

White-tailed eagle programme

Rhaglen eryr y môr

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)



Follow us *Dilyn wch ni*

www.eaglereintroductionwales.com

  @ERWproject



What is Eagle Reintroduction Wales (ERW) – White-tailed Eagle programme.

Eagle Reintroduction Wales was founded in 2016 by Dr Sophie-Lee Williams to drive the conservation of eagles in Wales. Between 2017-2021 a PhD to explore the feasibility of this work was undertaken.

ERW's White-tailed Eagle programme is continuing this research in partnership with Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust and Gwent Wildlife Trust. The aim of this project is to re-establish a small breeding population of White-tailed Eagles and restore important ecosystem functions once again to the skies, rivers and coastlines of Southeast Wales and the Severn Estuary.

What is a White-tailed Eagle?

The White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albibilla*) is our largest bird of prey with a wingspan of eight foot and in flight it has long, broad 'fingered' wings. They are brown in colour with a pale head and neck which in adults can be almost white, along with a white wedge-shaped tail.

It is widely distributed across Europe and Asia with strongholds in Norway and Russia. Part of the *Accipitridae* family, this eagle is one of eleven other species known as Sea eagles. White-tailed eagles are also known as the White-tailed Sea eagle, Eyr y Môr in Welsh and sometimes it is known as the ern or erne. It is considered a close cousin of the Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) which occupies similar habitats in in North America and is very similar in behaviour.

Are White-tailed Eagles native to Wales?

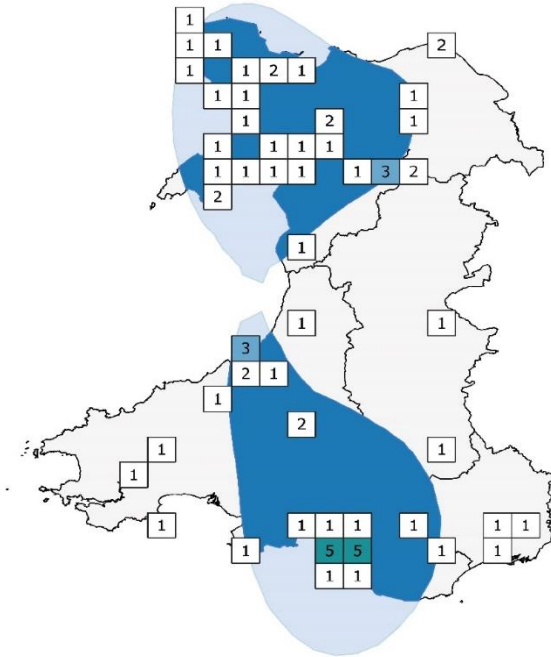
Yes, the British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) recognises the White-tailed Eagle as a species which is native to the UK. The BOU maintains the UK list – an official list of wild bird records in the UK. This species is a 'former breeder'.

White-tailed Eagles suffered intense human persecution, like many other birds of prey, which caused population extinction in Wales by 1830 and the wider UK landscape by 1918. Historic records such as place-names, archaeological, observational and historic persecution records



showcase the birds were common and widespread across the UK. Historic information for Wales shows records in every county with the last known nest site located at Kenfig National Reserve on the Swansea coast in South Wales.

White-tailed Eagle, Eryr y Môr (*Haliaeetus albicillia*)



This map shows the core distribution (blue) of White-tailed Eagle historic records in Wales. Core distribution depicts areas of Wales which hold the highest density of records.

Why is returning White-tailed Eagles to South-east Wales important?

The White-tailed Eagle is listed as a Species of Conservation Concern in the UK and is recognised as a priority action for species recovery in the UK Government’s 25-year Environment Plan. This is advised to be best achieved by a rolling scheme of reintroduction programmes for the species in Britain. Our programme to restore White-tailed Eagles to the Severn Estuary is a recognised and accepted strategy for the UK conservation of this species. Any plans to restore the White-tailed Eagle to Wales would substantially aid regional, national and international efforts to restore the species to its historic ranges and contribute to the global species recovery programme. A Severn Estuary restoration will provide connectivity between Scottish (150+ pairs), Irish (12+ pairs) and English populations (1+ pair) and facilitate international links with small recovering populations in Europe (e.g., France, Spain, Netherlands).



Wales is now the only country in Britain not contributing to the national and/or international conservation recovery programme for the species. This conservation programme aims to provide an opportunity for Wales to take a progressive stance towards species and ecosystem restoration.

Why not wait for them to re-colonise naturally?

White-tailed Eagles are long-lived birds with delayed sexual maturity, low breeding success and slow range recovery. Birds do not breed until 4 or 5-years old and often choose breeding sites close to their original natal/nest sites, meaning that population expansion is extremely slow. Despite other projects in the UK working to restore White-tailed Eagles, it is thought it could take 50-100 years for birds to colonise Wales naturally. This reintroduction project would significantly speed up this process restore this native-lost breeding species into its former UK historic range.

Will the project bring any benefits to Wales?

White-tailed eagles are a missing part of Welsh culture, heritage and biodiversity. This programme aims to restore a native lost species and its ecosystem functions. White-tailed Eagles provide important ecosystem services that regulate and support the function and health of habitats, plants and wildlife including food web balance, pest control, meso-predator control, biodiversity support, clean-up services, nutrient cycling, disease and genetic control. White-tailed Eagles are also regarded as important flagship species of aquatic habitats and have been observed to bring wider biodiversity conservation benefits. As an iconic species they help raise the regional conservation profile of species and habitats, in turn, leading to benefits for a suite of threatened and declining species which share the same habitats.

In addition to the conservation and ecological case for the reintroduction of the White-tailed Eagle to Wales, evidence suggests that it will also have economic benefits. In Scotland, eagle tourism is extremely popular and recent RSPB commissioned reports have shown that the presence of White-tailed Eagles generates between £5 - 8 million to the economy of the Isle of Mull each year, and £2.4 to the Isle of Skye through visitor spend in the area.



What habitats are they most likely to use in Wales?

White-tailed Eagles are part the Sea Eagle family (*Haliaeetus*) and are tied to freshwater and marine landscapes. You would most likely find a White-tailed Eagle around the shallow waters of our coastlines, rivers and lakes. Mature trees and woodlands are also important habitat for roosting and nesting White-tailed Eagles.

Where do White-tailed eagles typically nest?

White-tailed Eagles most often nest in large mature trees but can also be found to nest on coastal cliffs across their European range. Typically, nests are located 3km away from a freshwater or marine waterbody (e.g., sea, lakes, or rivers).

What is the size of their territories? How far would a bird travel?

It is known from satellite-tagged eagles that they wander widely before they settle to breed, but most eventually settle close to their natal sites. In Scotland, research has found that young birds often range up to 200 km away in their first two years, before returning to breed close to their natal sites. Natal sites mean where they were born (e.g., nest sites) or where they were released (e.g., release site). When young birds establish a territory they have much smaller home ranges and are likely to remain sedentary throughout the year. The average territory size for a breeding White-tailed Eagle ranges from 6 – 70 km² across Europe.

Is there enough suitable habitat across the Severn Estuary?

The extensive intertidal habitats across the Severn Estuary and wider Bristol Channel provide ample foraging grounds for White-tailed Eagles. Large expanses of ancient woodland cover provide access to a suite of large mature trees for eagles to use as perch, roost and loafing sites and ample breeding grounds for adult birds. From ERW's research highlighting all suitable breeding habitat across the UK and Wales, the Severn Estuary is estimated to hold 3,552.7 km² of suitable breeding habitat for White-tailed Eagles. Using the average White-tailed Eagle territory size of 70 km², it can be predicted that the wider Severn Estuary could support up to 50 breeding pairs.



What do White-tailed Eagles eat?

As a generalist raptor over 1,000 prey items are found in White-tailed Eagle diets. An aquatic prey specialist targeting seasonally abundant prey, these birds favour fish, water birds and carrion, but can take a variety of other birds and mammals at a less regular capacity. The birds favour shallow waters as foraging grounds. The mosaic stretches of freshwater and marine habitats across Southeast Wales and the Severn Estuary provide perfect foraging grounds and are important habitats for migratory fish, waders, and waterfowl. Seasonally abundant fish species such as Grey Mullet and Northern Pike; and plentiful of ducks and geese such as Mallards, Coots, Wigeon, Canada geese, Greylag geese, Cormorants, Goosanders and Gull species are likely to form a key source of prey for White-tailed Eagles. It is thought that most geese and ducks taken by eagles are likely to be injured or sick individuals. The high concentrations of wintering wildfowl and waders in these regions mean that foraging eagles will regularly encounter carcasses washed-up dead as they search shorelines for food.

Would White-tailed Eagles present a threat to local wildlife?

Across Europe, White-tailed Eagles coexist with the same range of species that occur in freshwater and marine habitats across Southeast Wales and the Severn Estuary. No negative ecological effects on species or populations have been evidenced to be correlated with the population recovery of European White-tailed Eagles. This is due to broad and varied diets and favouring the most seasonally abundant prey, including carrion. It is also important to consider that these birds are opportunistic and will hunt injured, sick and dying wildlife.

Will they prey upon wading birds and ground nesting birds?

As a generalist predator, White-tailed Eagles tend to favour the most seasonally abundant prey. Across Europe this bird is known to prefer fish, when readily available, rather than birds during the spring and summer. Furthermore, evidence from other parts of Europe indicates that White-tailed Eagles have little to no impact on ground-nesting birds. The evidence suggests that waders will occasionally be taken by White-tailed Eagles, but this represents a small proportion of their diet throughout the year and these species are far more likely to be predated by existing populations of Peregrines, Gull species and foxes. During the breeding season in other European White-tailed Eagle populations duck and geese species are



preferred - such as Coot and Mallard, Greylag and Canada geese - which are widespread and increasing across the Severn Estuary.

When they fly over wetlands will they scare off waders and wildfowl?

Evidence from Europe suggest that the disturbance to waders and wildfowl by White-tailed Eagles is similar to or less than that caused by Peregrines, Marsh Harriers and Greater Black-backed Gulls, and birds quickly become accustomed to their presence. Another important consideration is that White-tailed Eagles are inactive for long-periods – research of satellite-tagged birds highlights that 93.2% of their day is spent perching or standing. This is due to the White-tailed Eagle's low cost 'sit-and wait' hunting strategy which has also been reported for the closely related Bald Eagle which spends 94.3% of daytime perched. This behaviour means that disturbance will be less regular than that of other current avian predators which are on the wing for longer periods of the day across the Severn Estuary. It is important to note that most migratory species across the Severn Estuary would be familiar towards the presence of White-tailed Eagles as they would come across such predators on their migratory ranges.

Will the return of White-tailed Eagles have any impact on river or sea fishing?

White-tailed Eagles are likely to have minimal impact on fish stocks. They will take the majority of their fish in shallow estuarine water and will favour seasonally abundant species such as Grey Mullet, Northern Pike, Sea Bass and Bream. Furthermore, their ability to exploit other prey such as birds and mammals means that fish populations will not be under threat. The River Usk and Wye are important spawning grounds for many important species such as Salmon and Twaite Shad. Spawning fish typically prove easy prey, but it is unlikely that White-tailed Eagles will predate these particular species when spawning upstream in rivers because they prefer larger more open stretches of water when hunting, as observed elsewhere across their European range.

Do White-tailed Eagles present a risk to livestock?

Concerns have been raised by livestock farmers in Wales that White-tailed Eagles may present a risk to livestock, particularly lambs. These perceptions are based on experiences in Scotland



where White-tailed Eagles scavenge dead lambs and very occasionally take small weak individuals from hill grazings. These birds often roost and breed in areas grazed by sheep and there are very few records of White-tailed Eagles taking lambs where they overlap elsewhere in Europe. This conflict appears to be almost unique to Western Scotland. The occasional opportunity to take small, sick, weak or injured livestock does not represent habitual predation and usually occurs in areas of open hill grazing, bad weather periods and the lack of alternative wild prey in some biologically poor regions. There is lack of evidence to suggest White-tailed Eagles have an impact on healthy, viable stock and has been concluded by Scottish Natural Heritage to have a 'minimum impact' on livestock farming.

Due to the abundant supply of wild prey across the Southeast of Wales and the Severn Estuary, particularly waterbirds and fish, we do not expect negative impacts on farming or domestic animals.

Further project information and contacts

You can discover more about Eagle Reintroduction Wales's (ERW) - White-tailed Eagle programme by visiting our website <https://www.eaglereintroductionwales.com/> or on Facebook or Twitter [@ERWProject](https://twitter.com/ERWProject).

If you have any questions about our research, please do not hesitate to speak with the lead researcher, Dr Sophie-lee Williams at eagle.reintroductionwales@durrell.org.