

Changing Perspectives and Shifting Baselines

Liv Cooper

I moved to Dorset four years ago as a novice birdwatcher and keen conservationist, starting an exciting role with a local charity Birds of Poole Harbour working on the Poole Harbour Osprey Translocation Project. I've been fortunate enough to continue working for BoPH since then, regularly leading events with the charity, and continuing my involvement in the Osprey project. The last 18 months have been particularly interesting, with a huge increase in the uptake of our events, seeing more people come from further afield to enjoy Poole Harbour's birdlife. We're also seeing more and more people join us who are new to wildlife-watching, not just seasoned birders, trying out the hobby for the first time. The reason for this spike in interest isn't a mystery - people are booking onto our events with the primary aim of seeing Ospreys and White-tailed Eagles, two species that are being reintroduced locally.

It was momentous last year when we saw the first pair of Osprey breed in Dorset after an absence of c.180 years. Being able to live-stream the nest through online webcams has helped spread the word about the project, and with three chicks



on the nest this year, it has been brilliant to watch them grow knowing that there are hundreds of other people from around the world as equally hooked as I am. For the last 5 years, BoPH have been running Osprey Cruises around Poole Harbour during their peak migration period from mid-August into early September, when migrating birds will be stopping over in the harbour to re-fuel before continuing their long journeys. This year is no exception, but we now have enough interest to run 34 Osprey cruises during this period, rather than the 3 that were originally hosted in 2017. This is remarkable, and with much of the charity's operations and project work being funded by the events that we deliver, the charity has been able to continue to grow.

The chance of now seeing White-tailed Eagles on these trips further adds to the draw, which is all thanks to the work of Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation (who are also our partners in the Osprey Project) and Forestry England. Since 2019, they have been translocating White-tailed Eagles to the Isle of Wight, which was the last location that the species bred in England before they were persecuted to such an extent that they were lost as a breeding bird in the late 1700s. Records of White-tailed Eagle show that they historically visited Dorset, featuring in the first pages of Mansel-Pleydell's 1888 Birds of Dorsetshire as a "rare straggler", with records in Weymouth, Lulworth and Rempstone, and a Time Team archeological dig in 2004 found remains of the species on Green Island in Poole Harbour. Now, thanks to the Isle of Wight reintroduction project, we are once again seeing White-tailed Eagles in our landscape, and even have a pair establishing a local territory in Poole Harbour.

I've had some truly special birding experiences while I've been living in Dorset; a staff twitch of the Alpine Swift at Old Harry last year, and the excitement of seeing the Forster's Tern on one of our boats this spring are up there with some of my favourite birding moments to date. That being said, there is nothing that comes close to the experience of watching Ospreys and White-tailed Eagles with a boat-full of excited people, many of which are seeing these species for the first time.



Alpine Swift Twitch, Old Harry - Paul Morton

On our boats, I often talk about the concept of "shifting baseline syndrome"; the idea that each generation is accustomed to the species and population numbers that we experience when we are growing up, which

makes it harder to recognise long-term declines. With numbers of many historically abundant species dwindling, like the House Sparrow or Common Swift, there is a sense of grief I frequently feel when I'm out birding, for the loss of the sheer volume of birds that generations older than me would have been able to regularly experience. But what I can now say is exciting, and is somewhat contributing to healing that grief, is the recovery of other species including White-tailed Eagles and Ospreys. During our events at Birds of Poole Harbour, the shared joy that comes from seeing these birds back in our landscape is palpable and offers me reassurance that there are other people who care and value species recovery in the UK, at a time when we so desperately need it. But there is a flip side to that coin; the reintroduction of these species locally has also made me increasingly aware that not everyone shares this view, and I was surprised to find that this was a fairly common perspective within the birding community.



White-tailed Eagle, RSPB Arne - Seb Haggett

As a brief aside, I've always had difficulty describing myself as a "birder", despite the local birding scene having been largely welcoming and encouraging since I moved to Dorset. But, in spite of my growth in understanding and identifying birds, as well as the fact that my life now pretty much revolves around birds, I still don't feel like I can confidently call myself a birder. There is definitely a sense of imposter syndrome contributing to this disassociation; the feeling that I'm not



obsessed with birds enough and someone will ridicule me for thinking I'm a true birder. There is also the fact that I'm not a keen lister, which for some reason makes me feel I should be in the "birdwatcher" rather than "birder" camp.

Maybe these feelings show that I am too introspective, but there is another key contributor to my disassociation, which is the frequent disparity in the general opinion of birders and conservationists. Of course, there is diversity of opinion within both these groups, but there are some perspectives that arise solely within the birding community which can feel almost jarring to me, because they so strongly differ from what I feel as a conservationist.

One such perspective became apparent to me with the increasing regularity of White-tailed Eagle and Osprey sightings in Poole Harbour. Perhaps naively, I thought that birders would be delighted to see these birds back in our skies - after all, they are being returned to their historical range and were only lost from this region due to human persecution. It was surprising to me, therefore, to discover that there are many birders who do not wish for these birds to be reintroduced, or are at least on some level disgruntled about it, simply because they deem translocated birds "untickable", or make "tickable" birds (i.e. non-translocated individuals of that species) harder to identify.

I'm very familiar with the various debates surrounding reintroductions - there is enough discourse within the conservation sector itself - but I have to admit this particular stance is one that I can't get my head around. As I previously mentioned, I'm not a lister myself (beyond keeping track of lifers), but I do understand the appeal and that everyone has their own reasons for listing. But, to me at least, being so stringent with listing that you think conservation projects like translocations shouldn't be carried out or are a hindrance, shows a lack of awareness of the depth of the biodiversity crisis in the UK.



It feels like there is an opportunity for us, as birders (perhaps I shall start calling myself one now), to become more forward-thinking, at a time when there is minimal funding for nature recovery and greenwashing is rife. There are already plenty of birders whose care for the planet shapes how they birdwatch, which can be seen in the rise of low-carbon birding, for example, and I know many local birders who are very pleased about the return of Osprey and White-tailed Eagle to Dorset, regardless of whether they feel they can tick them or not. But there is also a new wave of birders gathering on the horizon, spanning different generations, who are getting into birding because of conservation projects, and I expect that some of the old-school birding mindsets probably won't sit right with them either.

To round off, I want to mention one of my favourite projects that Birds of Poole Harbour delivers - our School Bird Boat Project. This project has been running for many years, where we offer free boat trips to local schools, giving pupils the opportunity to learn about the industry, habitats and wildlife that they can find on their doorstep. How wonderful is it that they are now able to watch White-tailed Eagles on these boat trips, enabling them to see a species that many of us couldn't have dreamed of watching in Dorset when we were younger. The pupils are now experiencing different birding baselines to older generations, providing hope that we can recover some of what has been historically lost. And, if any of the children on our trips should become birders, I hope we wouldn't deny them the excitement of ticking White-tailed Eagle off their lists...



Osprey Ringing 2022, Birds of Poole Harbour