

Press release

Success for NPWS White Tailed Eagle Reintroduction Programme as new chicks from widowed eagle spotted in Co Clare

From [Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage \(/en/organisation/departments/housing-local-government-and-heritage/\)](/en/organisation/departments/housing-local-government-and-heritage/)

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Patience and planning have paid off for the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) programme to reintroduce the White-Tailed Eagle (WTE) to Ireland as a male eagle released in 2008 has bonded with a female released in 2020 and they have now produced two chicks together.

Nature conservation, particularly where efforts to protect an endangered species is concerned, can take quite some time to see success. The male eagle had previously partnered with, and produced chicks. Sadly, the previous partner succumbed to Avian Flu and this male eagle had lived alone in East Clare for the past four years until he recently paired up with his new partner.

Eamonn Meskell, who heads up the NPWS White Tailed Eagle Reintroduction project, proudly said:

“We have been monitoring these eagles for many years and of course we feel very familiar with their history as part of the project. The male eagle has been single for four years since his previous partner died. Of course the fact that he has now found and bred with a new partner is significant to our project but we’re also delighted to see this eagle that we know well make a new bond and start a new family.

“A story like this really brings our reintroduction programme to life, as it helps people to learn about eagle breeding behaviour and the fragility of our reintroduction efforts, all told through the story of a widowed eagle. For our project, the appearance of any new chick is a milestone and shows that the continuation of the project is proving successful.”

In addition, at another site nearby in County Clare - eagle-eyed NPWS staff have in recent days observed and tagged three chicks reared by one of the male eagle’s offspring from his previous partner. This earlier offspring, a female eagle, has thus far reared 10 chicks which are spread around the island of Ireland, some of whom themselves are forming pairs.

Mr Meskill added:

“It is also incredible that one of his offspring is now herself rearing three chicks. This is a very rare occurrence, as a very small minority of nest sites - in Ireland, Norway or anywhere else - have more than two chicks on nest. This is the second year that three chicks are on the nest at this particular nest site. This shows how suited Ireland and our lakes are from a habitat and feeding perspective for this reintroduction project.”

The male eagle who has found a new partner was originally released in Killarney National Park in 2008 and set up territory with a female from that batch, eventually making a nest in the Lough Derg area. In 2013, this pair nested successfully and fledged a pair of White Tailed Eagle chicks – the first hatching and fledging of a White Tailed Eagle chick in over 110 years in Ireland. The same pair successfully fledged White Tailed Eagle chicks for the next four years until 2018, when the female of the pair died after contracting Avian Influenza. The male held the same territory without any mate for the next four years.

In 2020, 16 White Tailed Eagle chicks were collected from the wild nests in Norway and sent to Ireland for the release programme that year. A female chick from this group (B for Bernadine) released at a site in Lough Derg, flew back to Scotland after her release but returned to Ireland six months later and bonded with the widowed male. They then set up a territory together, building a nest in February of this year on an island in Lough Derg. They subsequently mated and the female successfully hatched out one White Tailed Eagle chick.

Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform Malcolm Noonan said:

“The successful hatching of these White-Tailed Eagle chicks symbolises the patience and careful planning of a long term project such as the White Tailed Eagle reintroduction project. It gives us great hope and encouragement for the project which we always knew would take time and perseverance.

“As this story shows, reintroduction of the White Tailed Eagle hasn’t always been straightforward with factors such as Avian Flu and in the past illegal poisoning scuppering efforts. The current phase of the release programme aims to ensure the population is robust enough to give this once extinct species the best possible chance of long-term success in Ireland. The news from Clare today of five chicks born to eagles from both phases of the reintroduction programme – and indeed to their offspring - shows why our continued efforts, perseverance and hope can lead not just to lovely stories such as this, but to hope and good news for nature.”

Notes

NPWS White-Tailed Eagle Reintroduction Programme

In 2020, the National Parks and Wildlife Service began a second phase white-tailed eagle reintroduction project to bolster the existing eagle population in Ireland. The original reintroduction programme (2007-2011) involved releasing 100 young white-tailed

eagles in Killarney National Park, County Kerry. The released eagles subsequently dispersed widely throughout Ireland. By July 2020, a small breeding population of eight to ten pairs had successfully fledged 31 chicks across counties Cork, Kerry, Clare, Galway and Tipperary.

Some Irish-bred eagles are now reaching maturity and starting to breed in the wild. However, a scientific review of the reintroduction project indicated the small population is still vulnerable to mortality factors such as Avian Influenza, illegal poisoning and extreme weather events.

Each year of the project, the same process will occur: eagle chicks (aged 7-10 weeks old) will be flown to Ireland, reared until ready to fly, tagged and released. The tagging allows their dispersal around Ireland and their survival rates to be closely monitored. Sightings from members of the public will also be an important component of the monitoring.

An important aspect of any such releases is cooperation with the farming communities in the release areas and where birds settle to breed. During the first phase of the release project, managed by the NPWS and the Golden Eagle Trust, a good relationship was established with the farming community, with farmers helping to monitor birds and nests at some nesting sites. The second phase release hopes to build on this relationship to ensure that farming and eagles continue to coexist to their mutual benefit.

As well as bringing biodiversity and ecosystem benefits, restoring this flagship species can deliver potential economic benefits. Under the first phase of the reintroduction programme, the re-establishment of breeding white-tailed eagles at sites like Glengarriff, Lough Derg and Killarney National Park has proven hugely popular with local residents and visitors.

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