

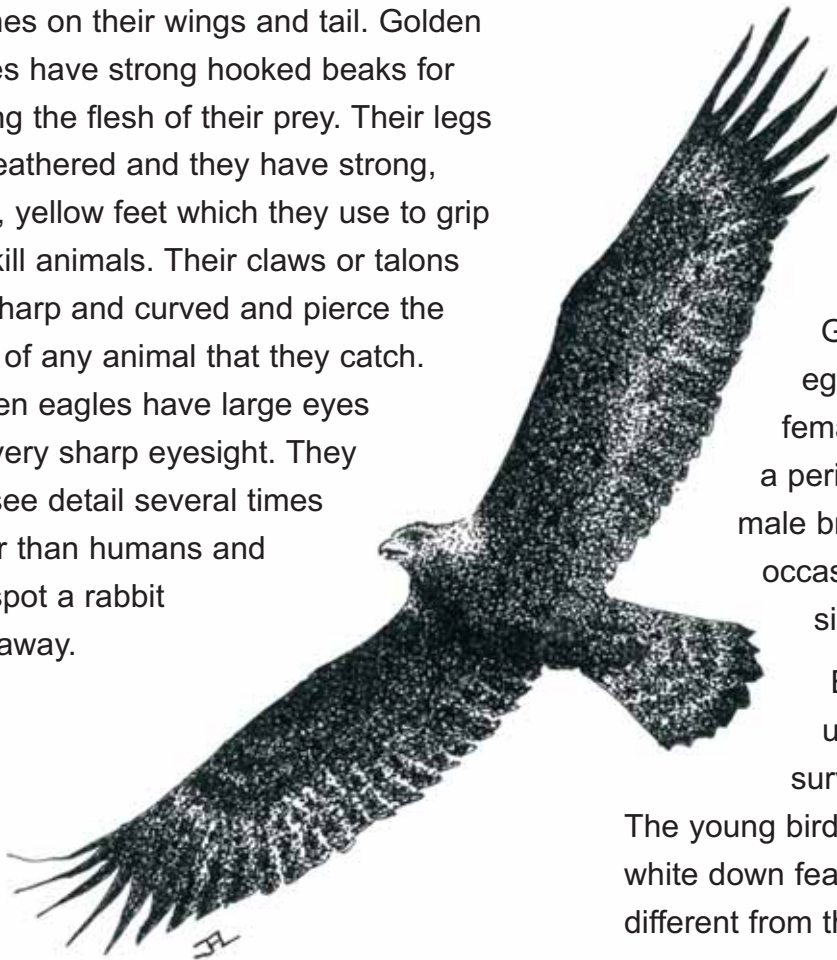
all about

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GOLDEN EAGLE

Aquila chrysaetos

Golden eagles are huge birds of prey with a wing span of over 2 metres. They can soar and glide high in the sky using air currents to help them. They are a dark brown colour with a paler golden brown head. Young eagles have white patches on their wings and tail. Golden eagles have strong hooked beaks for tearing the flesh of their prey. Their legs are feathered and they have strong, large, yellow feet which they use to grip and kill animals. Their claws or talons are sharp and curved and pierce the body of any animal that they catch. Golden eagles have large eyes and very sharp eyesight. They can see detail several times better than humans and can spot a rabbit 2km away.



Nest and eggs

A golden eagle's nest, called an eyrie, is usually found on a mountain ledge or crag, or in a very tall tree. It is a large, wide nest, made out of sticks and

branches. The same eyries are used again and again. As more nest material is added to them over several years they can grow as much as 3 metres deep.

Golden eagles lay two eggs 2–5 days apart. The female sits on the eggs over a period of about 6 weeks. The male brings in food for her and occasionally takes a turn at sitting on the eggs.

Both eggs hatch but usually only one chick survives to become an adult.

The young birds are covered in fluffy, white down feathers and look very different from their parents. They depend

on the parents for food until they are old enough to hunt for themselves. The strongest chick takes most of the food that is brought to the nest. A young eagle starts to fly when it is about 11 weeks old. During the autumn it stays with its parents and learns how to hunt. Eventually it will leave them and look for a territory of its own.

Food and feeding

Golden eagles feed on medium sized mammals and birds, including rabbits, hares and grouse. If they cannot find these animals they will eat other birds and mammals. They hunt in several different ways. Sometimes they soar high in the sky and then glide or swoop down quickly in attack. They also hunt by flying close to the ground, catching their prey by surprise. They will fly several miles in search of food.

Instead of hunting for themselves golden eagles will also eat the bodies of dead animals, including deer and sheep.

Where do they live?

Golden eagles live in mountain areas with few trees. They avoid areas that are farmed or where there are a lot of people.

A pair of golden eagles occupy a large area of as much as 30 square miles which is called their home range. The home range includes the area within which they hunt for animals and several eyries. Part of the range is used only by the pair and they will defend this as their territory.

Golden eagles and humans

In the past golden eagles, along with many other birds of prey, were persecuted by shepherds and gamekeepers. They are now fully protected by law but some are still shot, poisoned and trapped. Golden eagle nests are also still sometimes robbed of young birds or eggs.

During the 1950s and 1960s golden eagles, like other birds of prey, were affected by the use of new pesticides. It was later discovered that these chemicals remained poisonous long after they had been applied and they are now banned. It is thought that in the case of golden eagles sheep dip was the main problem. As the golden eagles fed on the dead bodies of sheep that had been dipped, the levels of poison gradually built up in the eagles' bodies until they became harmful. The eggs that the poisoned birds laid had thinner shells which broke very easily, so they could not produce any chicks.

Sometimes golden eagles die because they eat poisoned bait that has been laid out to kill other predators, such as foxes and crows.

Changes in the golden eagle's habitat can make it a less suitable place for them to feed and breed. In some parts of Scotland there are so many deer and sheep grazing on the moorland that there is not enough heather left to feed other animals. This means fewer grouse and mountain hares and in turn less live food for the eagles. Where there are fewer live prey golden eagles are less

likely to rear their chicks successfully. However high numbers of deer and sheep do mean that more carrion is available and this can lead to a rise in the number of golden eagles found in an area.

Golden eagles search for food in open areas and cannot hunt in dense woodland. This means that when forestry plantations are created on open ground in upland areas they make it an unsuitable habitat for golden eagles.

More and more people are using the countryside for recreation. Climbers, birdwatchers and photographers can disturb golden eagles and stop them from breeding successfully.

[Finding out more](#)

Scottish Birds

Valerie Thom (Collins)

The Birds of Scotland

Emilio Dicerbo (Lochar Publishing Ltd)

Golden Eagles

Roy Dennis and Laurie Campbell (Colin Baxter)

The Golden Eagle

Jeff Watson (Poyser)

[How you can help](#)

You could become involved with groups of other people concerned with the future of Scotland's wildlife. Check your local library for information about groups in your area.

The Young Ornithologists Club (YOC), which is the junior section of the RSPB, produces a magazine and Scottish newsletter which include information

about environmental issues and give you the chance to help wildlife by taking part in projects and surveys.

Contact: RSPB, Dunedin House, 25 Ravelston Terrace, Edinburgh EH4 3TP

[Glossary](#)

Habitat

The place in which an animal or plant lives.

Pesticide

A chemical that is used to kill pests.

Plantation

An area of planted woodland (often used to describe large areas recently planted, mainly with conifers).

Predator

An animal that kills and eats other animals.

Prey

An animal that is killed and eaten by another animal.

Territory

The area in which an animal or group of animals lives and which they defend against other animals of the same kind.

**SCOTTISH
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Forestry Commission
Scotland

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