



## BIG FIVE KEY FACTS: THE GOLDEN EAGLE



\* the golden eagle

- Scientific name:** Aquila chrysaetos
- Gaelic names:** lolair bhuidhe (other names include lolair dhubh 'Black eagle', distinguish from white-tailed eagle, one of whose Gaelic names is lolair bhàn = 'white eagle' and Fìor-eun meaning pure bird)
- Wingspan:** 204-220cm with the female's 10 percent longer
- Total Length:** 75-88cm
- Weight:** Male's weigh around 3.6kg and females 5.2kg. Sexual dimorphism is pronounced, with males smaller than females - (females 20 per cent heavier)
- Plumage:** Adult golden eagles are mostly a uniform dark brown (useful camouflage against colours of Scottish hills). The feathers on their upper side are generally paler and can appear lightly mottled due to a mix of darker and pale feathers, especially around the back of the head and on the wing coverts. It is the pale yellowish or tawny of the head plumes that gives the golden eagle its English-language name.
- Juveniles have plainer looking plumage than the adults with a darker golden head. Their rich chocolate brown colour can look almost black which explains their main Gaelic name: black eagle. The basal two-thirds of their tails are white. Most juveniles have conspicuous white patches at the base of the 'secondaries' and their inner 'primaries' are visible on both sides of their wings. This means that when seen from below, there are large white areas on the outer and inner parts of each wing and a largely white tail (which also looks white from above). Young birds take around four to five years to reach adult plumage and go through several plumage stages with the white areas gradually disappearing. In these plumages their upper wing coverts often become worn and faded giving them a strong pale bar across the upper wing. Their heads get paler too.
- Typical diet:** Their typical diet is mainly rabbits, hares, and grouse (red grouse and ptarmigan), as well as carrion - mostly sheep and deer. However, a wide range of other prey has been recorded, including seabirds (especially fulmars), ducks and wildfowl, including geese, waders, foxes, badgers, snakes, and occasionally other birds of prey (such as hen harriers, buzzards, and peregrine falcons). Their diet varies across Scotland - in general terms they have a more varied diet in the west Highlands and Islands compared to in the eastern and central Highlands where they tend to eat the abundant red grouse and hares.
- Life cycle:** They are slow to mature, not breeding until four-five years old, and it can take up to six years for a young bird to get full adult plumage. Nest building is most frequent in February and March and eggs are laid in March (most in late March) and April. They are incubated from March to May (main hatch in first half of May). Their typical clutch is two eggs but the range is one to three eggs. The first-hatched chick may kill the younger chick ('Cainism') if there is insufficient food available. The young are fed in nest for about 70 days through summer, from May to August in different broods, with most fledging in late July. Fledged young stay in their parents' territory for several months before leaving some time between October and December, after which they range widely. Pairs spend long periods together during the winter, soaring or sitting on sheltered perches. Spectacular, undulating display flights are quite common throughout the winter until early spring.

**CONTINUED...**



**Life expectancy:** The longevity record for wild golden eagle is 32 years, for a ringed Swedish bird. Adult life expectancy in unpersecuted populations is probably 20-30 years or more. Between 25 and 60 per cent of immature eagles (up to five years old) survive.

**Habitat:** Within Britain, habitat is now confined almost exclusively to Scottish Highlands and Islands, within a range of different types of upland landscapes, from low-lying peatbogs on the Outer Hebrides, through mountain ground and rough grazings, to the hills and grouse moors of the central and eastern Highlands.

**Status:** There are around 440 pairs, almost all of which are in Highlands and Islands, with a handful in the Borders and the Southern Uplands. Parts of the West Highlands and Hebridean islands hold the highest densities of pairs.

**Future prospects:** Several factors affect golden eagles in Scotland. In the west, land use change continues to affect the population via loss of open habitat, and in some areas reduction of prey species. Persecution has also been identified as an issue, particularly in the central and eastern parts of the range. There is evidence that increasingly wet springs are starting to affect productivity. All of these affect the population in the longer term. There has been a recovery in numbers on some west coast islands.

- Spotting tips:**
- ⊕ Patience in scanning eagle ground through binoculars can pay off, both through noticing soaring birds or seeing a perched eagle.
  - ⊕ Eagles are often easier to see outwith the main breeding season (March to August) but immature birds can be seen all year round and are often more visible than adults, having been chased from occupied breeding territories.
  - ⊕ They tend to soar on thermals in the middle of the day.
  - ⊕ They don't like being wet and will often fly around to dry off after wet days or in between the showers on showery days.
  - ⊕ Eagles are twice the size of common buzzards with which are they most commonly confused.
  - ⊕ Size can be hard to judge of high flying or distant birds.
  - ⊕ Buzzards are variable in plumage but generally are much more contrastingly marked on the underside of the body and underwings.

**Art & culture:** Eagles are surprisingly uncommon in Scottish tales, including from the Celtic tradition, though several from Wales and Ireland. Many Gaelic crag and hill names incorporate 'Iolaire', and these and other names have been used to map historical distribution. Their feathers are used in bonnets of clan chiefs.