

All in a Day's Work

Lorcán O'Toole – Manager, Golden Eagle Trust

Lorcán O'Toole works for the Golden Eagle Trust, managing the reintroduction of the Golden Eagle into Glenveagh National Park in Co. Donegal. Together with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Trust imports, rears and releases wild Scottish Golden Eagles in Glenveagh, hoping to re-establish these birds that were once native in Ireland.



Lorcán O'Toole

What is your main aim?

Our aim is to conserve and restore some of Ireland's rare and extinct bird species. Ireland has the lowest range of breeding birds of prey of any European country. When we started there were more extinct Irish bird of prey species than existing Irish species. Now we have reintroduced Golden Eagles in Donegal, White-tailed Eagles in Kerry and Red Kites in Wicklow. Buzzards are now spreading naturally southward with up to 20 pairs now breeding in Co Cork and Goshawks are probably breeding in a few isolated big forests too. We hope Ospreys, Marsh Harriers, Hobbies, and maybe even Honey Buzzards, will recolonise Ireland over the coming decades.

What is a day in your life like?

My job really has two main parts. I might spend half the week writing reports and dealing with queries regarding eagles. As a small charity I also need to keep on top of all the paperwork involved in running a small business. The rest of the week is spent in the field either feeding the chicks in the cages or once they are released, or following the older birds as they wander around Donegal. I also try to locate and monitor new breeding pairs in the Hills of Donegal.

What is the best thing about your job?

Walking out onto a hilltop and watching the young eagles get stronger and stronger, week by week, after they leave the rearing cages. At first they can only fly short distances and are often quite clumsy when they land. After a few weeks their wing muscles develop and it is a joy to watch a young bird soaring for the first time and learning to control its direction by lowering one wing or the other. My job is very rewarding!

What is the worst thing about your job?

Unfortunately some people are still using poison to control foxes and crows, as they are traditionally entitled to do so. We are constantly asking people to consider using other control methods. One can never be sure what bird

or animal will eat a poisoned meat bait – will it be the fox or crow one is after or will it be a passing Golden Eagle or Red Kite or maybe even a neighbour's sheep dog? It is really frustrating to see eagles live for 3-4 years and begin to establish a territory and then suddenly disappear almost certainly because they have eaten a poisoned meat bait left out for foxes or crows.

Where does your work take you?

I have got to know many of the most beautiful and remote spots in Donegal over the last eight years whilst tracking Golden Eagles. Every year I go to many parts of the Scottish Highlands and Islands to collect Golden Eagle chicks. I am also beginning to visit Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo and Galway more often in search of Golden Eagles – any eagle sightings from these four counties would be especially welcome.

Do you work alone or as part of a team?

Myself and Damian Clarke (managing the Red Kite project in Wicklow) and Allan Mee (managing the White-tailed Eagle project in Kerry) work closely together and share ideas all the time. We all get great support from Ronan Hannigan, John Lyden, Tony Nagle and Gilbert Little who help run the Golden Eagle Trust Ltd – a small but vibrant charity.

What would you say to someone wanting to do your job?

Nowadays it is quite important to get as much training or education as possible. But do also try and get some practical experience, maybe helping out a local conservation group or doing some voluntary work as you get older.

What would you do if you weren't doing what you do?

Conservation is not the best paid profession in the world and I always remember my dad and mom advising me to get a 'real' or a 'good' job and continue birdwatching as a hobby! I know if I was not working on the Eagle project I would still be working in conservation, but if not I might become a landscaper or a psychologist.

Photos © Lorcán O'Toole



Above: Irish Golden Eagle chick flying shortly after fledging.

Right: Locations from a satellite-tagged female Golden Eagle, released in Glenveagh National Park, from 2006 to spring 2007.



© 2008 Sherkin Island Marine Station & its licensors. All rights reserved.