

The Golden Eagle in Kent

Aquila chrysaetos

Norman McCanch

The Kent list currently includes two entries for Golden Eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*, a bird shot near Ramsgate in December 1895 and another at Yantlett Creek in 1964 which is no longer accepted. As part of my regular scrutiny of early Kent Bird reports I came across an article in the 1969 issue by J.M Harrison, entitled "Some historical notes on eagles in Kent". This discussed early records of eagles and included more details regarding the Ramsgate bird, currently the only accepted Kent record of Golden Eagle. Further examination of the historical data show that this record is no longer acceptable and should be deleted from the Kent list.

The earliest reference I have found to this bird is in Ticehurst (1909) where it is recorded, along with another shot soon after near Ashford, as a White-tailed Eagle. Ticehurst writes "*Early in December 1895 an immature bird was shot near St. Lawrence, Thanet and was preserved by W.J. Davis for the late Earl Darnley. Shortly after on 22nd December another bird was shot at Eastwell... Both of these birds were recorded as Golden Eagles in the Standard newspaper.*" It is clear that Dr Ticehurst was satisfied that these birds were both White-tailed Eagles and that the popular press reports were erroneous. James Harrison repeats this entry by Ticehurst *verbatim* in 'The Birds of Kent' (1953) under White-tailed Eagle. The entry for Golden Eagle in his work only refers to a series of un-substantiated records which he 'square' bracketed.

It would appear that the resurrection of this bird as a Golden Eagle is due in no small part to Miss T. M. Edwards, daughter of the man who shot the bird in 1895. According to the article in 1969 Kent Bird Report she contacted James Harrison by letter in September 1969 and provided him with ... "such full and convincing documentation that there cannot be a shadow of doubt as to its authenticity". He goes on to say "Miss Edwards has been to great pains in obtaining confirmation of the circumstances connected with the record which included certain references in the local papers of that time. One of the most important of these appeared in Pullen's Kent Argus of December 7th 1895, in fact the day after the bird had been shot. This runs as follows: - "A Golden Eagle - Yesterday (Friday) morning at about 9.30, a young man named Alfred Edwards of Whitehall, St. Lawrence, whilst shooting in that vicinity, had the fortune of bringing to the earth, a rare bird belonging to the eagle species . . ." The bird is thus claimed to be "an adult female, shot by the late Mr. Alfred W. Edwards (Miss Edwards's father) at Whitehall, Ramsgate, on December 6th, 1895".

Harrison adds "A very similar account appeared in Keble's Margate and Ramsgate Gazette of Saturday December 14th, of that year, although the bird was stated to be a Sea-Eagle; it was mounted by Mr. Gordon Allen, taxidermist of Ramsgate, in whose shop window people saw the specimen". In her letter of 7th September 1969, to James Harrison, Miss Edwards writes, "The eagle was thought to be one of a pair which had been blown off course, and it was also thought that the other one had been shot down near Ashford, Kent."

Harrison goes on to write “Miss Edwards generously presented her specimen to the Royal Canterbury Museum, where, by the courtesy of Miss Millard, the Curator, we (James and Jeffery Harrison) were able to examine it. Unfortunately, we found that the bird was affected by museum pests, probably *Anthrenus* or *Dermestes* and a more detailed examination at Sevenoaks revealed that this was of a very severe order. However, Dr. Pamela Harrison was able to photograph the bird (reproduced opposite) so that authentication could be further established”.



The Ramsgate eagle.

At this point the situation becomes slightly surreal, as Harrison provides no details as to why this bird was identified as a Golden Eagle, preferring to allow the photograph to speak for itself. This is unfortunate as the photograph published in the 1969 KBR is clearly that of a juvenile or first winter White-tailed Eagle. A number of features identify the specimen as to that species –

- 1) the boldly marked greater coverts with dark central tear-drop marks (these would be all dark on a young Golden Eagle, and pale with paler margins on an adult.
- 2) the crown and nape are uniformly dark matching the head and upper parts (nape and crown contrast with neck and mantle in all ages of Golden Eagle.
- 3) the bird shows unfeathered tarsi, whereas Golden Eagle in all plumages shows feathering right down to the toes.

It would appear that the identification of this bird as a Golden Eagle solely derives from Alfred Edwards, with no evidence that he had any experience of the species, or resources to

identify it. It is relevant that a week later the Ramsgate taxidermist who set the bird up does seem to have recognised it for what it truly was, as recorded by Norman Ticehurst.

There is a discrepancy in the accounts regarding the fate of the specimen; clearly the Ramsgate bird was set up by Mr Allen, taxidermist in Ramsgate and returned to the Edwards family, so that Miss Edwards could donate it to Canterbury Museum. However, Ticehurst (repeated in Harrison) states that it was preserved by W.J. Davis for the late Earl Darnley. I suspect that this might be an error based around the other Eastwell bird (accepted as a White-tailed eagle in the Kent list), as Earl Darnley did have some connections to Eastwell Manor around this time. However, this does not detract from the well-documented fate of the Ramsgate bird, which was returned to the Edwards family by the taxidermist after displaying it in his shop window and was subsequently passed to Canterbury Museum where it remained until seen by Harrison in 1969.

The maximum movement recorded for British bred birds does not exceed 150 km., and no Golden Eagles ringed in Britain have been recovered abroad, nor have any birds ringed outside Britain been recovered within Britain and Ireland (Watson, J; in Wernham et al, 2002).

This record was discussed at a recent KOS rarities committee meeting and it was agreed that the photograph is clearly of a White-tailed Eagle and this should be added to the Kent list accordingly, while the inclusion as a Golden Eagle should be removed, effectively removing Golden Eagle from the Kent list.

	Notes on Eagle specimen	Notes on Golden Eagle
1	Dark nape & crown	Golden Eagle in all plumages shows a contrasting pale nape
2	Pale bill base	Should be darker in Golden Eagle (although this could have been coloured by the taxidermist)
3	Pale wing coverts with dark teardrop marks	Uniform dark in young golden Eagle, pale and worn with light centres in adults
4	Unfeathered tarsi	Feathered right down to the toes in Golden Eagle
5	Tail base all dark	Sub-adult Golden Eagles show some extent of white feathering at the tail base

References

Taylor, DW, editor (1971) - Kent Bird Report 1969

Ticehurst, N (1909) - A History of the Birds of Kent, HF Witherby, London

Wernham C.V. et al (eds)2002 - The Migration Atlas: movements of birds in Britain and Ireland, T&AD Poyser, London

