

we headed up a short rise. We then worked together to the finish line and those last few miles flew past. If only I had managed this at the start of the ride.

At the finish line, Des came up to me and asked how I'd found the race. I felt happy to be finished but knew I'd been below my best, so there was not the elation you sometimes get when you know you've put in a good performance. I was frustrated with my bike ride, knowing I could have gone harder if I'd been more tactically smart.

However, Dan raced well to finish 5th, and Adrian had pulled away from me on the bike ride and finished 10 minutes ahead. We secured 2nd Open team prize, which felt satisfying. As we drew out of the car park to head home, our thoughts were already turning to the 2015 event.

Some results of the 2014 Highland Cross

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|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| First Gent | Joe Symonds 3h:19m:17s |
| First Lady | Claire Gordon 3:57:18 |
| First Veteran Gent | Dan Whitehead 3:39:24 |
| First Veteran Lady | Claire Whitehead 4:11:18 |
| First Open Team | Nevis Cycles |
| Second Open Team | Bike Station, Ballater |
| First Mountain Rescue Team | Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team |

Conversation With An Eaglet

Eric Jensen

I was deeply unsettled. The referendum on Scottish Independence was looming and I just had to get away. North-west Sutherland beckoned and at short notice I arranged accommodation at Bettyhill. From books and scientific papers I had previously worked out the location of several golden eagle home ranges, so here then was an opportunity to examine them further.

My passion for *Aquila chrysaetos* was kindled in 1967 on reading Seton Gordon's second book, "The Charm of the Hills". (I wrote to

Mr. Gordon and received a kind reply; we exchanged about 15 more letters and I finally met him in 1975 at the Invercauld Festival Theatre, Braemar, where he delighted an audience with magic lantern slides of the golden eagle). For about 20 years goldies became the prime objective of my outings to the Scottish hills, where I witnessed most aspects of golden eagle activity, from hunting, to mating and rearing young. But until that September I had not actually conversed with one!

In "Eagles, Hawks and Falcons of the world" Brown and Young state that the golden eagle is generally a silent bird, only occasionally uttering a loud, clear, yelping call. In human language "tsewk" describes the sound fairly well. The description of golden eagle mating given in Watson's "The Golden Eagle" states that the female emits a "characteristic but quiet whistling call" during copulation. The only golden eagle mating episode I have so far witnessed occurred in the late 1970s in Glen Esk. It was a sunny, windless, mid-March day and the only sounds to be heard were a tumbling stream and, as my nature diary faithfully records, one of the birds was uttering a loud, intermittent scream-like call.

Whilst at Bettyhill, I visited six golden eagle home ranges. Two of these were towards Foinaven, three were in the vicinity of Ben Hope and Ben Loyal, and one was further east. Some days I saw only eyries; on other days adult birds were also in evidence. Coincidentally, single adult goldies which I encountered in two separate home ranges were each being attacked by a peregrine falcon. However, the highlight of that eleven day trip was the discourse I enjoyed with a juvenile golden eagle, an eaglet.

Two years previously I had visited a particular hill in the company of Hella Alexander and Vilma McAdam. After only a short walk from where we had parked the car, a beautiful, adult golden eagle sailed out to greet us from a steep hillside above some birch trees. It circled above us for a short time before spiralling upwards, and then setting course to disappear across the hill. Two years later - avoiding the Referendum hype - I returned to the same locality for the purpose of searching the far side of that same hill.

The ground was very wet and the moorland vegetation remained tall. It was difficult going for several kilometres as I worked my way round the hillside. Eventually, a small valley came into view and I

made my way up it to check some rock exposures. These were inspected for eagle signs with negative results. A little further on a small corrie appeared. It had much steeper rocks and on scanning them with binoculars I spotted a bulky eyrie in the middle of a small precipice.

By lying against a boulder on the moor I steadied myself to focus on the pile of sticks. The heather stems in the upper part of the nest looked brown and fresh compared with the grey stems below and white down feathers were adhering to the nest perimeter. Clearly this eyrie had been used earlier that year. But there was no sign of an eagle - yet!

Looking further up the valley I saw some scattered rock outcrops and decided, for the sake of completeness to view them more closely. Ten minutes later I was standing opposite a low cliff and scanning the rock, looking for whitewash, which might have suggested an eagle roost.

Suddenly I heard it, "Tsewk, tsewk, tsewk". I recognised at once the call of a golden eagle, but where was the sound coming from? I scanned all around but nowhere could I see the bird. The call continued for a few minutes and then I could not resist replying. I turned towards the direction from which the calls seemed to be coming and mouthed my best "Tsewk, tsewk, tsewk". There was an immediate response which caught me somewhat off guard !

The small cliff was echoing my call back into the valley where I stood. It was actually very helpful as it helped perfect my imitation ! The originator of the "tsewk" seemed to become intrigued by the echoing sounds. Then, a handsome golden eagle flew into sight. Its dark chocolate colouration with prominent, white, wing patches and broad tail band confirmed that it was an eaglet of that year, and had almost certainly fledged from the eyrie viewed ten minutes earlier.

The eaglet circled round about 60 metres above the ground. It was clearly looking down at me and calling at the same time. Of course, I responded! Wouldn't you? This went on for several minutes and the eaglet then decided to land at the top of a nearby slope. For five further minutes we continued to converse with one another, although our vocabulary was somewhat restricted. Neither of us seemed to be bored with the conversation, though!



Suddenly the eaglet sprang into the air, opened its huge wings, swung round and glided out of sight. Silence prevailed and for five more minutes I stood perfectly still just enjoying the very recent, precious memory. Then a feeling of intense loneliness overwhelmed me. I turned towards the rock face and commenced “tysewking” afresh. After a couple of minutes, back flew the eaglet, calling down to me and circling as before. I was euphoric. My “ friend” had returned!

It was to be short lived though and the eaglet soon flapped off towards the head of the valley. This was in the direction of a very bright sun and the eaglet was quickly lost to view. After some 45 years of studying the magnificent golden eagle, the very spirit of the hills, I had finally managed to converse with one: my intimacy with the species was complete.

◀ *This photograph of a juvenile golden eagle was taken by the late Neil Cook, who for many years was senior ranger on Balmoral estate, and is reproduced with kind permission of Denise Cook, Neil’s elder daughter. Neil was a superb photographer and naturalist and he was also engaged in falconry. Falconry friends, who owned and flew golden eagles, would arrange for Neil to look after their eagles, which would often be released during falconry sessions to catch prey in Glen Muick and elsewhere.*

The photograph shows one such bird, a juvenile, which during snowy conditions has caught a mountain hare. In true raptor fashion the eaglet is tearing at the hare whilst mantling its prey with its great wings.