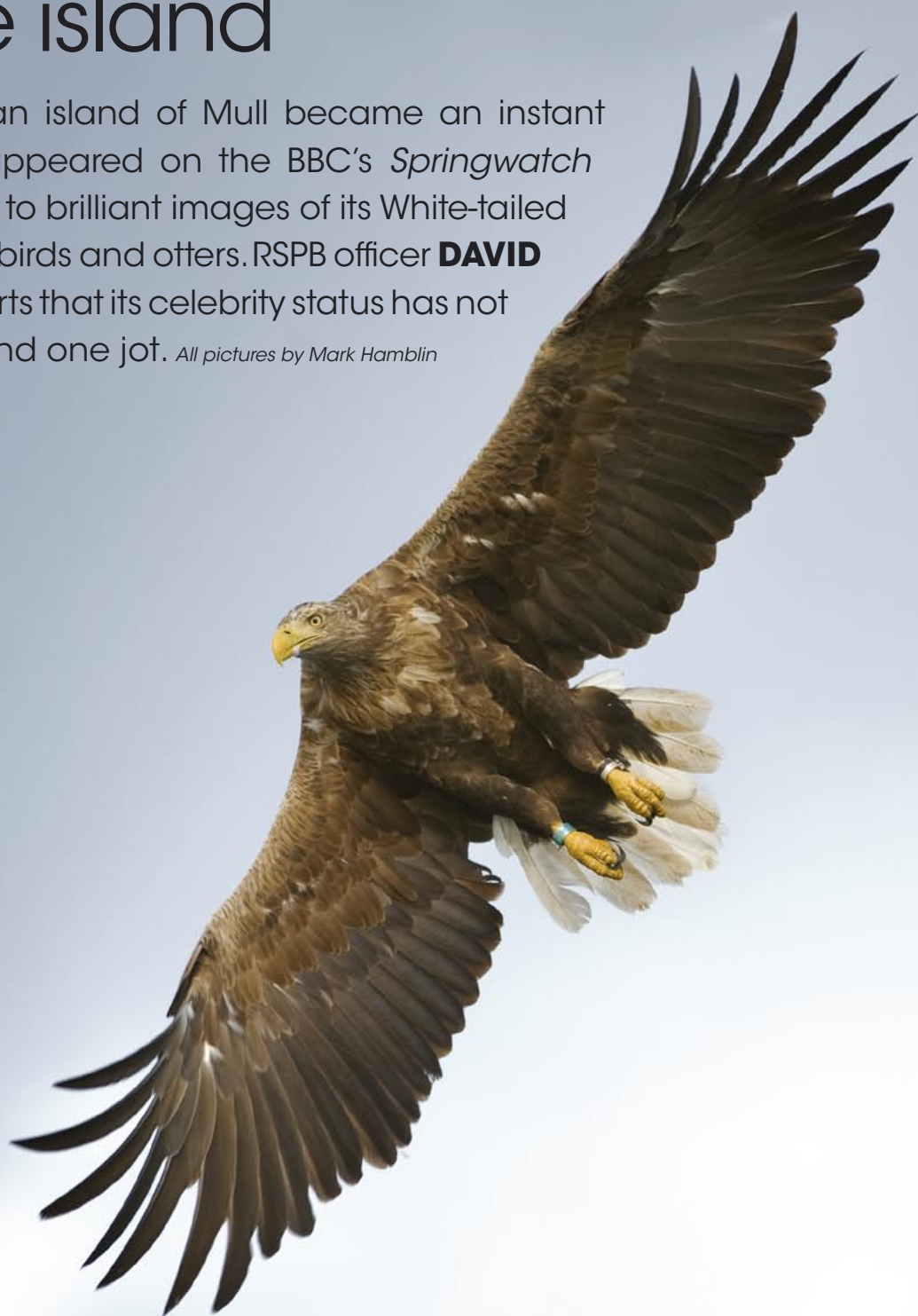




GREAT PLACES TO SEE BIRDS

Eagle island

The Hebridean island of Mull became an instant hit when it appeared on the BBC's *Springwatch* series, thanks to brilliant images of its White-tailed Eagles, other birds and otters. RSPB officer **DAVID SEXTON** reports that its celebrity status has not spoilt the island one jot. *All pictures by Mark Hamblin*



A White-tailed Eagle bears the coloured leg rings that, if reported by visiting birdwatchers, can help ornithologists keep track of Mull's now well-established population. In their first four years, young eagles roam far and wide and the RSPB is now using satellite tracking to discover more about these movements.

THEY SAY you never forget your first love. I watched her from afar, across a dark and restless loch. In the early morning spring sunshine, she was relaxing and preening on a lichen-covered boulder.

Behind her, new emerald green leaves on the oak trees were just budding. She was

being scolded by two twitchy Hooded Crows – their black wings flicking, their calls harsh and angry. Then she turned her blonde head away from them to look directly at me and I gazed longingly into those pale, piercing eyes. I was watching *Iolaire sùil na grèine* – the eagle with the sunlit eye.



Left: Late evening light illuminates the spectacular island scenery of Mull with Ben More touching the clouds in the distance.

She bent her noble head back over her body to preen the gleaming white tail which she fanned out in an arc. As the sun caught it, you could even see the burst of white feathers without binoculars – like a camera flash going off on the hillside.

Then that clever-like, banana-yellow beak gently worked its way through the feathers, one by one, and dislodged a floating tuft of eagle down which drifted away in the breeze and lodged itself in the fragrant bog myrtle.

Several hours or even days later when the White-tailed Eagle was long gone, the fluttering piece of down would be all that remained of this moment.

That image from 25 years ago is with me still. I can recall it in an instant if I close my eyes. But if I open them, it's better than ever because I'm still here! The sea lochs, the mountains, the forests and the eagles are the daily backdrops of which I will never tire.

There are many moments from Mull which will stay with you for a lifetime. This particular magic moment was in spring but come to Mull at any time of year, especially in summer and autumn and you will be astounded and entranced by what you see and hear.

My first White-tailed Eagle and her faithful mate went on to produce the first wild-bred sea eagle chick in the UK for 70 years, following their successful reintroduction from Norway. She is gone from our skies now but her offspring live on.

So what has happened to Mull in the last five years which has catapulted it to the dizzy heights of being described as 'Europe's best wildlife watching destination'? Two answers: White-tailed Eagles and *Springwatch*.

In 2005, the year the BBC launched *Springwatch*, they chose Mull as the first location for presenter and cameraman Simon King to base himself. Every night for a week,

the first live, stunning close-up images of family life at a sea eagle's nest were beamed into the homes of four million viewers.

The sun shone, the wildlife performed on cue and with the glorious backdrop of Ben More, Mull's rise to international wildlife-watching stardom began. And it's never looked back.

The '*Springwatch*-effect', as it's become

known, generated regular coverage over the years on everything from *Countryfile* to *Blue Peter* and from GMTV to Sky 1 HD.

Mull's reputation has gone global with hour-long programmes about our 'Eagle Island' being shown on primetime TV coast to coast in the USA and in Australia. So where next and has this 'fairest of the isles' been spoiled by all this attention?

Come here this summer and autumn and you'll see that she hasn't lost her appeal one little bit. We know there are a lot more people coming here now. We know how much income eagle watchers are generating for this fragile rural economy (£2 million a year at the last count) and yet Mull remains the same as she ever was: solid, dependable, beautiful and exciting.



The rasping call of Corn Crane is almost exclusively restricted to offshore Scottish islands – and none is better than the spiritual retreat of Iona. Author David Sexton says the noise reaches its peak between midnight and 3am!



Autumn is a great time to visit Mull – the summer crowds and most of the midges have gone, but you've got every opportunity to enjoy sightings of great birds such as Ptarmigan.

As the cars and motorhomes stream off the ferry at Craignure and the foot passengers rush for the waiting buses to Iona and Tobermory, you sometimes think Mull will sink under the weight of this seasonal influx.

And yet, as the buses depart, the ferry port falls silent once again and the crowds seem to disperse like autumn mist into the hills and glens. Even in high summer the whole island can appear as empty and remote as the numerous abandoned Clearance villages scattered around the land.

If you head north from Craignure, the main point of entry for most visitors, you are immediately in eagle country. If you play a round of golf at the amazingly scenic Craignure Golf Club, you are almost guaranteed a 'double eagle' (let alone a birdie).

A bold yellow Strathclyde Police sign proclaims 'Watch the eagles from here – proceeding risks causing disturbance' and you are immediately aware how important these birds are to the local community – and the local economy.

Off-shore delights

Along the entire stretch of coastline towards Salen, you will encounter spiky-headed Red-breasted Mergansers in small moulting flocks, perhaps an Eider or two mixed in and the ever-attendant Herring Gull waiting for a free meal of Mull mussels when the Eider surfaces. Common seals haul out and breed on the skerries in Salen Bay near the photogenic old boats tied up in the shallows.

Driving that stretch of coast today, before putting pen to paper for this article, my eye caught sight of a splash and a flash of fin out in the Sound of Mull. Pulling into a parking area (not a passing place) I spied seven bottle-nosed dolphins, adults and calves, cavorting, leaping and hurtling their way north up the Sound towards Tobermory.

From there you can board several boats dedicated to finding Mull's other big stars, the whales and sharks. A family company on Mull was the first in the UK to pioneer whale-watching trips. Once you had to travel to New England or South Africa to watch whales but not any more.

Just off Mull's shores you can see minke whale, orca, and even the occasional fin whale and humpback. Sharing their seas are one of the world's biggest ocean-going

creatures, the gentle basking shark, as well as harbour porpoise, common and Risso's dolphins. And all around, as the whales engage in a feeding frenzy, are the seabirds.

The best seabird colony close to Mull is on the Treshnish Isles. Scattered in a line out to the west of Ulva, with the famous Staffa off to the south, the Treshnish Isles are home to a thriving colony of auks – Puffins, Razorbills, Guillemots, Tysties (the local name for Black Guillemots) and their cliff-edge neighbours, Kittiwakes and other gulls.

A pair or two of Great Skuas have colonised in recent years, while Arctic and occasional Pomerine Skuas carry out raids just off-shore. In the autumn, grey seals come ashore here to pup and there are regular boat trips out from Ulva Ferry to see them.

Night sounds

On both the Treshnish Isles and Staffa, a couple of Corn Crakes call each summer but it is to Iona you must pilgrimage if you want to be sure of a classic night of summer corncraking. Wander the lanes and farm tracks by evening of this stunning Hebridean idyll and you may count more than 40 calling males if the weather is calm and mild.

Of course, if you're really keen and want to hit it exactly right, the times I do the annual Corn Crake census are between midnight and 3am when the air is reverberating with their deep, throaty crakes.

The medley of drumming Snipe, Lapwings, Golden Plovers and Curlews, the sound of distant surf, Corn Crakes, sheep, a distant dog bark and the heady scent of meadowsweet and you know it's summer on Iona. Before you know it, the Sky Larks are up again, the



Slavonian Grebes breed on the island, but by autumn they are more likely to be found offshore, along with Black-throated and Red-throated Divers.

crakes fall silent and it's time to stagger back to the B&B.

As you head back towards the ferry you will pass through the mighty and slightly spooky Glen More. Spooky, as it's the home of legends and a headless horseman but mighty as it's the domain of Golden Eagles.

Many a Gaelic-named rocky outcrop bears testament to it being an 'eagle crag' at some point in its history and more often than not, they're still here. The Golden Eagle has the reputation of being the more reclusive, distant, nobler and sleeker performer than its bulkier, less agile shadow in the skies, the White-tailed Eagle. But watch them together over the peaks

of Glen More and you'll see both are capable of stunning and intricate flying displays.

The Goldie is usually the aggressor, seeing off this relative 'newcomer' to our skies and the sea eagle is often happy to oblige and clears out of occupied air space. But when they do engage, there's no telling who will emerge unscathed.

If their talons lock, the cries of the White-tail echo out round the glens and if you're lying on your back in the heather gazing at all this in the heavens, you will never want it to end.

But it will, suddenly and quickly. One will go one way and one will go the other...



A female Hen Harrier brings half-eaten rodent prey back to the nest for her hungry chicks. Loch Frisa is a top site for seeing several bird of prey species.

dispute sorted. As the eagles glide off over the distant ridges, they will be on the look-out for Ptarmigan on the highest Mull peaks, Red Grouse over the lower moors and Irish hares if they can find them.

The White-tailed Eagle may drift down towards the coast and alight on a grassy knoll by the sea. The knoll may be bright and green from centuries of eagle and otter activity and it's the otters that the eagles have come to watch.

You will not be the only ones hoping to catch a glimpse of otters fishing. Our sea eagles regularly watch and follow them along the shore as have learned that otters are better

fishermen than they are and if they wait and wait and then wait a bit more, they will eventually get to steal a fine catch from the hard-working mammal.

It seems to be an ancient relationship which will have existed long before sea eagle became extinct here and one which they picked up again very quickly upon their return.

Offshore in the autumn, the Great Northern Divers will re-appear on Loch na Keal and Loch Scridain. It seems like they had only just left us in the early summer for Iceland, looking resplendent in full breeding plumage but now they're back. Red-throated and Black-throated Divers and Slavonian Grebes too will be there

but others will have gone from our shores. The Common Sandpipers, Ringed Plovers and terns which once called long into the summer nights have headed south.

Mull in the late summer and autumn can be a magical time. The stags will be roaring and all the young eagles of the year will be bolder in flight and grappling with one another over late-blooming heather.

Later still as the first snows descend on the hills and ice crackles along the hill burns, Dippers dart ahead of you. Snow Buntings mingle with Yellowhammers and Reed Buntings around the cattle feed stances and scatter as Merlin, Sparrowhawk, Hen Harrier and Peregrine flash through.

But always overhead the eagles will be soaring. I know where I can go to see the now-adult offspring of that first magnificent White-tailed Eagle sitting on her lichen covered boulder. If you come, we'll show you too. ■

David Sexton

David Sexton works as the Mull Officer for RSPB Scotland, monitoring the White-tailed and Golden Eagle populations as well as the Corn Crakes on Iona. He helps to set up the famous Eagle Hide each year at Loch Frisa and initiated the satellite tracking study of immature sea eagles (follow on-line at www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/tracking/mulleagles)

Previously he was Head of Reserves in Scotland at RSPB's HQ in Edinburgh before taking the plunge and heading back out into the field. He lives on Mull with his wife and two daughters.

MULL FACT FILE

● **Getting there** – CalMac ferries depart all year from Oban to Craignure, Lochaline to Fishnish and Kilchoan to Tobermory. Summer and winter timetables vary. Car bookings essential at peak times. www.calmac.co.uk or call 0800 066 5000

Trains to Oban from Glasgow Queen Street. Contact First Scotrail. Buses to Oban from all over Scotland. Contact Scottish Citylink.

Private airstrip at Glenforsa. Seaplane service from Glasgow to Tobermory.

● **Getting around** – Driving is

on mostly single track roads with passing places. The police and locals strongly encourage you not to use passing places as parking places – expect a ticket if you ignore this advice. Always allow cars behind you to pass by pulling into the left or waiting opposite a passing place on the right. Nothing causes more local 'road rage' than birders and photographers motoring along at 5mph looking for otters and eagles or stopping in the middle of the road to set up tripods.

Bowman's Buses meet most ferries in the summer but only

selected ones in winter. They can take you to Fionnphort for Iona (no cars allowed on Iona) or to Tobermory and all points en route. They also meet some ferries from Lochaline to Fishnish. Check first by calling 01631 563221 in Oban or 01680 812 313 on Mull.

● **Car hire** – Limited but try Mackay's Garage, Tobermory 01680 302 103

● **Bike/kayak/boat hire** – Possible at various outlets; check with the Visit Scotland Visitor Information Centre in Craignure 01680 812 377

● **Accommodation** – As above check with the VIC in Craignure. The main website to check is www.holidaymull.co.uk and www.visitscotland.org Tel 0845 22 55 121
Wide range of B&Bs, guest houses, hotels, hostels and camp sites. The camp sites at Fidden and Killiechronan offer excellent wildlife viewing opportunities on the doorstep.

● **Best time of year to visit** – Mull is an all-year-round destination! The island Big Five (White-tailed Eagle, Golden Eagle, otter, red deer

and seals) are resident here all year round. Minke whale and basking shark peak in May-August. Corn Crakes on Iona are calling May to July. Puffins and seabirds on Treshnish Isles May to July. Red deer rut and grey seals pup in October. Red deer calves and common seals pup in June.

White-tailed eagles at the Loch Frisa Eagle Hide are breeding from March to August but are resident all year.

Midges emerge in May and go by October! Try a visit in the autumn and winter: the roads are empty and many

accommodation providers offer attractive weekend and mid week break rates.

● **Recommended books and maps:** – The main shop in Tobermory 'Tackle and Books' is full of local wildlife guide books and well worth a browse. The annual *Isle of Mull Bird Report and Species List* compiled by Alan Spellman is available in local shops. Island-based birding and wildlife websites include www.mullbirds.com and www.mullbirdclub.org.uk

● **Guides and tour operators**

Nine land-based wildlife, photographic and history/culture operators can take you around the island in mini-buses providing lunch, binoculars, telescope, guide books and expertise. All have their strengths and are similarly priced and timed to pick up and drop off at ferries or accommodation. Contact the Craignure VIC for more details or see their details on either the Holiday Mull & Iona website or Mull Birds Online (addresses above).

There are even more sea-based operators offering seabird and cetacean

watching and sea angling trips. Most depart from Tobermory, Ulva Ferry and Fionnphort/Iona. For all the operators look for the 'Wild Scotland' membership logo which means they comply with a wildlife watching code. And if you think they're not complying, tell them!

Several off-island companies include Mull in their itineraries. These are often day trips from the mainland. Both VisitScotland and Wild Scotland will list members who offer Mull excursions www.wild-scotland.org.uk



BEST BIRDING AND WILDLIFE PLACES

● **Loch Frisa:** Where the famous Mull White-tailed Eagle Hide is open year round. Run by Forestry Commission Scotland, RSPB, Mull & Iona Community Trust, Scottish Natural Heritage and Strathclyde Police and all proceeds go back to local good causes. There's lot more besides, including Golden Eagle, Buzzard, Hen Harrier, Raven, Crossbill. Call 01680 812 556 to book a trip or visit www.rspb.org.uk/datewithnature/sites/mull or www.forestry.gov.uk/mullsea eagles

And keep up to date with an award-winning online blog from the eagle hide at www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/tracking/mulleagles

● **Loch Don:** A beautiful tidal sea loch to the south of Craignure. The hamlet of Lochdonhead skirts the shore line. Probably the best site on Mull to look for waders and sea duck at low tide and high tide roosts. Sea eagles are frequent, Ospreys regular in summer. Great woodland walks at nearby Torosay Castle.

● **Salen Bay:** Scenic bay to the north of Salen. Common seals on the off shore rocks and otters regularly seen. Wigeon, Eider, Red-breasted Merganser are common; follow the Aros river for Dipper, Goosander and Grey Heron.

● **Loch na Keal:** Massive sea loch which nearly cuts Mull in two. North and south shores have roads skirting them. Otters are frequent; cetaceans sometimes enter the loch for periods of time. Sea eagles and Golden Eagles regular in the area. Peregrines and Buzzards along the dramatic Gribun cliffs. Seaduck, divers and grebes in winter. Gannets fish here when the weather is rough at sea. One enterprising boat operator out of Ulva Ferry now gets sea eagles dropping in for fishy handouts, offering great photographic opportunities.

● **Loch Scridain/Loch Beg:** To the south of Mull. Another excellent eagle and otter area. Give the otters some space and don't harass them just for a good photograph. Greenshank and other waders often on the mud at low tide. Avoid parking where you're asked not to in nearby Glen Seiliseir as otherwise the White-tailed Eagles will get the blame for causing congestion!

● **Tobermory:** The bay is always worth a scan for winter white-winged gulls, Dipper and wildfowl. Nearby Aros Park offers



Crystal clear waters, sandy beaches and dramatic interior landscapes - it's no surprise that people fall in love with Mull. This is Calgary where otters are seen regularly and basking sharks swim offshore.

stunning woodland walks and waterfalls and a typical range of woodland and river species. Kingfisher is occasional here in winter.

● **Calgary Bay:** The white sands of Calgary can be busy on warm summer days but at any time it's a stunning area to visit. Eagles, other raptors, Ravens are all nearby; basking sharks and otters are seen in the bay and when you've had enough fresh air the gallery and tea room up the hill offers a hearty local lunch.

● **Loch Cuin:** Another great little inlet in Dervaig with waders (Greenshank regularly) and White-tailed Eagles frequently overhead. The reedbed at the back of the bay always looks like it ought to produce something interesting; Hen Harriers are frequently hunting here especially on blustery autumn evenings. Barn Owls too frequent the low ground for hunting then it's back to the Bellachroy Inn for some refreshment.

● **Fidden:** Opposite Iona, this farm and campsite are great for breeding waders and wintering geese. Most of Mull's Greenland White-fronted and Barnacle Geese use this area in winter alongside the resident Greylags. This is the main place on Mull where you might also hear a Corn Crake in June.

● **Iona:** A gorgeous island, especially when the sun is out. Corn Crakes galore as you sip tea in the hotel gardens. Other island species include farmland finches like Twite, waders, Sky Larks and a big rookery. Please keep out of fields and gardens in your quest for the elusive Corn Crake.

● **Treshnish Isles:** Boats leave mostly from Ulva Ferry though also from Iona/Fionnphort. Take time out there to land and walk carefully towards the main seabird colony and Puffin burrows. As ever, keep well back from the burrows and cliff edges so birds can access their nests.



Next month **'Solway secrets'** spotlights little-known sites on both sides of this mighty estuary.