Eagles in Wales: a review of ornithological literature, county avifaunas 1889-2000 and Welsh place names

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Crynodeb

Mae'r erthygl fer yma yn adolygu'r dystiolaeth am statws hanesyddol eryrod, eryr euraid (*Aquila chrysaetos*) ac eryr y môr (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) yng Nghymru drwy edrych ar lenyddiaeth adaryddol mewn papurau newyddion, erthyglau mewn cylchgronau, Adroddiadau Sirol am adar 1889-2000 ac enwau lleoedd yng Nghymru. Daw i'r casgliad mai prin iawn yw'r dystiolaeth fod yr un o'r ddau fath o eryr yn gyffredin a phrinach fyth yw unrhyw dystiolaeth o fagu. Mae'r dystiolaeth yn awgrymu mai rhywogaethau prin, ysbeidiol a chrwydrol oeddynt yng Nghymru. Bu cryn drafodaeth ar statws hanesyddol eryrod yng Nghymru. Awgrymodd Williams *et al*. (2020) bod tystiolaeth o fagu a chofnodi aml. Yn ôl Lovegrove *et al.* (1994), yng nghyswllt eryr môr, "nad oes unrhyw dystiolaeth bod eryr môr erioed wedi magu yng Nghymru.....Mae tystiolaeth adroddiadau pryfoclyd ac anelwig am eryrod yn nythu yng Nghymru mwy na thebyg yn cyfeirio at yr eryr euraid" Mae Williams *et al.* (2020) yn awgrymu bod y dystiolaeth yn adlewyrchu magu a chofnodion "rheolaidd". Fe dderbynir yn gyffredinol bod rhywogaethau o eryrod wedi bod yn gyffredin dros rannau helaeth o Gymru hyd at ganol y bedwaredd ganrif ar bymtheg, ond prin iawn yw'r cofnodion cyhoeddedig cyn canol yr 1800au. Nid oedd yng Nghymru adarwyr brodorol a bu'n rhaid dibynnu ar adroddiadau ciperiaid a thirfeddianwyr fu'n difa ysglyfaethwyr gan eu pasio ymlaen i dacsidermiaid neu yn ddiweddarach adroddiadau offeiriaid Plwyf. Bu ciperiaid yn allweddol ar gyfer darparu cofnodion(er yn aml cofnodion o garcas) ond ychydig iawn â wyddom am effaith a'r rhan â gymerwyd ganddynt ynghŷd â dilysrwydd cofnodion y stadau. Byddai rhain yn faes ymchwil pellach. Tybed a oes rhagor o wybodaeth i'w gael yng nghofnodion y stadau ? Wrth fynd trwy'r llenyddiaeth adaryddol fe ddaeth yn amlwg bod nifer o anghysonderau a gosodiadau camarweiniol yno, felly rhoddwyd sylw penodol wrth geisio dilysrwydd pob cofnod a'u gwirio gydag ffynonellau eraill.

Abstract

This short article reviews the evidence for the former status of eagles, Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) and White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) in Wales on the basis of a review of the ornithological literature gathered from newspaper reports, journal articles, County Avifaunas 1889-2000 and Welsh place-names. It concludes that there is very little evidence that either species were common and that there is even less evidence of breeding. The evidence from the records points to both species being rare visitors to Wales. There has been much discussion regarding the former status of eagle species in Wales. Williams *et al.* (2020) suggested that there was evidence of breeding and frequent records. Lovegrove *et al*. (1994) stated that in relation to the White-tailed Eagle "There is no evidence that White-tailed Eagles ever bred in Wales.....The tantalisingly vague accounts of Eagles possibly nesting in Wales more likely refer to Golden Eagle." Williams *et al.* (2020) suggest that the evidence was of breeding and "frequent" recording. It is thought and generally accepted that eagle species were widespread over much of Wales into the mid-decades of the 19th century, yet there are few published records before the mid-1880s. Wales lacked indigenous ornithologists and had to rely on gamekeepers and farmers who destroyed predators, kept records, passed specimens for taxidermy and later the records of parish priests. Gamekeepers played an important

role in providing records (albeit of carcases) but little is known of the impact of the role that they played and the accuracy of Estate records. This would be an area for future research. One wonders if any further information could be gleaned from archive material on historical Estate records. From the review of the ornithological literature it became apparent there are many inconsistencies and misleading statements in the literature, so particular attention was paid to assessing the validity of each statement by referring to other sources.

Introduction and methods

This short article reviews historical literature of eagle records in Wales It is not intended to be a scientific analysis but an attempt to collate historical records from all parts of Wales. In presenting this short paper I hope to generate further understanding of historical records, archaeological finds and place names relating to eagle species in Wales. I have touched on archaeological findings which would provide new avenues of research, specifically in Wales.

Literature searches were conducted by searching newspapers and journals on the National Library of Wales website. County avifaunas and local bird reports from 1889 to 2000 were also searched. The main documentary sources were the 19th and 20th century ornithological accounts. These accounts include useful information on the presence and former presence of both species of eagle in Wales.

Attempts to reconstruct historical ranges of species inevitably involve much speculation. Studies of this type have many possible sources of error. Consequently it is difficult to validate the assumption that a place name identified as representing eagles by detailed research in one area will do so elsewhere and it is possible that some names may not directly reflect the past presence of eagles. Welsh place name elements denoting 'eagle' do not differentiate between species. This of course is not surprising given the relative novelty of species as a concept and the difficulty in distinguishing between similar species in the days before optical aids. Some wild animal specimens are sufficiently charismatic for their former presence to have been recorded in place names (Ekwall 1960). Although a place name may conceivably be named after a single occurrence of a notable creature, Gelling and Cole (2000) argue that place names at least in parts of Britain tended to describe the landscape in terms of persistent familiar features.

The use of place names in any historical context has its own potential pitfalls. Consider the place name "Llwyn Eryr" on the outskirts of Morriston, south Wales, thought by many as a place name reflecting the presence of the White-tailed Eagle. In reality "Llwyn Eryr" has no connection with any eagle species. Llwyn Eryr was a house built for one of the managers of the Llangyfelach coal pits which were owned and managed by the Eagle Bush Mining Company. "Llwyn Eryr" is the Welsh translation of Eagle Bush. One also has to consider the probability, as does some of the historical evidence, of escaped birds being recorded in the wild. The Golden Eagle in the Tregaron area in recent years springs to mind. Also of note is the statement in Thorpe and Stratford (2021) that "A review of all records in 2020 found that all post-1950 records were likely, or proven to be, escapes". Escaped eagles would not have been an event exclusive to post-1950 years as reported in one newspaper: "EXCITING EAGLE HUNT. An exciting eagle hunt has just taken place at Liverpool. Five large eagles escaped from a vessel in dock, having been brought from abroad for a dealer. They were chased along a number of housetops, but owing to their showing fight, none of their pursuers ventured too near. One of the birds attacked a boy very fiercely, and tore his hand, while another played havoc among a lot of pigeons. The eagles are still at large" (Cardiff Times 29 June 1901). It is not inconceivable that some of these escaped birds would have found their way over the border to Wales in the years following 1901.

Verification of records

References were generally taken at face value but careful attention was paid to the exact wording and implication of the original reference wherever possible. There were several instances where originals were misquoted or embellished. In such instances the record always assumes the status of the original reference. Loosely worded statements were double checked against other relevant references where possible.

Early historical records

There is no shortage of references to eagles in early Welsh prose and poetry such as Canu Heledd and Canu Llywarch Hen or the story of Culhwch and Olwen in the Mabinogion. Williams (2014) in his thesis provided an interesting picture on the symbolism of eagles in the age of the Cywyddwyr. In early Welsh literature the eagle is represented as a symbol of power and status and it is difficult to establish whether a number of these writings actually refer to the present geographical Wales or not. Previously Wales extended from the south-west of England right up into southern Scotland. One cannot dismiss as Dafydd (2015), suggested that some of the place names in Canu Heledd and Canu Llywarch Hen are located in the "Old Powys" just over the border in Shropshire. Canu Heledd describes eagles waiting for the opportunity to feast on the bodies of the dead warriors of battle. On the other hand Elias (2004) also stated that Eryr Gwernabwy in the story of Culhwch and Olwen cannot be completely dismissed as being an Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*). It is not clear what species of bird these prose and poetical works relate to.

Although records from past centuries are somewhat vague it seems that Golden Eagles were seen regularly in Snowdonia until about the middle of the 17th century. The botanist Thomas Johnson who was collecting plant specimens on Carnedd Llewelyn in 1639 mentioned "the faintheartedness of his guide in his fear of eagles on Carnedd Llewelyn" Carter (1964). Subsequent authors have added to this statement by stating that "eagles nested there" Lovegrove *et al*. (1994) and Barnes (1997). Jones (1993) gives more details and background information to the occasion and one feels that there was rather more to the story than simply the danger of "nesting eagles".

In *c*.1538 John Leland (*c*. 1503-1552) described an eagle's nest at Castle Dinas Brân, Denbighshire, in these terms: "and there in the rok side that the castelle stondith on bredith every yere an egle. And the egle doth sorely assaut hym that distroith the nest, goyng doun in one basket, and having a nother over his hedde to defend the sore stripe of the egle." Interestingly Borrow (1901) quotes a stanza from a poem by Roger Cyffin (*c*. 1589-1609) on Dinas Brân. There is no mention of 'egle'.

"Gone, gone are thy gates, Dinas Bran on the height!
Thy warders are blood-crows and ravens, I trow;
Now no one will wend from field of the fight
To the fortress on high, save the raven and crow"

Had the egle disappeared by Cyffin's time or did Leland add a bit of colour to his account?

All authorities are agreed that the Golden Eagle used to be present in the mountainous districts of Wales. They appear to follow Willughby (a contemporary of John Ray), who, writing in 1678, said that it nested at that time on the high rocks of Snowdonia. Eagles nested in Snowdonia in 1658 and 1662 (Ray and Willoughby's visits). Pennant, writing more than a century later, stated the same in general terms, "This kind of eagle sometimes migrates into Caernarvonshire and there are instances though rare of its having bred in the Snowdon Hills." Forrest (1907) wrote that "no author, so far as I can find out, gives any actual instance of an eyrie being found [....] No specimen has been obtained in North Wales within the last one hundred years. From time to time reports of Golden Eagles being

seen or obtained have appeared in news papers but on investigation these have always proved to be either immature White-tailed Eagles or Common Buzzards."

Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709) printed some information on the Snowdon eagles, more than likely using information given to him by Gulielmus (William) Rowlands. "It is more than sufficiently well established", he said, "that the mountain crags of the British Alps are called Creigie y'ryri (sic) from yr Eryr ab Eryrod, eagles, which according to tradition formerly lived in profusion in that region". He went on: "There is scarcely anyone of the older local inhabitants who has not seen the eagles; an eagle has been seen within the past three years, and people believe there is still one surviving". According to Emery (1985) "Although Rowlands does not state that he saw a golden eagle himself, he is convincing about the testimony for the presence of eryrod in Snowdonia in or about 1690". Rowlands continued: "These birds of prey were once famous for various incidents: for they are said to have snatched up not just tame birds, lambs and sheep, but dogs, calves and swine, and to have devoured larger animals and, not content just with these, to have swooped on men".

There are some archaeological records from relatively few localities that could be included. There is the likelihood that eagle remains may have been transported to their final location by humans either incidentally or deliberately (Grossman *et al*. 2008). Archaelogical records of eagle bones found in Welsh caves have been quoted in many published works Lovegrove *et al*.(1994), Pritchard(2020) and Williams *et al.* (2020). These publications, in general, repeat the same information. However information from the National Museum of Wales (2020) provided us with additional information to consider. Records of two bones from Coygan Cave, Carmarthenshire claiming to be eagle. Identifications are recorded to have been made by Don Bramwell, however, a note on one of these records states that the bones have been looked at more recently by Dr Jo Cooper of the Natural History Museum, who has identified these as simply 'large bird but not eagle'. There is a bird bone from Port Eynon Cave, Gower which is 'unverified and for which there is no credit for the identification'. This is noted on the database as an eagle bone but the bone is unidentified, 'so no doubt caution should be given to this identification'. Further excavation at Cat Hole Cave in 2012 showed that ten pieces of bones were recovered including a coracoid and two conjoining fragments of an ulna belonging to domestic fowl and a proximal phalanx of the major digit belonging to a duck (*Anas/Aythya* spp.). The remainder were only identifiable as a 'bird' with the exception of a passerine, probably Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), humerus. There is one bone from Pontnewydd Cave, Denbighshire, identified as either a Golden Eagle or an Eagle Owl (*Bubo bubo*). This identification is by Mrs Anne Eastham and suggests it is a terminal phalange comparable in size with Eagle. See current research on use of phalange bones as pieces of jewellery in neolithic nomad tribes. The final reference is to four eagle bones, without bone identifications given from the excavations in the Museum Garden, Caerleon by J.David Zienkiewicz. This would suggest that further research on archaeological finds could be undertaken to establish further the identity of such bones. Should these archaeological finds be discussed in a wider 'global' rather than 'local' context?

County records

Anglesey

There are a few records from Anglesey (Jones and Whalley 2004). The earliest was of a bird shot at Bodowen Farm, Bodorgan in December 1839. Initially, thought to be of the "species called falcon imperialis or imperial eagle". This bird was later confirmed by the Zoological Society "to be the Golden Eagle, now a very rare bird indeed in the British Islands. It is in mature and perfect condition and will be the more valuable to us from being the only British specimen in our collection". There were unconfirmed reports of Golden Eagle at Tregaian around 1910 and another off the coast of Cemlyn in December 1954. There is some confusion surrounding the Cemlyn record. Walker and McLean

(1961) stated that there was doubt on the accuracy of this record and a subsequent note stated that "an eagle (indeterminate views) seen on Cemlyn, December 1955". There are no recent reliable records for the species for Anglesey. White-tailed Eagles were reported from Cors Erddreiniog on 7 June 1988 and another bird from Trearddur Bay on 14 April 1989, but, these records were "not accepted" (Sandham 2016).

Brecon

The ornithological records mention one Golden Eagle record, a bird killed at "Penbont near Brecon" in around 1859. Cambridge Phillips (1899) after having seen the bird described it thus "I should consider it, from its plumage to be a bird of three or four years old and to have strayed to the Beacons in search of food". There are two records for White-tailed Eagle. One reported by Professor J.H. Salter of one "captured at Dinas, near Cantref at Christmas 1901". The other record refers to a bird that was seen in Breconshire on 11 April 1936. Ingram and Salmon (1957) stated that in their opinion, Phillips (1948) "mistakenly" suggested that, the Golden Eagle was "still to be found" in the county. Phillips mentioned that a farmer Mr. Glyn Francis, Llandegeman Farm had shot a bird near Tretower and that it had been stuffed and preserved at Crickhowell. Lovegrove *et al*. (1994) and Ingram and Salmon (1957) considered this record as "unsubstantiated". Phillips also mentioned a bird that he had observed above Cwmshenkin but gives no date and also mentioned "Golden Eagles observed at Llangynidr, Grwyne Fawr and at Llanigon", again no dates were given for any these.

Caernarfon

Although there are a number of records the details in some cases are unclear, as with the Carnedd Llewelyn 1639 report. The next record was at Beddgelert in 1859. This record was considered as a White-tailed Eagle although Sandham (2016) suggested that it is "considered as doubtful as Golden Eagle was not ruled out".

The records of two birds seen on Glyder Fawr in September 1870 and May 1886 have been disputed. Both sightings were reported on in the press. However, Forrest (1907) noted that "From time to time reports of Golden Eagles being seen or obtained have appeared in newspapers but on investigation these have always proved to be either immature White-tailed Eagles or Common Buzzards. Both in colour and form the latter closely resembles an Eagle and may easily be mistaken for one, unless the observer is near enough to note its smaller size. There is no doubt that the pair of birds seen on Glyder Fawr 30th September 1870 and described by Mr A. G. More as Golden Eagles in the Zoologist as well as another pair in the same place recorded similarly in the Field 1 May 1886 were Buzzards". Love (2013) wrote after "personal communication from Dr W G Hale that 'the last known Welsh pair' seemed to have nested at Carreg y Llam, near Nevin on the Llŷn Peninsula, around 1880".

There was a record for Capel Curig in 1900 for White-tailed Eagle but Sandham (2016) stated that this record should be "considered doubtful as Golden Eagle was not ruled out". The 1910 record for Abersoch is well documented in the literature and was also reported in the press at the time. The eagle was finally shot and injured and taken to Wrexham where it was kept in captivity.

Ceredigion

The first record for Cardiganshire was a bird shot on Plynlimon in November 1887. The bird was reported to Mr Hugh Jerman, Principal of Llandrillo College who described it as a "beautiful specimen of Golden Eagle". It is interesting that a photograph of the shot eagle appears in Aston (1906) and is described as "an immature White-tailed Eagle". A second record was of an immature bird shot at Glandovey in the spring of 1904. The 1910 bird recorded at Aberaeron was considered by Forrest (1907) to be the same bird that was later shot and captured at Abersoch. The 1965 report of a Golden

Eagle in Tre'r ddôl was widely reported in the newspapers and Lovegrove *et al*. (1994) considered this record as "unsubstantiated". The next two records were in the Cors Caron area. On 28 January 1990 an "immature bird was seen over the hillside on the edge of Cors Caron (Roderick and Davis 2010). It was reported that the possibility of "an 'escape' could not be completely dismissed. On 12 November 1997 a "juvenille White-tailed Eagle twice glided over. This bird was not resighted."

Carmarthen
Mathew (1894) reported on a bird shot near Carmarthen that was in the collection of Stackpole Court Pembrokeshire. This bird was reported as "a young White-tailed Eagle". Another bird was reported as having been shot by Mr Lockyer, keeper at Dynevor Castle. Ingram and Salmon (1954) suggest that these records may "refer to the same bird".

One was recorded near Dolaucothy about 1915 but this may have been one of the Golden Eagles released from Skomer, Pembrokeshire.

The most substantial record for Carmarthenshire is of a Golden Eagle reported as shot at Llanelli on 6 October 1908 and described as "the first eagle ever seen in the locality and it caused great excitement".

Denbigh
Apart from the record from Llangollen (*c*. 1538) there are three records for Denbighshire. Two of the records related to possible "immature" birds. A bird was shot in Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog in 1855 and brought to the Hand Inn before being sent to Shrewsbury for preservation. The second record related to a bird shot at Llandrillo in 1862 or 1853 (Pritchard 2012). Some records stated that it was recorded at Crogen. Dobie (1893) reported that "Sir H.B. Robertson has a specimen in the Palé collection, shot on the Berwyns, Merionethshire, near the Denbighshire border, in 1863". There was another possible "immature" bird shot at Bodelwyddan in 1873 described in a newspaper article as a "White-tailed Eagle, a young bird showing no white in the tail."

Flint
There has been one record of a bird shot at Talacre in 1810. A newspaper report of 1884 reported that this bird was "a white tailed eagle of great strength and beautiful plumage was shot. The legs and talons were remarkably large and strong, and feathered all down to the claws. It has a large white spot on the tail whence it derives its denomination". This description would suggest a Golden Eagle.

Glamorgan
Heathcote *et al*. (1967) noted that, "Dodderidge Knight recorded that two eagles of this species were caught at Kenfig Burrows in 1818". In this he may not have been quite accurate since there is in the National Museum of Wales a water-colour by Wm. Weston Young depicting a pair of eagles the female of which is shown caught by her right foot in a gin-trap. A contemporary note is appended apparently in the handwriting of the artist, stating that the bird was taken in 1816 at Kenfig but that the male, though remaining in that part of the country for some time afterwards, could not be caught 'by any contrivance'. It also stated that the unfortunate female was left in the trap for 24 hours (no doubt in the hope that her mate might be taken in another trap or thus enticed within range of a gun). There is also in private hands another water-colour by the same artist of a 'young Sea-Eagle' which was said to have been found at Margam *c*.1810 though there are no supporting data. Dodderidge Knight also recorded two others during severe weather in 1830 and another at Newton Warren "towards Ogmore" in 1833. Two single birds were later recorded, probably quite reliably as

having been seen at Margam in *c*.1840 and *c*.1860. There are still in existence two specimens at Penrice recently examined through the courtesy of Mr Christopher Methuen-Campbell which may possibly be associated with the 1830 birds mentioned above. These two specimens are recorded on their cases in apparently contemporary handwriting; the first simply with the date 'March 7th 1828' and the second dated 2 March 1831 with the legend 'shot by Isaac Stubbs, Cwm Malwg'. Cwm Malwg is, of course at Margam and the birds after being mounted were perhaps taken to Penrice or possibly moved there from Margam at a later date.

Hurford and Lansdown (1995) also reported on records in 1840 and 1848 but gave no further details other than "the species was occurring more rarely by 1848. There was no record subsequent to 1859".

Meirionnydd

As the case with the records for Caernarvonshire there are several, but they are not clear and the number involved ambiguous. The first record was on 13 Nov 1880, a bird seen and shot near Craig yr Aderyn. Sandham (2016) reported that this bird "was preserved at Bala Post Office and now Bangor University". However other reports stated that the bird "preserved" at the post office was the bird obtained on 28 Feb 1899 in the Llangower area. The bird was picked up dead in the neighbourhood, at the foot of a cliff, in 1899, against which it had been dashed by the violence of the wind. However, another report stated, "Its skull was fractured and the lower mandible missing. It is conjectured that the bird met its death in a fight, through jealousy, with another of his species". There was a record of about the middle of April, "a white-tailed eagle was seen on the farm of Hafod Uchel around the 15 or 16th April 1900". The farmer had seen the White-tailed Eagle which was captured at Llangower, near Bala, at the end of February of last year, and he was "certain it was one like it he saw on his farm".

There was a record of a Golden Eagle from the Cwm Bychan area above Llanbedr on 2 July 1909. This individual was considered to be "an immature or unattached bird". Later records were of a bird at Llanuwchllyn in September 1923. Pritchard (2012) suggested that "more recent records are likely to be escaped birds". There was an immature bird reported from Trawsfynydd on 29 November 1965 and an adult at Blaen-lliw near Llanuwchllyn on 20 June 1967.

Then there was a record from the Cwm Croesor area in 1902. This record appears to have gone under the radar as I have not seen it reported in any of the County avifaunas. Forrest wrote (in Bygones, 22 October 1902) that he had "received the following interesting account from Mr Townshend of Oxford, who had read my recent article on the subject:—'I was on Cynicht in the latter part of July this year, with my niece, and saw a pair of Eagles. The one first seen got up below us on the S.W. area of the hill', where it had been feeding on the carcase of a dead sheep..... After a while this first bird was joined by its mate, and the pair continued for some time to soar over Cwm Croesor, between Cynicht and Moelwyn..... I was careful not to mention the matter to the people of the neighbourhood, as it would have been easy to shoot the birds'. The occurrence of a pair of Eagles in July in Wales is so extraordinary that the fact requires to be substantiated without a doubt".

Radnor

There was a record in Ingram and Salmon (1955) of "A noble eagle shot at Beguildy" on 2 December 1835. This was followed by a record of a bird shot in the Llanwern area in December 1896 and described as "brown, streaked with white. The eagle was afterwards presented to Mr D.A. Thomas M.P. on whose preserve it was shot."

Monmouth

In 1985 there was a record of a Golden Eagle from Coed y Prior on 24 March and reported by Venables *et al*. (2008): "The occurrence of a bird in Gwent in 1985 is therefore most remarkable. The bird in question was an immature…….. What was almost certainly the same individual had also been seen in central Wales several weeks earlier".

Montgomery

One was reported over Foel in 1965. Holt and Williams (2008) noted "There has never been a definite record in the county other than one reported at Foel in 1965 which was almost certainly an escaped bird from Pwllheli". A certain Mr Barnes at that time kept a Golden Eagle at Pwllheli. A Golden Eagle was killed following a collision with an ice cream van at Pwllheli.

Pembroke

Mathew (1894) reported a bird seen in the Haverdfordwest area in 1851. This bird was supposed to have been a Golden Eagle, but "with more probability may be considered to have been an immature White-tailed Eagle,...".

The next record was of an "immature" bird that was shot in Whitechurch in February 1908. Donovan and Rees (1994) stated that, "It was erroneously reported as Golden Eagle".

Much has been written about the two Golden Eagles that were kept as captive birds on the Island of Skomer and released in 1915. One of these was shot when it visited the mainland. The remaining eagle remained on Skomer before moving to Ramsey Island in 1928. Another Golden Eagle was brought from London Zoo in an effort to encourage breeding but was found drowned in Ramsey Sound on 9 October 1929. The remaining Skomer eagle was shot in March 1932 and the mounted specimen can be seen at Tenby museum. It was later discovered that the last two birds were both female. Rees (2010) reported a"2nd or 3rd winter bird was seen at Skomer on the 10th and 11th November 1993 which departed along the line of the southern shore of St Bride's Bay but was not seen again".

Resident or passage birds?

Some of the ornithological literature provides further information about the circumstances of the records. Other reports mention the age, sex of the birds and dates of the records. This may provide further insight into past status of eagle species in Wales. General terms such as "Not recorded for over 50 years" Ingram *et al*. (1966), "Very rare vagrant", Roderick and Davis (2010), "A very rare visitor" Green and Roberts (2004) and "Rare vagrant with a possibility of birds being escapes from captivity" Pritchard (2012) were frequently encountered but some of the literature provided further information such as, "This bird was supposed to have been a Golden Eagle, but with more probability may be considered to have been an immature White-tailed Eagle, a species not unseldom observed as a straggler along the western coasts of the kingdom" Mathew (1894).

Edward Lhyud in his revision of the sections on Wales in the second edition of Camden's Britannia (1722), noted that Eagles in Snowdonia "do yet haunt these Rocks some years, though not above three or four at a time, and that commonly one summer in five or six; coming hither, as is suppos'd, out of Ireland". According to Nicholl (1889), "As an accidental visitor the White-tailed Eagle has occurred several times. I have records of nine such occurrences, only four of which, however, are in my opinion reliable".

Cambridge Phillips (1899) stated that "The Eagle (in this instance Golden Eagle) was never very common in South Wales. In relation to the White-tailed Eagle he stated that "Immature examples of

the White-tailed Eagle (Haliatus Albicilla) are observed from time to time on the Sea-bound Counties of England and Wales in autumn and winter when the young birds reared in the North of Europe are migrating towards the South; adults, however are of very rare occurrence. I mention this to show that the bird in question was not bred in Wales".

Of all the historical records in the ornithological literature the most concentrated are those in the Kenfig/Margam area from around 1810 to 1860. Some of these records refer to a pair of birds or young birds. As previously mentioned there is much confusion regarding dates and location. Hurford and Lansdown (1995) offered some additional information to the historical records: "It is believed that these records involved birds from the Scottish and/or Irish breeding population which became extinct after 1916 rather than from Iceland, Scandinavia, Germany or Eastern Europe".

Roderick and Davis (2010) also mentioned, in relation to the records in Ceredigion in the early 1900s that "Considering that this species was nearly extinct in Britain by the beginning of the 20th century, it is extraordinary that there was a series of three records of birds shot in the county at this time. Probably they were immigrants from the continent".

Mathew (1894) also provided further information on the 1851 bird in the Haverdfordwest area and considered to be an "immature White-tailed Eagle, a species not unseldom observed as a straggler along the western coasts of the kingdom." Rees (2010) also suggested that "the 1908 bird must have been an immigrant as none were then breeding in the UK. The 1993 bird may also have been an immigrant but could have come from the Scottish population".

The eagle in Welsh place names

Recent studies on the historical status of eagle species in Wales have included place names containing the element "eryr" in an attempt to trace the historical distribution of eagle species. Some of these studies have made use of "Archwilio" and "Archif Melville Richards". In his assessment, Pritchard (2020) stated that a "total of 78 place names were found, though many of these could not be used in the analysis". After excluding many place names 51 place names in Wales which contained the element "eryr" and that do not appear to be derived from another place name were included. Williams *et al.* (2020) considered that there were 64 place names containing the element "eryr" which were valid for their study. Evans *et al*. (2012) identified 18 Welsh place names containing the eagle component which were classified by place name, language and habitat suitability for eagle species. Twelve of these place names identified were attributed to the past presence of Golden Eagle, four to White-tailed Eagle and two as "unknown". There is a marked difference in the numbers included in these studies and it would be useful for future research to establish the criteria or basis in including specific place names.

In some cases, the same name could have been applied to different species of birds. Earlier evidence of eagle species in Wales may come from place names, though this can be ambiguous since the common Welsh name eryr has been applied to more than one species (Lewis 2006). Yalden (2007) also spoke of exercising caution; "Given that modern tourists to Scotland are reputed to misidentify Common Buzzard as eagles on a regular basis one might ask how reliable is the attribution of [Old English] *earn* in place names to what in modern terms we regard as eagles".

The subject is problematic for various reasons. Does the place name with the element 'eryr' mean that an eagle lived there or was it used to convey a far away location (even after the departure or destruction) of eagles from an area? Eagles have a wide expanse of "territory" then if a place name is named after a 'real' eagle what does this signify? A nesting spot or a location where eagles were

seen, or what? Would a place name be applied if eagles were common at that location or simply applied if it was due to an exceptional record or occurrence?

There is no etymological connection between “eryr” and “Eryri”. The two words were connected’very early and people did ‘believe” (and some continue to do so) for centuries that the meaning of Eryri was/is “the domain of Eagles”. The evidence does suggest that the whole landscape of Wales would have been suitable territory for eagle species at one time but, what can be gleaned from Welsh place names? The Welsh place names do not clearly explain which eagle, or the reason for its origin. It is extremely difficult to be specific apart from simply (or naively) stating that place names generally show that eagles were here in the past. The names would reflect that eagles were here at one time but difficult to assess the significance of this. Take for example “Craig yr Eryr” does this mean, that it is a rock where eagles were common or a rock where one eagle was seen and that this was considered an exception, a one-off event that needed to be recorded and remembered? Or a rock where someone believed they had seen an eagle? Without any firm supporting evidence as to the origin it is difficult to offer anything of substance.

Mathew (1894) noted; “Although one of the highest points of the Precelly Mountains is known by the name of Foel-Eryr "the Eagle's Peak," we cannot ascertain that any species of eagle has nested within recent years in Pembrokeshire, or has been observed as a frequent visitor to the county”.

Conclusion

On balance, it appears that eagle species were known in Wales for many centuries but there is no clear proof that any ever nested here. There is some archaeological evidence, however, that warrants further investigation. Welsh place names containing the element eryr require further research and clarification. In this respect, eagle references are thinly spread over almost six hundred years of records and from the records themselves it is not clear which species of eagle is referred to. The question of any eagle species’ historic breeding status in Wales, has therefore to remain an open question. The ornithological literature, evidence and place names clearly point to eagle species being and remaining as rare visitors in Wales.

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Photo competition - highly commended
Hawfinch: Bob Garrett

