

## CHAPTER 12

### *Mixed fortunes*

Snow lay deep in the valley during January 1987, and the eagles were absent again for long periods. Nest refurbishment began on 4 February, and a good solid and compact layer about 30 cm thick was added during the next 10 days. My roost checks produced pellets containing sheep wool and rabbit fur and bones, but I didn't actually see the eagles feeding until 22 March. That was one of the earlier laying dates, but it came and went in 1987 without anything happening. The female didn't lay on the 23rd either, but I had high hopes on the 24th when she visited the nest shortly after I arrived. She left 16 minutes later, and the male flew in to replace her. I was used to the male taking the first stint of incubation, but he appeared unsettled on this occasion and called as three crows flew by; he didn't fly off in pursuit or leave when his mate was dealing with a peregrine, but he didn't sit on the nest either and left after 15 minutes. That was an unusually long visit for the male at that time of year without there being eggs in the nest, but the female didn't replace him and, in fact, the male delivered material to the nest before the female next landed there. The eagles' activity declined after this, and during eight-hour watches on consecutive days I didn't once see the female visit the nest. It was a similar picture during the next three days, and it looked as though we weren't going to see eggs in 1987.

The Haweswater eagles hadn't failed to lay eggs since 1968, regardless of the pressures of harsh winters, but that now looked to be a real possibility. When I arrived in the valley at 6.30 a.m. on the 29th I could find neither the eagles nor the wardens. I wasn't able to spend all the daylight hours in the valley, and with the wardens only being on duty during office hours, there was a real possibility that something could already have been missed. I stayed at the hide for an hour but saw nothing. If a breeding attempt was about to be made I'd have expected the birds to be on show, but if they'd already failed or been robbed they'd have no reason to stay.

There was no one else in the valley, and little prospect of the wardens arriving for a couple of hours, so I decided to check the nest. The eagles weren't, apparently, on the verge of laying eggs, so I felt that a quick visit by someone who knew what he was doing wouldn't have any adverse effects. I wanted to give the eagles every chance to reveal themselves before I did anything that might cause disturbance, so I started by walking along the valley floor to see if I generated any response and planned to reach the ridgeline via a view of the top nest. I hadn't seen the eagles adding to that nest

in 1987, but it was there so it may as well be checked. I'd then double back along the ridge-top before dropping to view the middle nest from above, as in 1986.

Typically, the female and then the male circled up from behind the top-nest crag within 10 minutes of me leaving the hide. They crossed the valley and settled on the rocks opposite the middle nest. It was poor timing; they'd caught me in no-man's land, halfway between the two nests, with the one I expected them to use between the RSPB's hide and me. I walked on more quickly and regularly checked to ensure that the birds were still perched. At top speed I angled up towards the *bilberry peaks* and from there could see that the top nest was unchanged from when I'd checked it two months earlier. The eagles were still perched, so I scrambled up to the ridge-top and sped along towards the point from which I'd descended a year and a day earlier.

I climbed down towards the nest. There was no need for discretion on this occasion; in fact, with the eagles perched opposite me, it was best for my actions to be as open as possible, to allow them to see what I was doing. It was risking eliciting some disturbance behaviour, but it was better for that to happen than it was for the eagles to be uncertain of my whereabouts. I went beyond my secluded viewpoint of the previous year and dropped to a lower ledge. From there I had a clear view into the nest. The eagles still hadn't moved, which wasn't a good sign, and it was made worse by what I saw. The nest was in a very poor state of repair, there was very little fresh soft lining material, such as woodrush, and no cup had been formed. There was also snow on the nest, and single streak of faeces ran down the outside of the front wall. These weren't good signs, but it confirmed that no eggs had been laid.

I followed an even more obvious route away from the ledge, and the eagles stayed where they were, unconcerned by my actions. Back on the ridgetop I noticed that the wardens had arrived, so I dropped back down to meet them. I made no secret of what I'd done, and I think they were pleased to have it confirmed from a reliable source that nothing untoward had happened at the nest. I directed their attention to the eagles, and we watched them mating almost immediately. I stayed for a couple more hours but only short flights followed, so I left the wardens in peace and returned home. That evening, to my astonishment, I was informed that the female had gone to the nest at about 2 p.m. and that incubation had begun, in the middle nest, at about 4.40 p.m.

The incubation period appeared to progress without a hitch after that, but I wasn't too surprised when the prospective hatching date arrived and passed without any news. During the next couple of days there was no burst of activity, the male didn't carry food, and the female didn't sit any tighter. I was in the valley by 5.30 a.m. on 15 May, but the first changeover wasn't until two hours later. The male didn't have time to sit before the female returned, but before she could sit the male did so, and she flew off again. The female landed on a rock to preen, and I was surprised to see a crow dash in and grab a discarded secondary flight feather the eagle had just pulled from her wing. Satisfied with the condition of her plumage, the female then made three nest visits, twice with material. The male stood with each arrival but was beaten into flight each time until the third when he dashed off and made three display dips as if pleased to have escaped. I

tracked him to a perch but missed him leaving it half an hour later, so I wasn't sure what he'd carried to the nest three minutes after that, but I then kept a closer watch on him. During the next 18 minutes I saw him catch, pluck and deliver two ring ouzels to the nest. This confirmed that an eagle egg had hatched, and being 47 days after incubation began, it also told me that it was the second egg that had hatched, just as in 1986.

Happy with events in Riggindale I travelled north, but when I returned from my Scottish study area on the 26th it was to learn that the eagles had failed. I was amazed, small chicks certainly do die in the nest but there was no apparent reason for it. There was no way of knowing what had happened at the nest, and I struggled to learn what the wardens had seen. All I could glean was that the adults had lost interest in the nest, and it only contained the unhatched egg when the wardens checked it a few days later.

It was also natural for the eagles' behaviour to fall into a slumber after a breeding failure, and this year proved to be no exception. The resultant lack of any wardening interest gave me the times of day I wanted for my activities, the first and last few hours of daylight when the wardens weren't in the valley. I collected pellets on the 27th, one of the few occasions I was able to do so during the summer months and found 26 from the nests and 42 perches I checked. Most contained only sheep's wool, but the others showed the diversity of the eagle diet: the species represented included fox, badger, stoat and rabbit, kestrel, pigeon, crow and meadow pipit. There were no ouzel or vole remains, even though I knew those to have been eaten, and no evidence of red deer in the diet at that time of year.

As could also be expected, the little activity the eagles did perform included a bout of nest-building. I saw both birds on the top nest on the 31st and, a week later, saw them delivering soft material to the same nest. The male also visited the *acacia* nest that day, and two days after that I saw the eagles nest-building on an old roost ledge that the male had used until 1984. A visit there on 9 June found 10 sticks, some heather and a few eagle feathers. There were fresh sticks on another ledge on 7 July, and the female spent 34 minutes on the *acacia* nest two days after that. On the 21st I found more fresh material on the 9 June nest, and that the centre of attention had moved along the ledge, and on the 30th there was fresh greenery on the top nest. While all this activity was of interest, there was probably little point to it, I'd seen it all before, with new nests started and old ones refurbished, but the eagles had only ever laid eggs in two nests since 1975 and I didn't expect that situation to change.

The contrast between these last three years and the three previous ones had been stark to say the least, from three chicks fledged to one that had died, so I hoped for better news in 1988. There were other changes afoot, though. There'd long been talk of the area becoming an RSPB reserve and that eventually came to fruition during 1988 via an access agreement with the landowners, North West Water. I was confident that the eagles would be better managed after that and that the poor decision-making of recent years would become a thing of the past. There was another change as well – I found myself working for the RSPB again! I'd be based in Hawick that summer and on Mull in 1989, so I'd miss the breeding seasons but I wasn't too concerned by that. I'd seen

most of what I expected to see at that time of year and would still have the winters and the post-fledging periods should there be another juvenile.

After two years in the middle nest, I was certain the eagles would return to the top nest for the 1988 season, and seeing both birds there on 25 January seemed to confirm that belief. Neither bird carried material until 3 February in 1988, but on 28 January 1989 I saw nest building in January for the very first time when the male delivered two 2m-long sticks to the top nest. The first soft material reached the nest on 4 March in 1988, but after that both eagles left the valley, the male east towards the grouse moors and the female to the north. This suggested food shortages, and the lack of sheep carrion that year was further evidence of an increasing problem. And this came into stark relief when I witnessed what was at the time a unique event during my years with the eagles.

I reached the valley at 6.30 a.m. on 10 March 1988, and the male delivered a stick to the nest an hour later. It was a cold day; an incomplete layer of snow covered the valley from ridgetop to floor, and a bitter wind was blowing. I was settled on the north ridgetop having checked some roosts when the female called at 8.20 a.m., and I assumed it heralded the male's return. I waited as the female flew to her favourite perch, but it was seven minutes before her mate eventually entered the valley. To my utter amazement, he was carrying the hind leg of a red deer. It was the first time I'd seen an eagle carrying food for any distance outside the breeding period, and he'd brought this in from outside the valley! He swung low through the mouth of the valley and kept close to the ridge, flapping his wings to maintain his momentum as he passed my position. Even though he'd struggled to carry the leg for more than 5 km, he didn't land immediately but circled for three minutes below the perched female in the valley head before landing next to the big screens.

As he landed the female began to call and continued to call for six minutes and only stopped when the male flew from the food. Eagles weren't supposed to provision the nest during incubation (which I'd seen at both sites), and males certainly weren't supposed to supply food for their mates during the winter. Yet again I was witnessing something the experts said didn't happen. The male didn't eat during his time beside the food and when he flew he made two display dips, but the female stayed on her perch. He circled below his mate and made eight more dips, but still she didn't fly. He performed another nine dips and circled again before making five more dips. After the last one he swung across the valley and flew straight to the top nest, stayed for a minute and then flew to settle less than a metre from his mate. This was very intriguing: if it was provisioning, I couldn't understand why the female hadn't claimed the food and if it wasn't, I couldn't understand why the male had carried the food so far and then displayed so actively without feeding.

The eagles perched together for half an hour before the male returned to the food, and he called four times before immediately taking flight again. It was as if he was trying to entice his mate down to the food, and had it not been for the calling, it would have been very similar to his provisioning of the juveniles. The male returned to the

nest at 9.35 a.m. and flew off five minutes later to mate with the female and then return to spend 22 minutes on the nest; he even sat in the cup for 15 minutes, and I was at a complete loss to explain what was happening. When he flew he returned to *the ledge* and stayed there with the female perched above him in *the hole*. It seemed as though the food had been forgotten about (it was by then more than two hours since the male had arrived with it), but there was more to come.

The male was flying again after half an hour, and he performed three display dips as the female watched and called. After these he dropped to the food and ate for 16 minutes. Satisfied, he flew again, but this time he carried the leg with him. He circled for four minutes and then landed to catch his breath by panting hard after the efforts he'd made. On the wing again after a minute he carried the food to a higher ledge, and the female was now in flight as well. She circled over the male, and once he'd returned to *the ledge*, she dropped down, called and began to eat. It was a long and convoluted affair, but it was food provisioning. Given the uncertainty, the apparent confusion and the delays, it seems likely that what I'd seen was the first-ever example of non-breeding season food provisioning of the female by the male, and it was possibly the first record from any British eagle site. I would go on to see provisioning every breeding year after that, and yet, intriguingly, I'd never seen it before that day.

My concerns about the eagles' future weren't at an end, however. With the area now a nature reserve rather than a species protection site, a decision was made to keep the hide in place for the middle nest regardless of where the eagles chose to lay their eggs. I had grave concerns about this. While I'd thought the permanent RSPB presence would improve life for the eagles, this seemed to be a step backwards. Geoff and I had shown that the top nest was only just within reach if a potential egg collector made an obvious approach, but there was no chance of preventing a robbery when starting from the middle hide. The decision was taken to restrict public access to the site as the warden wanted to control the expected increase in visitor numbers once the reserve agreement had been announced, but it made it impossible to view the floor in the valley head and increased the likelihood of the eagles being disturbed.

When the birds successfully reared a chick that year, and did so again from the top nest in 1989, it was deemed to have been a good decision, and the hide was moved even further away from the nest after that and put lower in the valley with an even more restricted view. When I visited the ridgetop during the season not only did I find an arrow made from stones pointing towards the nest crag and groups of people sitting watching the birds, I was even told to keep back from the edge in case the wardens saw me!

I saw the male take the first stint of incubation in 1988, on 22 March, but then left for Hawick and missed most of the incubation period. The egg hatched as expected after 43 days, and I arranged to be in the valley when Geoff arrived to ring it. With the top nest in use, Geoff needed a rope man so when he asked for assistance I volunteered again and off we went. The wardens remained at the hide while we ringed the chick. I was later told that the head warden wasn't happy with me even being in the valley never mind on the crag, but what did he expect? Geoff needed someone he could trust, and

I'd been with him on many occasions and had held on to slipping belays while he was on the rope. In 1989, when I was on Mull, Geoff received no help and had to abseil to the nest, ring the chick, abseil to the foot of the crag, scramble all the way back up, collect the rope and then clamber back down again to return to the hide, while the warden sat on top of the crag, out of site of the nest and unaware of what Geoff was doing. When I was there it was to help Geoff as he was ringing the eagles and peregrines for our benefit but at his expense. Now it was just something the wardens felt obliged to be involved with.

The 1988 juvenile proved to be a slow developer and didn't leave the nest until 83 days after the hatch, so I hadn't missed much of the post-fledging period before I returned from Hawick. This bird was a jumper and had only just reached its safe perch on *the dome* when I arrived to see it for the first time off the nest on 30 July. There was little activity during the seven hours I was on watch, and as the wardening team couldn't tell me anything about the food situation, I was interested to see how this juvenile would fare. By being on a safe perch it was already behaving more like the live prey birds than that of 1986, but during my first four visits I neither saw the juvenile feeding nor the male hunting. I located the juvenile in *the cross tree* on 5 August, and it was there for at least nine hours, three days later it was in the same place for at least 12 hours. As I still hadn't seen it feeding, I decided to check its perches when I next entered the valley.

I walked to the site to arrive at 4.45 a.m. on the 10th fully expecting the bird to be in *the cross tree* again. I knew my actions would probably disturb it, but at two weeks off the nest, its flight feathers would be fully grown and I knew it was a strong flyer. This was, of course, the first day on which I didn't find the juvenile on that perch, but that was good news, I wouldn't disturb it after all. It was actually back on the nest and stayed there for two and a half hours as I scoured the valley. There was plenty of evidence of the juvenile being fed, and it was just like in the earlier years. There were pigeon pluckings on Short Stile, but as could be expected, most of the remains were by *the cross tree*. As well as down and splash from the juvenile, there were the remains of two more pigeons, at least four corvids and some rabbit fur. There was more of the same below a nearby tree and even more on *the dome*. Elsewhere I picked up signs of at least five more crows, two rabbits and three foxes. The latter were on the *bilberry peaks*, and so had been fed to the juvenile while it was still on the nest. I suspected that many of the other pluckings related to nestling food, but unlike in other years when the top nest was used, there were no deer calf remains on the *peaks*. It wasn't until the 16th that I eventually saw the male delivering a crow to the juvenile, but I saw it feed from carrion on the 21st and so knew that there was still a problem with the food supply.

In 1989 I didn't return to the valley until 17 August, but I saw the juvenile visit the top nest that day before it winged its way across to the big screes and settled on a boulder. Its approach appeared to be casual, but through the scope I could see a fox's head peering out from beneath the rock. The eagle stayed there for two hours with the fox moving from one end of the rock to the other again and again, but it didn't dare make a dash for safety. It knew the eagle was there and wasn't going to run until the

bird moved. And when it did move it sprinted across the ground and dived into another bolthole before the eagle could attack.

These two juveniles behaved very much alike, but there were differences between them and the previous four. Their behaviour seemed to be an intermediary stage between the live prey and the carrion birds. The male was able to catch live prey in 1988 and 1989, but the juveniles were feeding readily on carrion before they left the valley. These two also took almost as long as the 1982–84 birds to make that first flight, but once they were out of the valley they were roamers in the vein of the 1986 bird. Both of them found food easier to locate in the valley nearest my home than in Riggindale, which made it easier for me, and I found juvenile roosts there in both years. They played the games the others had played, riding sheep and deer and tearing at the ground as if it was food, but the adults didn't teach any lessons. The greatest interactions with other species were when gulls joined the crows to mob the eagles as they moved along the lakeside. The food source in that valley was soon exhausted, and I followed them as best I could, but as in 1986, they were distant wanderers.

I saw the juvenile on 28 September in both years, but again in both years, there were long gaps without sightings after that. The 1988 bird was present on 10 October, but it was independent by then, and the 1989 bird was gone even before that. The adults' resurgence of nest-building activity was always a good sign of the juvenile's departure, and in 1989 they began to build a new nest at the beginning of October. It would never be used, but it would become full sized, which was more than could be said for most of these efforts. It was on a new ledge on the top nest crag, and the birds spent 45 minutes of active building on this the first day of effort. When I checked the nest two days later it was already more than a metre across and half that deep, but they soon lost interest, and although a few more sticks and pieces of heather were added after that, I didn't see any more material taken in until 15 November 1989. The birds were back in winter mode by then. The eagles added to the top nest that year, and if it were to be used in 1990 it would be the first time they'd used the same nest in three consecutive years, but as it was, they weren't allowed to make a choice.

After a largely fruitless series of cold searching in the surrounding hills, I was back in Riggindale on 22 December. I saw the male arrive at his usual winter roost, circling above it to check the site security and then, once happy, whiffing down and onto the branch. He always almost froze on arrival, becoming suddenly stiff and deliberate in his movements before he readjusted his feet, ruffled his feathers and settled down for the night. By 4.05 p.m. it was too dark to search for the female, which usually roosted with the male, and I realised that I hadn't seen her for almost a month. It was the longest gap I'd had when I was available to look, but I wasn't too concerned. I hadn't attempted any roost watches for some time before that and knew from the signs on her favourite perches that she was still about and was probably roosting further up the valley than the male.

I couldn't return to the valley for six days, but 28 December dawned clear and frosty, and I was encouraged to walk rather than drive to the site. As always I checked the six

main perches on entering the valley but, failing to find an eagle, then turned my attention to the nests. The top site was empty but the nest looked in good condition, but the middle nest wasn't there! There'd been no storms or heavy snowfalls during the previous six days, and yet there didn't seem to be a single stick on the ledge. I decided to take a closer look and dropped down to the valley floor, crossed the beck and scrambled up through the screes. I'd planned to go directly to the nest, but I could see the nest pile at the foot of the crag and thought I'd get a better photograph from above, and so diverted along the foot of the crags to scramble up a gully and then down to the ledge I'd visited in 1986.

All that remained on the nest ledge was a rotten heap of compressed and mouldered material. I took a few photographs and turned to climb a gravelly runnel that would lead me to the ridgetop, but after a few steps I noticed a scuffing that made me suspicious. The possibility of the nest being deliberately destroyed entered my head, so I decided to climb down and take a closer look. As soon as I turned, I saw a man in the valley below me. He was beyond the hide site, but there was no harm in that at this time of year. However, I ducked down among the rocks to keep watch. It was a good idea; the man skirted the screes above the usual footpath and then stopped to look directly at the nest through binoculars. He spent about five minutes scouring the site before moving off up-valley. As soon as I knew it was safe to do so, I scrambled up to the ridgetop and followed from above. By 11.40 a.m. he'd reached the foot of the top nest crag, and I saw him pick up a stick and hold it at arm's length as if to judge the height of the nest. He then deliberately pushed the stick in the ground vertically below the nest, scanned the crag again and began to climb higher. I waited and watched, but he turned higher up the ridge and disappeared into the low cloud. There was no point in my following him; I wouldn't know how quickly he'd be walking and I wouldn't be able to dally if I caught up as the pursuit would have become too obvious. Also, the distance I'd have to keep behind would mean that, in the mist, I wouldn't know which way he turned when the nest ridge joined High Street, the main ridge.

I looked around and was relieved to see Stefan at the hide site, so having walked 8 km, climbed 300 metres up the ridge, dropped half way back down to check the nest and then back up and along the top, I dropped the 300 metres back to the valley bottom to talk to Stefan. I told him what I'd seen and borrowed his car keys. The man I'd watched must have had a car parked at the lake head, so I trooped down to that and sat in Stefan's car to wait.

I was still waiting when Stefan returned, and it was 2.30 p.m. before the man reappeared. He walked straight through the car park and around the first bend in the road. He must have parked further down the road, which, I thought, was a little strange in itself. I'd intended to play it cool, to give the man time to reach his car, stow his gear, take a breather and then move off, a couple of minutes at least, but Stefan had other ideas. As soon as the man was out of sight Stefan started the engine, revved up and was off in hot pursuit. We sped past the man after about 100 metres, so I stopped Stefan and we had to pretend to be looking at ducks while the man walked past us again. We now

had all the parked cars in view, but as I was in the process of saying that we should wait Stefan was off again, foot to the floor. There were 25 geese for us to look at this time, but we were running out of things to count, so I stopped him again and insisted that we wait for the man to reach his car. I was concerned that we'd already made him suspicious, but my own suspicions were raised when he finally did stop at a car. Even though the car park was half empty and there were other parking points between us and it, the man stopped at a car that was simply pulled halfway onto the verge. Armed with his vehicle details Stefan and I returned to the village to inform the warden of the events I'd seen. He wasn't convinced that the nest had been deliberately destroyed and tried to tell me that it must have fallen out naturally, but when he announced that he and Stefan would be working on his holiday cottage the next day, I decided to do what he was being paid to do and prepared to visit the nest again.

29 December dawned dry with increasing cloud and the promise of rain that could destroy any evidence. I didn't want to waste any time, and so cut straight through the screes towards the crag. There was only one route to the nest without using ropes and on the very first foothold I found a boot print. I climbed up for a closer look at the nest ledge itself. There wasn't a single stick left in place. All that remained were the rotten remnants, a compost of sticks that had probably been collected by the eagles more than 20 years previously. And right in the middle was a boot print, size nine. I told the warden that the destruction was definitely deliberate, and he and the team puzzled over the motives for such an act. They theorised about it being a farmer worried about the threat to his lambs (even though the local farmers were sympathetic towards the eagles) and almost convinced themselves that it was the work of someone who held a grudge against the warden himself! I suggested that it was the work of an egg collector who'd be raiding the site in 1990.

It was obvious to me: if the eagles had two nests the best way to guarantee the use of one was by destroying the other, the one closest to the RSPB hide. The hides had been moved further from the top nest, the wardens weren't capable of reaching it in time to prevent a raid, and the eggers must have been aware of these things. They'd obviously visited the site during the 1989 season and realised the ease with which they could take the eggs. They'd be able to take them during daylight if they had the nerve!



*The unhatched 1985 eggs illustrate why eagle eggs are so highly prized by collectors (courtesy of G. Horne).*



*Other unhatched eggs (including those from 1969 – top left with scribbling to deter collectors) are held in Tullie House Museum, Carlisle.*



*The 1985/86 winter was one of the most severe I saw.*

*Ringing the 1986 nestling allowed me my closest view.*



*I was later able to stalk this bird after fledging.*