same year Dunbar made his first harrying of the nest on the ruined lodge at Loch Morlich. In this year died the first Sir John Peter Grant of Rothiemurchus.

**1849.** In May of this year Dunbar took three eggs from a nest in an old fir-tree at Loch Morlich. According to a statement by Harvie-Brown of the custodian of the Natural History Museum at Newcastle, there were also two young birds just hatched in the same nest. It seems unlikely that five eggs would be in the one clutch, but Harvie-Brown, while reporting these two statements in different parts of his

book, makes no remark as to the improbability, apparently not recognising that the two statements refer to the same year. The eggs were sent to St. John, in Sutherland, and he sent one to Hancock of Newcastle, from whom it passed to the Newcastle Museum. Dunbar says that the ospreys moved their young to the nest on the ruined lodge, though he does not definitely say that he is referring to this same year. He climbed up to the nest, though he does not say why, and then the birds removed their young to some place unknown.

In the same month Dunbar made his second harrying of the Loch an Eilein nest, getting three eggs, and sending them to Hancock. He also visited an old breeding site, apparently near Loch Gamhna, in a tree that Harvie-Brown says has since been cut down.

**1850.** Dunbar with Mr. Hancock and Dunbar's brother or cousin visited old breeding sites near the Nethy, and then went on to the Loch Morlich Lodge. Here they shot the female bird, and took two eggs from the nest, and apparently carried off the nest also. On dissection, the bird was found to contain another egg, Dunbar says "beautifully marked," but Hancock says "not shelled."

In this year also Dunbar made his third harrying of the Loch an Eilein nest, getting three eggs, which were sent to Hancock.

**1851.** Dunbar made his fourth harrying of the Loch an Eilein nest, getting two eggs, which were given to Mr. Wolley, who apparently was staying in the neighbourhood, but declined to accompany Dunbar in his visit to the loch. Wolley says in his "*Ootheca Wolleyana*" that he refused, "considering my position there, . . . the more so as I suspected the proprietress protected the birds, and I have been since assured that there was a man appointed on purpose to take care of them." Dunbar's visit on this occasion was at 3 a.m., and in a snowstorm.

There is some confusion in the records of the Loch Morlich nesting and harrying of this year. Wolley certainly had one egg from Loch Morlich, got by a shepherd, and sent to

Wolley apparently by Dunbar's brother or cousin, but Harvie-Brown's accounts leave it doubtful whether, besides this, Dunbar also sent to Wolley eggs, or even two clutches of eggs from Loch Morlich.

In this year a new lodge was built at Loch Morlich against the old one.

**1852.** Dunbar made his fifth and last harrying of the Loch an Eilein nest, getting three eggs, and sending them to Wolley. He went to the nest at night; Wolley writes, "At 11.35 p.m., very dark, and no moon. Had cramp in return, and was hauled out by his cousin," who had accompanied him. Dunbar wrote to Wolley, "The cock bird flew away before I reached the island; and after I climbed up to the top of the ruin, and was just at the nest, I put out my hand to catch the hen, but when she felt me she gave a loud scream, and flew away also."

Gordon-Cumming also robbed the nest this same year, and this severe treatment probably deterred the ospreys from returning the next year.

Wolley also received a single egg this year from Dunbar's brother William, but there is no record of where it was obtained.

**1853-62.** There is no record for these years.

**1863.** Peter Anderson, the joint-author of the classic "Guide to the Highlands," in his "Memoranda of an Excursion to the Grampians and Strathspey in July, 1863," published in this Journal in July, 1903, writes thus of Loch an Eilein Castle, "the little islet, with the most picturesque tree-filled shell of its old castle, the walls tenanted by a couple of small eagles, which to a day every year—1st to 3rd April—return to hatch their brood in their insular eyrie. I accordingly saw a fledgling keep a dignified state on the ruined wall."

**1864-71.** There is no record for these years.

**1872.** Lord Stamford, then the sporting tenant of Rothiemurchus, shot one of the birds, but, according to Harvie-Brown, without knowing what bird he was shooting; the bird rose suddenly from the hollow of a mountain stream

among trees, and was shot at sight without recognition; the sportsman regretted the result of his hasty shot.

**1873-78.** There is no record for these years.

**1879.** In *The Scotsman* of June 9th, 1879, there appeared an article, unsigned, but quite obviously written by Mr. Jolly, H.M. Inspector of Schools, giving an account of a visit to Loch an Eilein, where the ospreys had that season hatched two young, one of which, however, was later found dead on the shore. On June 12th, in the same paper, appeared a letter to the Editor, protesting against the publication of information as to the breeding-place of the ospreys, lest mischief should ensue. In *Good Words* for April, 1880, Mr. Jolly gave, under his own name, an extended account of the visit previously reported in *The Scotsman*. It may fairly be said that Mr. Jolly's article first made the Loch an Eilein ospreys known to the general public, but it is a moot point whether the ospreys have or have not benefited by the publicity.

**1880.** In August, 1880, Mr. Jolly again saw the ospreys at Loch an Eilein, where they had reared two young. Of this second visit Mr. Jolly gave an account in *Good Words* for May, 1881, (Harvie-Brown by some curious error says September, 1880), with an excellent drawing by Mrs. Blackburn, showing the "fore and aft" manner in which the bird carries a fish.

**1881.** The ospreys were at Loch an Eilein, but I do not know whether they reared any young.

**1882-4.** There is no record for these seasons, but in 1892 Mr. Charles Grant, younger son of the second Sir John Peter Grant, in a letter to Harvie-Brown, said in somewhat vague terms that about this time the Loch an Eilein nest was deserted for some few years.

**1885 or 1886.** There is reason to believe that in one of these years the birds nested near the north-west corner of Loch Gamhna, but did not breed. Harvie-Brown and Norrie photographed the remains of this nest in 1893.

The Rev. Dr. Forsyth, whose death is noticed in this number of the Journal, and who had great knowledge of and

interest in the district, in 1885 wrote to Harvie-Brown that until just before the time of writing ospreys had bred in the Abernethy forest, and that even then he doubted whether the Loch an Eilein birds were the only ones in the district.

**1887.** The ospreys bred at Loch an Eilein, and the eggs were taken. Harvie-Brown seems to suggest that the birds then went to Loch Gambhna, and that their eggs were taken there also.

**1888.** The story of this year is specially interesting, and was reported, but not quite accurately, to Harvie-Brown by Mr. Chas. Grant in 1902, in the letter already mentioned. Two female birds came on April 7th, and fought till one was killed. The dead bird was picked up, according to Mr. Grant, by William Grant, a local tailor, and is now preserved as a mounted specimen in The Doune. The same day a male bird arrived, and the next day another male. The progress and end of the combat between the two males seems unknown, but the surviving pair after a few days deserted Loch an Eilein, and bred at Loch Gambhna, rearing three young. One little point may be corrected in this account: the man that got the body of the slain hen-bird was Peter Grant, mason, son of old Mrs. Grant, then and for some years later resident at the Tea Cottage. This information I had from those who saw him carrying the bird to The Doune.

**1889.** The ospreys were seen at Loch an Eilein and at Loch Insh; they nested at Loch Gambhna, and the eggs were taken.

In August of this year an osprey was shot at Lower Cabrach on the Deveron.

**1890.** According to Mr. Chas. Grant, the ospreys bred in Rothiemurchus, but not at Loch an Eilein. According to a statement in the *Elgin Courant* of May 24th, 1892, three birds came, and one was killed in fight. I do not know what authority there is for this.

This year an osprey was shot at Meyen, on Lower Deveron.

**1891.** The birds were not at Loch an Eilein; they bred, presumably at Loch Gambhna, and the eggs were taken.

**1892.** The birds came to Loch an Eilein, but were "dis-

turbed," and left again. Harvie-Brown's statements about this year are not clear. Apparently he says both that the birds bred at Loch Gamhna, and also that he was told there that the birds had not used the Loch Gamhna nest for ten years. That same year also he was told by the keeper that the Loch an Eilein nest was all blown down, and yet the same day he and Dunbar saw "plenty of nest," and an osprey flying there. The same month he saw evidence of the shooting of an osprey in that neighbourhood; his text does not say where, but his illustration places it in the Richmond and Gordon property. He saw also another nest in the middle of the Rothiemurchus forest.

**1893.** The ospreys returned to Loch an Eilein at what Harvie-Brown calls "their usual time, *i.e.*, between the 15th and 16th of April." Hinxman, however, writing to Harvie-Brown says, "their first appearance in spring is very regular, —between April 4th and 6th." According to Hinxman, only one bird came in 1893, and it stayed but a short time.

In April, 1893, the Zoological Society of London awarded silver medals to Donald Cameron of Lochiel, and John Peter Grant of Rothiemurchus, "in recognition of the efforts made to protect the osprey in their respective districts." The John Peter Grant here referred to was the son of the second Sir John Peter Grant, who had died in the preceding January. The medals were to be presented on June 22nd, but the laird died on June 11th, and the present laird, also John Peter, succeeded to the estate, and received the medal.

**1894.** In August of this year my previous set of notes began. The birds had been seen in the spring, and reported to Harvie-Brown by Hinxman, William Douglas, and Colin Phillip. Two young ones were hatched at the castle nest.

**1895.** This year the ospreys hatched at the castle nest in June. They were photographed by O. A. J. Lee. Apparently there were again two young birds.

**1896.** The ospreys hatched at the castle nest. There were two young birds.

**1897.** The two birds arrived on March 29th, and hatched at the castle nest; probably there were two young birds.

**1898.** The two birds arrived at the castle nest on March 29th, but apparently they had no young there. Four ospreys were seen flying together near Glen Feshie, but their place of breeding seemed unknown.

**1899**—the year of the Rothiemurchus forest fire. Two birds arrived on April 3rd, and nested. A third bird arrived, and there was much fighting, in the course of which the nest was damaged and the eggs were smashed. It is not known whether the birds nested elsewhere. In May of this year an osprey was shot at Knockespock.

**1900.** Two ospreys came to Rothiemurchus, and one of them visited the castle nest several times. They did not breed there, nor, so far as is known, anywhere else. They nested elsewhere, as I have told at some length in my previous article.

**1901.** Apparently only one bird came to the castle nest, arriving on April 1st, but seemed to be mateless. It was seen fighting with a golden eagle.

**1902.** A single osprey came to the castle nest on April 4th, and apparently remained mateless.

Since 1902 no osprey has been seen at Rothiemurchus, but in September, 1904, one was shot near Guildford, in Surrey.

This finishes my story—a story of such ruthless persecution and of such altogether inadequate protection that the wonder is that the ospreys have survived so long. It will be a matter for serious regret if we lose these birds, but lose them we shall—even if we have not already lost them—unless this persecution is prevented, and the birds are given a fair chance to continue the course of life that adds such a charm to that most beautiful of Highland beauty-spots—Loch an Eilein.