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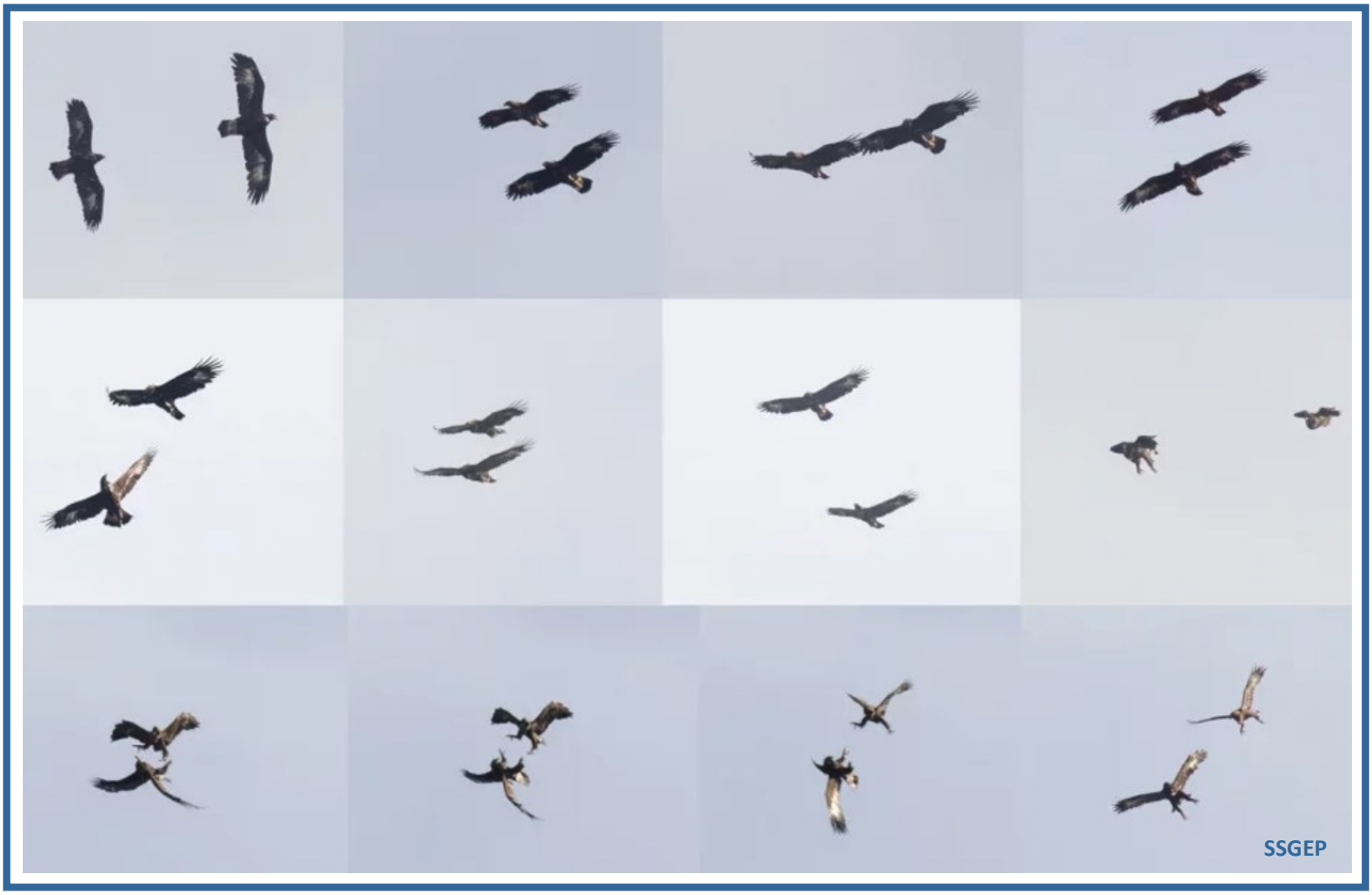

'Composite' of Beaky & Skan over the Skies of Southern Scotland

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NEWSLETTER 371 *JANUARY 2021*

NOTICEBOARD

Indoor Meetings continue be cancelled at this time, but our programme for 2021 will continue with a ZOOM Talk on Friday 12th February entitled 'Northern Flights' presented by the eminent ornithologist Dr Colin Bradshaw. A keen photographer, Dr Bradshaw has visited many Sub-Arctic Northern European Countries including Iceland, Norway and Finland, and will share his stunning images of the birds and wildlife of these remote areas, including some of our familiar wintering species in their fine breeding plumage.
(ZOOM LINK will be sent to Members in early February)

FROM the WEBSITE: As ever, Phil Hanmer shares many of his latest ringing visits; This month he tells an intriguing tale of suspected incestuous behaviour on Swan Lake (*actually a Pond*)….. but I'll leave readers to follow up the full story online! If you enjoy the ID challenge of separating Willow Tit from Marsh Tit, you will also love his photos of both species side by side.

ARTICLES for the NEWSLETTER: I hope you enjoy the photographs and short article below sent in by Michael and Marian Hall. If you have some similar idea or experience you would like to share with other members of the club, please send your short article to the Editor: **stewart@yearle.plus.com**

Ellingham 'Des Res' for House Martins

We bought a RSPB House Martin's nest box 5 years ago, put it up under the eaves at the front of the house. During the first summer a pair visited the box, inspected it but didn't attempt to nest in it. However last year a pair decided to nest in it, in about mid May, they made some minor adjustments to the entrance, added mud etc to it, (to make it more homely, no doubt) and they managed to have 2 broods.

We have for several years erected a little curtain of strings with small hexagonal nuts attached and this certainly deters the sparrows from using the nests. The martins are quite capable of swooping under the strings to rebuild their nests and feed their young. The nest they built from scratch had 3 broods last year.

It seems incredible to me that they left in 2019 probably back to Ghana and returned to the same nest site probably a round trip of 7000 miles.

Michael & Marian Hall, Ellingham

TWO SEASONS with the SOUTH OF SCOTLAND GOLDEN EAGLE PROJECT

Our first NNBC "Zoom Talk" by Rick Taylor took us through the exciting development of the Southern Scotland Golden Eagle Project. Rick explained that the population of eagles in southern Scotland has declined to the extent that only three breeding pairs remain, and that there is a real risk that this stunning species could be lost from the region. The Project was set up to reverse this decline by releasing chicks taken from northern Scotland to reinforce the local population. The extensive research, preparation and management of this process outlined by Rick, followed by the exciting description of released birds gave us an inspirational insight into this work.

The Project benefits from the huge experience of an advisory group drawing on other release and re-introduction projects. Rick and these experts are clear that the reason the local population is in decline is not now because of persecution, nor for lack of food or nest sites, but because the population has shrunk to such an extent that young birds exploring from the eagle heartlands to the north, do not see viable mating opportunities when they visit, and so return north for more promising prospects. The plan is to release 5 to 10 birds each year, for five years. This boost to the existing population should re-establish a viable "social scene" for young eagles who may not only stay and breed themselves, but could be more attractive to eagle tourists from the north. With this help, it is hoped the population could move towards the 11 to 16 pairs which the region might be able to support. Given how close this is to north Northumberland, such a development would almost certainly lead to increased sightings of eagles over places like Kielder and The Cheviot.

The vital importance of making sure all parts of the local community are positively engaged and supportive has been a huge part of the Project work. Rick explained, for example, carefully developed approaches to landowners and gamekeepers using research about eagle diets, which showed them that more of these birds would be no threat to their livelihoods. The actual content of the average eagle diet, shown in a picture of bodies littered across a nest, was fascinating. It included foxes, squirrels, a wide range of birds, loads of carrion, and plenty of the predictable rabbits and hares. Rick even shared a story of an eagle which seemed particularly fond of frogs! This hard information was used to allay fears from landowners, who have become, for the most part, strong supporters of the Project, keen to have this iconic bird back on their land.

A second strand of preparatory work has been a huge effort to engage local communities through primary schools. With youngsters enthusiastic after learning about eagles, perhaps naming one of the birds to be released, and getting to see a real eagle in the flesh with a falconer, the whole community is excited. This is reinforced by taking every opportunity to promote the economic benefits of eco-tourism which should arise from resurgent eagles, culminating in the Eagle Town Festival for Moffat, now planned for 2021.

Aviaries under construction in the Moffat Hills

Rick also took us through the more physical preparations including the construction by volunteers of very robust aviaries for the re-located chicks, hidden somewhere in the Moffat Hills. Predator and weather proof, these became the temporary homes for the relocated birds which were the stars of Rick's presentation. These birds are only taken from nests of healthy twins in a careful process which places bird well-being as the top priority. Since two chicks rarely fledge from a nest of twins, this intervention does not risk impacting on the northern eagle population. After transport to the south, the birds are fed without human interaction to keep them fully wild, and prepared for release with satellite tracking devices which allow the Project to

'Beaky' before release in 2018

monitor behaviour and progress. Rick showed us video of the first three birds from 2018, including Edward and Beaky. Their hesitant first flights were soon followed by images of them feeding from the carrion stations set up to support them through their first winter. Rick explained that, to their surprise, the young eagles quickly learned to forage and hunt for themselves, and were not heavily reliant on these stations. 2018 was clearly a great start, with one female and 2 male eagles released.

2019 started just as well with 3 male chicks translocated and released. In a dramatic twist, however, Rick told us how the female called Beaky from 2018, returned to the release site, and in some very unusual behaviour, attacked the new males at the feeding station, killing at least one. The lone surviving male was taken back into captivity for its own protection, and after a careful health check, released again at a different location, where he did fine.

This means that by 2020, when the project had to be suspended because of Covid, 4 birds had been successfully released. These are monitored using the satellite devices which may last up to 10 years, and have been ranging as far south as North Yorkshire, enjoying their long maturation which takes about 5 years. Perhaps the most exciting pictures Rick showed us was of two of the eagles engaging in mating-style behaviour, touching talons in air, and shadowing each other's flight. (see composite on front cover) Amazingly, the two birds involved were the aggressive Beaky and the male she had attacked!

I am sure that everyone in the NNBC would like to thank Rick for such an exciting talk, and to wish the project well for the future. Hopefully, translocation will start again, and the long-term success of the project will lead to a thriving population of eagles almost on our doorstep. Rick was keen for any reports of eagle sightings and promised to let keen eyed observers know if birds they saw were from the Project, as their satellite tags can tell exactly where they have been. Keep your eyes peeled.

Report *by* Paul Ashdowne

All Photographs by Kind Permission of the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project.

BIRD RECORDS DECEMBER 2020

Brent Goose	Many at Fenham Flats all month, several observers.
Barnacle Goose	1000 at Budle Bay on 15th (A&MG), 1000 at Harper's Heugh on 19th (JPL).
Pink-footed Goose	2000 at Doddington on 16th (PH), several large flocks flying to roost daily North Sunderland (JPL).
White-fronted Goose	7 at Low Newton Scrape on 17th (A&MG).
Lesser White-fronted Goose	4 at Lucker on 1st feeding on stubble (JHa).
Whooper Swan	5 at Low Newton Scrape on 14th (PA).
Shoveler	60 at Budle Bay on 15th (A&MG), 40 on 21st (DG&RHB). Were highest totals.
Gadwall	20 at Embleton on 5th (PA), 5 at Monk's House Pool on 21st (DG&RHB, JPL).
Wigeon	1000 min: at Budle Bay all month (JPL), 225 at Branton Ponds on 5th (I&KD).
Mallard	98 at Branton Ponds on 28th (I&KD).
Pochard	1 at Branton Ponds on 14th (I&KD).
Tufted Duck	18 at Branton Ponds on 14th (I&KD).
Common Scoter	60 at Cullernose Point on 14th (A&MG), 2 at Stag Rocks on 28th (JPL).
Goldeneye	10 at Howick on 14th (A&MG), 5 at Branton Ponds on 14th & 10 on 28th (I&KD), 12 at Football Hole on 27th (PA).
Red-throated Diver	1 off Boulmer on 10th (A&MG), 1 off Stag Rocks on 28th (JPL).
Fulmar	34 at Howick on 14th (A&MG), 3 at Bamburgh Castle on 28th (JPL).
Little Egret	1 at Boulmer on 2nd (A&MG), 1 at Budle Bay on 15/19th (A&MG, JPL), 3 at Branton Ponds on 16th & 2 on 28th (I&KD), 1 at Long Nanny on 17th (PA). 3 at Fenham Flats on 18th (DG&RHB).
Hen Harrier	1 at Lucker on 13th was a ringtail (JHa).
Water Rail	1 at Low Newton Pool on 27th (PH).
Golden Plover	400 at Boulmer on 2nd (A&MG), 2500 at Budle Bay on 15th (A&MG).
Turnstone	50 at Stag Rocks on 28th (JPL).
Knot	1000 at Budle Bay on 15th (A&MG) & all month (JPL).
Sanderling	120 at Boulmer on 2nd & 160 on 10th (A&MG).
Purple Sandpiper	100 at Stag Rocks on 28th (JPL),120 on 21st (DG&RHB).
Green Sandpiper	1 at Doddington on 22nd (RD).
Black Guillemot	2 off Budle Point on 28th (JPL).
Collared Dove	16 at Branton on 25th (I&KD).
Little Owl	1pair at Embleton on 21st (PA).
Short-eared Owl	1 at Hazelrigg on 1st (CD).
Kingfisher	1 at Boulmer on 2nd (A&MG), 1 at Branton Ponds on 25th (I&KD), 1 at Stag Rocks on 28th (JPL).
Peregrine	2 at Doddington on (PH).
Hooded Crow	1 at Howick on 14th (A&MG).
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds on 5th (I&KD), 3 at East Linden on 18th (PH).
Fieldfare	100 at Lucker on 14th (JPL), 20 at Low Newton on 22nd (A&MG).
Tree Sparrow	1 at Yearle on 6th (DG&RHB).
Twite	30 at Long Nanny on 17th (PA) 45 at Guile Point on 19th (I&KD).
Lesser Redpoll	12 at Branton Ponds on 20th (I&KD).
Siskin	60 at Alnwick on 31st (A&MG).

Observers Paul Ashdown (PA), Graham & Rosemary Bell (DG&RHB), Ian & Keith Davison (IB&KD), Chris Duncan (CD), Richard Dickinson (RD), Alan & Margaret Goodall (A&MG), Phil Hanmer (PH), John Harrison (JHa), John P Lumby (JPL).

Many thanks to all who have contributed during the year, let's hope for a better 2021.