

THE RETURN OF THE OSPREY

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PROBABLY few Scottish climbers have not heard of the recent nesting of a pair of ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) in the Spey valley. This is undoubtedly the most important ornithological event that has occurred in the Cairngorms area recently, for it marks the welcome return, after a long period of years, of a bird which was thought to be permanently lost as a British breeding species. Not since 1899 have ospreys bred in the Cairngorms region, and almost fifty years have elapsed since the last fully authenticated nesting of a pair of our native birds. This was at Loch Arkaig in 1908. It is possible that a pair or two may have bred occasionally since then, for example at Loch Loyne some time between 1910 and 1916, and another pair, almost certainly of Scandinavian origin, are said to have bred at Loch Luichart in 1926. But the people who witnessed these events so zealously guarded the birds that details were kept secret and no attempts made to establish definite proof of breeding. It seems, too, that in the early 1920's a pair of ospreys probably bred under protection in woods by the River Deveron, in Banffshire, and here again the secret was so well preserved that it remained unpublished until only three years ago.

It may be wondered why such great secrecy was considered desirable. The answer is obvious when we briefly review the past history of the species in Britain. Until about 150 years ago the osprey or fish-hawk was a common breeding bird in the Highlands; one naturalist, writing in 1832, stated that a pair or two were to be found at most lochs. The large nests were usually built in a dead tree at a loch edge, or on a rocky islet, or sometimes on a ruined building; but they were never placed close together, for, unlike ospreys in some other countries—notably in North America, where a colony of 300 pairs has been recorded—the Scottish birds were solitary nesters. Besides nesting in the Highlands, several pairs also bred at a few suitable lochs in the Lowlands and nested as far south as Kirkcudbrightshire. But only until the rot set in. Then, during the next hundred years, game-preserving and specimen-collecting were jointly responsible for the virtual extermination of this once common Scottish bird. The facts make a nasty blot on Scotland's record, and England, although it had no breeding

ospreys after the end of the eighteenth century, has equally small cause for pride—twice yearly a barrage of English guns took their toll of the ospreys moving northwards or southwards on migration.

People like Charles St John, a well-known nineteenth-century sportsman, were largely responsible for the extirpation of the bird. St John's words on the osprey, written almost a hundred years ago in his "Sportsman and Naturalist's Tour in Sutherland," make strange reading to-day: "Why the poor osprey should be persecuted I know not, as it is quite harmless, living wholly on fish, of which every one knows there is too great an abundance in this country. . . ." St John's hypocrisy knew no limits: five pages farther on he described shooting an osprey and robbing its nest. Then he lamented, "I was really sorry I had shot her."

His sorrow was short-lived. Three weeks later he was again in Sutherland, again shooting ospreys and robbing their nests of eggs and young. It is believed that after St John's visits (made in 1848) ospreys returned to breed no more in Sutherland.

Probably the best-documented osprey nest in Scotland was the one on Loch an Eilein Castle, in Rothiemurchus, which was first described in Elizabeth's Grant's "Memoirs of a Highland Lady." In Vol. 5 of this *Journal* C. G. Cash reviewed the history of the Loch an Eilein nest from the early years of the nineteenth century until the final disastrous nesting in 1899, when a third osprey intruded on the breeding pair. In the fighting which ensued the eggs were smashed, unluckily. I say "unluckily" for good reasons. During the previous fifty years the nest had been robbed on at least a dozen occasions (St John and his friend Lewis Dunbar being involved in several robberies) and a few birds shot. And the unfortunate destruction of the eggs in 1899 by the birds themselves may have proved the final straw, for, although a pair returned in 1900, they did not attempt to breed, nor did they again try to do so. Only a single bird returned in 1901 and 1902, and thereafter the visits ceased.

But although the ospreys stopped nesting in Scotland a small but regular passage of foreign birds continued, becoming more evident in the past ten years or so. The osprey is a migratory species of world-wide distribution, nesting in suitable localities in all five continents; and it is known that the birds which breed in northern Europe migrate in autumn as far south as tropical Africa. On their return in spring some of them pass across the Central Highlands, usually singly, and continue up the east coast to Orkney and Shetland.

Thence they cross to Scandinavia. *En route*, however, an odd bird occasionally remains for a few days, sometimes for a week or longer, at some particularly attractive loch in the Highlands. In this connection it is interesting to note that, although ospreys apparently never bred on Deeside, one bird stayed and fished at a Deeside loch for a whole week one spring not many years ago.

Aware that migrant ospreys had begun to frequent lochs for short periods, several ornithologists came to believe that it would be only a matter of time before a pair or two found satisfactory nesting sites and decided to stay for the season. One of these was Mr P. W. Sandeman, Honorary Secretary of the recently dissolved Rare Birds Protection Committee of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club, and an indefatigable worker in the cause of bird protection. Mr Sandeman's conviction was so strong that he erected a "cartwheel" nest-site at two different lochs to supply an additional inducement for birds to stay. These "cartwheel" nest-sites actually are cartwheels, suitably camouflaged, which are securely fixed some 12 to 20 feet up in a dead tree at the edge of a likely loch. In countries where the osprey still nests, this type of artificial site has proved a considerable attraction, and there appears to be no reason why it should not prove successful here too. So far, however, they have not been used, and as I write I learn from Mr Sandeman that one, temporarily dismantled last summer, has not yet been re-erected, although it will be in the near future.

This brings us up to the recent nesting of the Spey valley ospreys. The Spey valley lies on one of the osprey migration routes, and since it provides numerous suitable nesting sites close to lochs well stocked with fish, it is hardly surprising that it should be the first of the former breeding places in which recolonisation has been attempted. The pioneering pair were first known to breed in 1954, choosing a typical site—a pine tree beside a loch—in which to build their nest, which was discovered by the son of a well-known authority on Highland birds, Captain Nethersole-Thompson of Rothiemurchus. According to Captain Thompson, breeding was successful that year and two young birds eventually flew from the nest.

In 1955 the birds returned to the Spey valley and again attempted to breed, but this time unsuccessfully. The previous year's nest was not used, a dead pine in the Slugan Pass, near Loch Morlich, being selected on this occasion. This site later received some publicity in the Scottish press and has since become well known. The normal breeding season of the osprey in Scottish latitudes is late April and

early May, but, oddly enough, the 1955 pair were not seen constructing their nest until early in June, an abnormally late date, and no eggs were laid in it. Consequently, it is thought the pair may have built an earlier nest at some other spot, deserted it for some reason, and then built a second nest, the Slugan one, too late in the season to breed.

That may well be so, if we may judge from events in 1956. For, that year, the pair reappeared early in spring and tried to breed once more, building a new nest and laying a clutch which, later, mysteriously vanished without trace. The birds suffered some disturbance at this nest, however, and a possible explanation for the disappearance of the eggs is that they were stolen by hoodie crows at a time when the ospreys were frightened away by people wandering about in the vicinity. On losing their eggs the ospreys commenced building a fresh nest in another tree some distance away, but this second attempt at nesting was eventually abandoned and the birds disappeared.

It is to be hoped that these most recent failures do not deter the ospreys from returning and trying yet again. For ospreys are magnificent birds. Seen at a distance, they superficially resemble a small golden eagle, for their wing span measures up to 6 feet and the plumage of their upper parts is dark brown. But the markedly angled wings are narrower than the eagle's, and their snow-white under parts—which are marked only with a faint brown band across the breast—and their whitish head contrast strongly with the brown above and provide diagnostic features which prevent confusion with other large predatory birds. And their hunting habits are quite characteristic. The osprey is the only large, hawk-like bird we have which normally fishes, and when fishing it usually flies about 50 to 100 feet above the surface of the water, sometimes flapping its wings, sometimes gliding, and often hovering like a giant kestrel when it spots a fish swimming about under-water. Its plunge for prey is sometimes spectacular; it may enter the water with a mighty splash, feet first, and submerge completely; at other times it may snatch a fish from near the surface so adroitly that little more than a ripple disturbs the water. Once caught, a fish is held secure by the bird's toes, which are armed with horny spikes to grip such slippery prey.

Its fishing is not always successful, however. Last summer I watched one of the Strathspey birds fishing on several different days, and all the plunges I saw went unrewarded. Besides fresh-water

lochs, where trout and other fishes up to about 3 lb. in weight are caught, the osprey also fishes in the sea; and it feeds a little on other prey like crustaceans, frogs, young water-birds, and small rodents. But it is quite harmless to game-birds, and, in fact, to practically all adult birds, no matter what species. The bird I watched in the Spey valley gave a fair sample of the species' behaviour in this respect. It was frequently mobbed by lapwings and black-headed gulls, both singly and in flocks, yet it never once turned on its tormentors. Nor did I ever see it attempt to pursue any of the small passerines which are so abundant in the area.

There is no doubt whatsoever that a bird like the osprey will make a fine addition to the breeding birds of the Highlands. Knowing this, and aware that the matter is of interest to many mountaineers—for the birds have been nesting in a locality frequently traversed by climbers—the Editor asked me to make this contribution to the *Journal*. It has been a pleasure to do so, although the story reads a bit grimly in places—of persecution of the birds in the past, and disturbance during the present. And the future of the osprey in Scotland is still too shadowed with uncertainty to make speculation worth while; the most that can be hoped for just now is that the pioneering birds will be left in peace should they come back and try again in future seasons.