

CUMBRIAN WHITE-TAILED EAGLE PROJECT

Biology and behaviour



What does a white-tailed eagle look like?

White-tailed eagles (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) have a wingspan of up to 2.5 metres, making them the largest native bird of prey in Britain. Their brown feathered wings are broad, almost rectangular, with fingered tips.

These eagles have a short wedge-shaped tail. In adults the tail is completely white, and the head and neck are pale grey / white. In juveniles the tail is white with black ridges and the head is brown, and remains this way until they are approximately 3-5 years old and approaching breeding age.



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Their large, hooked beak, legs and talons are yellow, and so are their eyes.

As with many birds of prey, females are larger than males.

How do they breed?

White-tailed eagles usually breed from four to five years old and tend to mate for life. Potential breeding pairs can be seen engaging in courtship behaviour such as calling, synchronised flights or talon grappling, which are common displays amongst birds of prey. The pair spend time building a nest (or 'eyrie') from sticks or tending to an existing one. These eagles sometimes use nests from other birds of prey. Eyries can be built at the top of mature trees, on cliffs, or even on the ground in remote undisturbed locations. A pair will usually reuse the same eyrie, which they build on each year, and it can become several metres tall and wide.

In March to April, one to three eggs are usually laid and incubated for 35 to 40 days. After the eggs hatch, the female stays with the young for around three

weeks, relying on the male to feed her and their offspring. When the young are three weeks old, the pair take it in turns to hunt and provide for their family.

From about 10 weeks old, the young are ready to fledge (leave) the nest, however they are not yet expert hunters and for several weeks rely on their parents for food. Juvenile white-tailed eagles often spend their first few years exploring, sometimes traveling long distances, and joining other juveniles in rich feeding grounds.

Following this phase, both males and females usually return to their natal (fledging) area to settle down and start searching for a territory and a mate. A pair usually remain in their territory throughout the year. White-tailed eagles can live to over 20 years of age in the wild but have been known to live almost twice as long in captivity.

Talon grappling



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Mating



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Adult feeding chicks



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Group of juveniles



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Where do they live?

These eagles live in a range of marine, brackish, and freshwater areas including coastlines, estuaries, islands, and inland lakes. They can venture further inland where carrion (animals that are already dead) is available to scavenge, however breeding pairs usually settle close to a water body. White-tailed eagles are found across Europe and Asia.

What role do they play in the landscape?

White-tailed eagles are a key part of a landscape, and as carnivores they help manage prey populations.

In many areas, a large part of their diet consists of waterbirds. Large numbers of non-native Canada geese in Cumbria are contributing to the eutrophication of lakes leading to low water quality and negatively impacting the native biodiversity. The return of white-tailed eagles has the potential to help control populations of animals introduced to the area that wouldn't naturally occur (non-native species). White-tailed eagles are also scavengers and play an important role in the clearing of carcasses (pictured below).

Cumbrian communities, who are an integral part of the landscape, could benefit from nature-based tourism, including in coastal areas. The presence of an eye-catching species like the white-tailed eagle could help raise awareness of other important conservation issues in the county.



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