

## Annual William Condry Memorial Lecture, 2014

### **Eagle, Wolf and Whale: Scottish wild nature past, present and future.**

by **Jim Crumley**

#### **ONE**

In the late summer of 1998, I went to Alaska for three weeks to make two radio programmes for BBC Radio 4 about one of my favourite recurring themes – the relationship between people and wilderness, which is really what this lecture is about. It was an eye-popping, heart-wrenching, thought-I'd-died-and-gone-to-heaven time. And in terms of my day job as a nature writer, it was life-changing. In that particular regard, its most profound consequence was that I wrote a book about whales. It was called *The Winter Whale*, and it set my writing on a new course which has now encompassed four consecutive books in seven years, and may not be done yet.

Two moments stand out amid the crowd of memories from Alaska. One was watching a grizzly bear sow approach to about 20 yards through chest-high fireweed, at which point it stopped and stood up on its hind legs. I turned to the amiable guide beside me and asked in a very soft voice :

“What is she doing?”

“She’s just taking a look.”

“At us?”

“Oh no. At you. She knows what I look like.”

The second moment was watching humpback whales from a small boat. After the kind of spectacle afforded by creatures the size of a house bursting through the ocean, twisting in mid-air and crashing down on their backs to the unison and involuntary gasps of the dozen people on board, the whales eventually came in round the boat, and one came right alongside where I leaned over the gunwale about six feet above it. First the snout passed, very slowly, then a couple of seconds later the eye. It was four inches across, and it made blatant

eye contact. I felt as if everything I had ever done in my life that had any bearing on nature was a journey to that moment, that meeting of eyes.

But I didn't write a book about whales because I'd spent one day among humpbacks in Glacier Bay. I wrote a book about whales because I have been living with one particular whale all my life. It is known in Dundee where I grew up as *The Famous Tay Whale*. It turned up in the Tay estuary in 1883 when Dundee was home to Britain's largest whaling fleet (and in midwinter the fleet was laid up and there were 700 whalers in Dundee with nothing to do). The whale suffered a long, slow death. Its carcass was bought by a local oil merchant known as Greasy Johnny. It was obscenely paraded around the country, and the skeleton has been in Dundee's museum more or less ever since, and there it tormented my childhood dreams so effectively that I have never quite been able to shake it off.

In 2005, so seven years after Alaska, I was in the same museum, to look at a painting, and on the way out I picked up a new leaflet about the Tay whale. I found it again a few days later in a jacket pocket, and I was on the way to the rubbish bin with it when the word "humpback" caught my eye. *I had never known until that moment that the Tay whale was a humpback*. Then I thought of that Pacific Ocean humpback eye that had sought my eye, and the following day I was back in the museum where I asked to see everything in print about the Tay whale. There was nothing at all, other than a pile of 125-year-old newspaper cuttings. So I wrote a book about whales, and a new writing journey had begun. I would like to read you the first short chapter of that book. It's called "*How Whales Die*".

[Reads Chapter 1, *The Winter Whale*]

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY years ago, somewhere in the world's oceans, an unknown harpoon gunner on a small boat from an unknown whaling ship fired one of the new explosive harpoons into the neck of a bowhead whale. The weapon was basically a bomb on a stick. It was designed to penetrate the

whale's skin and blubber then explode deep inside the whale a few seconds later. The theory was that it would die at once, or at least quickly. The whale died all right. It died off the Alaskan coast in May 2007, but only because it had been harpooned again. It was about 130-years-old, or to put it another way, in late middle age. The world's media gasped at the discovery. We know all this because the 21<sup>st</sup> century whalers found the 19<sup>th</sup> century harpoonist's missile still embedded in the whale, in a bone between neck and shoulder. It had lodged in what they called "a non-lethal place", and there it remained, and over the decades the initial pain might have dulled to a vague ache or an itch the whale couldn't scratch. Perhaps it swam a million miles with that itch.

The discovery was both fascinating and troubling. The fascination is that the age of whales suddenly catapulted from scientific guesswork to public knowledge, and – as is so often the case when whales command our attention – our response has been to gasp in a kind of primitive wonder. The troubled nature of the fascination is that we have only acquired the new knowledge because our fingerprints were on the whale, or rather in it, lodged "in a non-lethal place" between neck and shoulder. All science could date with any accuracy is the missile itself, the head of the bomb lance. Staff at an American whaling museum pinned down its manufacture to New Bedford, Massachusetts. They also know it had been in the hands of an Alaskan, because of the nature of the notches carved into the head, a system by which Alaskan whalers of the time pronounced "ownership of the whale".

Science got excited, because, as the man from the whaling museum in New Bedford put it, "...no other finding has been this precise". I suppose precision is relative when you are dealing with things that live so much longer than we do. Yet evidence "this precise" has been around for centuries, and ignored by science because it distrusts the source. For example, I have come across something similar in studies of wolves, and found it tellingly articulated by the American nature writer Barry Lopez in his book *Of Wolves and Men*. He was explaining why many biologists irritated him:

“The Nunamiut Eskimos, the Naskapi Indians of Labrador, the tribes of the northern plains and the North Pacific coast...are all, in a sense, timeless. Even those tribes we can converse with today because they happen to live in our own age are timeless; the ideas that surface in conversation with them (even inside a helicopter at two thousand feet) are ancient ideas. For the vision that guides them is not the vision that guides Western man a thousand years removed from the Age of Charlemagne. And the life they lead, you notice, tagging along behind them as they hunt, really is replete with examples of the way wolves might do things. Over thousands of years Eskimos and wolves have tended to develop the same kind of efficiency in the Arctic.

“It is one of the oddities of our age that much of what Eskimos know about wolves – and speak about clearly in English, in twentieth century terms – wildlife biologists are intent on discovering. It was this fact that made me uneasy. Later, I was made even more uneasy by how much fuller the wolf was as a creature in the mind of the modern Eskimo...”

Meanwhile, wildlife biologists theorise about the age of a whale, explain the difficulties of assessing it scientifically, knowing in the case of this particular whale only the age of a missile lodged inside it, while Inupiat Eskimos, one of Lopez’s “tribes of the northern Pacific coast”, have known – “and spoken about clearly in English in twentieth century terms” – that whales have twice the lifespan of a man, so that 150 years old is common, and the oldest might live to be 200 years old.

Whales and wolves are still big species in the minds of all the tribes that inhabit the northern edge of our hemisphere. Their accumulated knowledge is handed down and refined over millennia. Lopez’s word “timeless” is quite literally appropriate. They have carried it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even with helicopters and snowmobiles at their disposal, and they go on learning and refining, because – then as now –some kind of understanding of these species in particular is central to their own way of life, and because they exist within nature as one of its creatures rather than apart from it like most of the rest of us. Their knowledge

was garnered and stored and passed on without computers, without radio collars, without microchips, without scientific databases. They are their own database.

People not unlike them, at least in their sensibilities, would have inhabited Britain once, for our first settlers were also coast dwellers on the rim of a continent who lived with and learned from the possibilities offered by proximity to wolf and whale, and for 5000 years they too amassed unique knowledge. But by the time our more recent forebears built their own whaling industry, and made their wolf extinct (remarkably, at more or less the same time), the bridge to the old knowledge was broken. And after that, something ancient and unnameable only ever stirred in us when an extraordinary circumstance occurred. For example:

*'Twas in the month of December, and in the year 1883,  
That a monster whale came to Dundee,  
Resolved for a few days to sport and play,  
And devour the small fishes in the silvery Tay.*

William Topaz McGonagall, self-styled Poet and Tragedian, an eccentric, perambulating Victorian historical monument of Dundee streets, is still cherished by 21<sup>st</sup> century Dundee, albeit with a smirk on its face. His "poems" abandoned all known poetic conventions and structures in pursuit of a rhyme. They are routinely derided by pompous literary critics who miss the point: they were not poems so much as his scripts for one-man performances in the howffs and halls. His raw material was the events and the personalities of the day and set piece episodes of history. And one of his greatest hits was *The Famous Tay Whale*. The fact that the poem exists is all that most people in 21<sup>st</sup> century Dundee know about the whale that turned up and lingered in the Tay estuary in the winter of 1883-84, that and the fact that its skeleton has been suspended from the ceiling of the city's main museum more or less ever since.

Even as a child growing up in Dundee, when that skeleton first haunted my young dreams, it struck me as an odd way to display a dead whale, as if it was

some preposterous species of flying fish you could only admire from below. And of course I knew nothing of the nature of its death, only that it had swum up the Tay estuary to Dundee and that it had died. Well of course it died, my childhood self reasoned, anything that old would be dead, a bit like my grandfather.

But here's a thing: if the Famous Tay Whale had been left to its own devices rather than hunted to its slow and dishonourable death in early January 1884, then paraded in death round Britain for the entertainment of vast crowds of gawping Victorians – paraded without its flesh, without its organs, without its backbone, its skin stuffed and draped over a wooden frame and stitched up again to look like a caricature of its living self – it might still be alive today.

At which thought, the 21<sup>st</sup> century Inupiat shrugs in a timeless way and says: "Of course."

## **TWO**

If *The Winter Whale* had been a spontaneous, light-bulb-moment kind of book, the one that followed it, *The Last Wolf*, was a slow-burning book I had been mulling over for years, and that suddenly seemed to have found its moment. Early on in the whale book, as you have just heard, I made the essential connection between the roles of the great whales in the ocean and the wolf on the land. These are nature's Chosen Ones, without which nothing in nature makes sense. It makes no sense because we, the exterminators of whale and wolf, have cast ourselves in the role of top predator, and we are demonstrably crap at it. In Scotland in particular, we have invented the grouse moor and the deer forest as excruciatingly thoughtless ambassadors for the crappiness of our wolfless regime.

In a northern and relatively sparsely populated country like Scotland, the wolf *should* be in place, and *The Last Wolf* makes that argument after first rewriting the history of the wolf in Scotland. I take a small measure of satisfaction in the fact that I have forensically demolished the ridiculous yet much quoted and widely accepted account of the killing of the last wolf up the valley of the

Findhorn River in 1743. It was written down (although not until 1829) by a minor aristocrat and even more minor writer who walked obsessively in the shadow of Sir Walter Scott. He did for the wolf what Scott did for Rob Roy, and both left the historical reality in tatters. If you were to ask me when the last wolf in Scotland died, I would tell you that the last wolf in Scotland has not been born yet.

I would like to take moment to talk about my nature writing. I like to make the distinction between a naturalist – which I am not – and nature writing, which is what I do. Obviously, I have some of the skills you would expect a naturalist to have, but my motivation for the time I spend in nature's company is to write it down. I am first and last a writer, and the natural world is my raw material. I frequently resort to story, to poetry, and to handling nature's scheme of things the way a painter might. I can illustrate what I mean with the prologue from *The Last Wolf*. In the throes of researching that book I was given enthusiastic help by staff at the Yellowstone wolf reintroduction project in North America. The Prologue of *The Last Wolf* takes the essential kernel of the first ten years of that project and re-imagines it in the landscape of Highland Scotland. The title of the Prologue is *The Painter of Mountains*, for reasons which will become clear.

***[Prologue from The Last Wolf]***

THE THING about the mountain after the wolves came was that it started to change colour. We noticed the change the second year, in the spring. All along the level shelf at the foot of the screes where the deer used to gather in the evening there was a strange haze. We had never seen that haze before. It was pale green and it floated an inch or two above the ground, a low-lying, pale green mist. We had only ever seen the red deer there, deer by the hundred, deer browsing the land to a gray-brown all-but-bareness, all-but-bare and all-but-dead. It is, we thought, what deer do. They gathered in the places that sheltered them, places that accommodated their safety-in-numbers temperament. And every morning, once the sun had warmed the mountain, they climbed to higher pastures. They commuted up and down the mountain. But their days routinely

ended browsing the level shelf to the bone, to the almost-death of the grasses, mosses, lichens, flowers. When there was nothing left to eat they moved. But as soon as new growth began they returned because they liked the comfort of the shelf under the screes, and the browsing to almost-death resumed. In the long wolfless decades they forgot how to behave like deer. Then the wolves came back, and overnight they remembered.

We looked out one evening and there were no deer. None. We scoured the lower slopes, all the ways we knew the deer came down the mountain in the evening. Nothing. We saw no deer for weeks without knowing why, until on the stillest of evenings a wolf howled. We had never heard a wolf howl. Not even the oldest folk in the glen held the memory of wolves, only the handed down stories that grew out of an old darkness. That howl, when it came, when it sidled round the mountain edge the way a new-born breeze stirs mist out of stillness, when it stirred things in us we could not name because we had no words for what we had never felt and never known... that howl sounded a new beginning for everything in the glen that lived. Everything that lived, breathed, ran, flapped, flew, flowered – and all of us – were changed from that moment.

And in the spring of the second year after the wolves came, we saw the mountain start to change colour. Where the deer had been, where they smothered – suffocated – the growth, bit and bit again the heather-high trees (twenty years old, twenty inches high and going nowhere until at last they were bitten to death)...in that second spring we saw the evening sun illuminate a green haze, low on the land. At first we didn't understand its meaning, so we climbed from the floor of the glen to the old deer terrace, and we found its meaning: fresh, sweet, young, vivid, green grass. The wolves, by keeping the deer constantly on the move, had restored to the mountain a lost meadow. And as the spring advanced, flowers! Splashes of white and yellow and blue, and the grass ankle deep. And with every new season after that, the new growth summoned others to the change: butterflies, moths, berries, berry-and-butterfly-eating birds; then the first new trees.

It has been ten years since the wolves came back. Their howls have become the mountain's anthem. The deer still come back to the old terrace of course, but in much smaller groups, and only for a few days at a time. Then they vanish, and we know they have moved on to the rhythm demanded of them by the wolves. The trees are many, and tall, taller than the biggest stag. The oldest memories in the glen do not remember trees there before. Now every year at the first hint of spring, we watch the low sun in the evening for the first illumination of the new green mist. The wolf that was handed down from the old darkness was a slayer of babies, a robber of graves, and a despoiler of the battlefield dead. The wolf that howls in our dusk is a painter of mountains.

Time passes, tides turn. Scotland is reintroducing beavers, albeit with all the conviction of Canute at high tide. It may have taken 20 years of talking, false starts, and an official five year trial, but it is a beginning, and for that matter, a precedent: a mammal has been reintroduced. But while I contemplate the prospects of reintroducing *wolves*, ahead lie the massed ranks of politicians in Europe, London and Edinburgh, landowning intransigence, farmers large and small, mountaineers and mountain bikers, and hill runners and hillwalkers and tourists of many hues, even unimaginative conservationists, all of them worried about being eaten, or worse, being half-eaten but left alive. The wolf will return despite them all, because that tide has turned, because the wolf has begun to drift from the backwaters of conservation thinking towards the mainstream. Meanwhile, I was looking for arguments and ammunition in a country where people were growing accustomed to living alongside wolves again, and at least some of them considered it a privilege. Writing *The Last Wolf* had been greatly assisted by another BBC Radio 4 commission to make two programmes about wolves, called *The Real Wolf*. In pursuit of the real wolf I went to Norway where I spent some time with two film-makers called Bjorn and Gaire.

*[Are there any Norwegians in the room? Good. In that case I can proceed with my Scottish version of Norwegians speaking English.]*

Gaire described hearing the high-pitched babble of wolf cubs at one in the morning, then the answer from the alpha male, two kilometres away. And as he mimicked the deep wolf voice rising then falling again in unpredictable bluesy slides and intervals against a backdrop of the rise and fall of the valley, river, woods, clearings, fold after fold of forested hills yielding at last to 6000-foot mountains, something danced between my shoulder blades. And suddenly the wolf was changing in my mind. These two Norwegians had begun to show me a creature going about its everyday business, small in a huge landscape – one pack, five wolves, a territory of a thousand square miles. I asked what the sound of wolves meant to them. Gaire answered (in a timeless way, it seemed to me:

“You sit there in the winter time, waiting, hoping that something will happen. You freeze a little. You take a little cuppa coffee. And you’re looking. And looking. At trees full of snow. Nothing happens. Maybe you hear a little bird. And then you hear this noise. Starting very low, and you’re thinking, ‘Where is it? Where is it?’ You know? You can feel how your whole body is looking for where the wolf is. It’s a very special feeling. It’s the voice of the wild. And this voice, you bring it with you in the body, for many, many, many days.”

I also talked to a sheep farmer, a delightful, charming, cultivated, rational, thoughtful man, but with a blind spot about wolves the size of Scandinavia. He had lost sheep to wolves, because in the 40 years wolves had been absent, the sheep had forgotten how to behave when wolves appeared, so instead of scattering they bunched and there was carnage. He was scornful of government compensation payments. “ I raise sheep. My father raised sheep. His father raised sheep. We do not raise sheep to feed wolves. There is no room for wolves in the little Norway,” he said. Much later, I thought about what he said, and this is what I think about it, what I think about the inevitable hostility that will come *our* way when wolf reintroduction is finally on the table in Scotland.

The truth about the wolf – one truth about the wolf – is that it can be like a bridge in all our lives, a bridge where enlightenment may cross, a bridge to a place where we don’t make all the rules and our species is not always in charge.

And if some people are disadvantaged by our country's willingness to allow the proximity of wolves back into our lives, then that is simply part of the price we pay for the privilege of a closer walk with natural forces, part of the debt that we owe for all that we have *taken from* nature for far too long. We cannot rationalise every decision we ever make as a species on the basis of whether or not it will be good for the economy; sometimes the greater good of planet Earth must come first, and the wolf, as the master-manipulator of northern hemisphere eco-systems, is an agent for that greater good.

### **Three**

In Yellowstone, there were no beavers when the wolf was reintroduced, because there were no suitable trees. The elk hordes had seen to that. But once the wolves began to make their presence felt, began to paint the mountains, began to make breathing spaces for trees, beavers just outside the national park were the first to notice. Soon, wherever the wolves went, the beavers followed, and now the two great transformers of the treed landscape are in place – the bringer of trees and nature's architect. So often, the answer to problems with nature in my country is trees. My publisher had suggested a big photograph-rich book on the so-called Great Wood of Caledon, the historic native forest of the Highlands. But it seemed to me that the subject was a natural fit with wolf and whale, and once that was agreed I began to think for the first time of this seam of work as a series of books about nature's big themes in my own country, and in the same breath it occurred to me that such a series must also include eagles. The work began to acquire a sense of mission.

I had never been convinced by the widespread notion of The Great Wood of Caledon as a forest shroud that snuffed out the sun, a temperate northern jungle and a truly terrible place. Like the caricature of the wolf so mauled by ignorance that has been handed down to us, the historic forest is also drenched in myth and sits uneasily on any modern reading of the landscape. My own research suggested that the notion was essentially a Roman invention to mask the fact that they were far out of their comfort zone and at the extremity of their empire. They were looking for a reason to turn back, and my best guess was that they

found it in a great wall of trees that stretched from Rannoch to Loch Etive. That great military race of wall builders finally lost their nerve in the presence of a thousands-of-years-old wall built by nature. I concluded that when the trees were at their greatest extent, about 5000 years ago, there had been four great woods – Rannoch to Loch Etive, the Cairngorms pinewoods, the Atlantic seaboard from Glen Strathfarrar and Affric to the Sunart oakwoods and Mull, and the wider Trossachs area which is regenerating fast and optimistically even as I speak. I called my forest book *The Great Wood*. Like *Whale and Wolf*, I leaned as heavily on imaginative writing informed by nature as on strict nature observation. This short extract is an example of what I mean. It's from a chapter called *Lament for the Trees*.

***[Extract from Lament for the Trees]***

THE FIRST NATURE WRITERS sang the praises of the land and sea and sky and all that moved there – fish, deer, cattle, horse, lynx, boar, beaver, bear, badger, skylark, swallow, swan, eagle, wolf; sang the praises of mountains where their various Gods made love and war, fire and ice; sang the praises of trees. Nothing they made is signed. We don't know who they were. Whatever they wrote is wreathed about by the cold, corrosive patina of millennial dust. But then as now (and whenever "then" may have been and whoever "they" may have been), their themes were the preoccupations of their age, and trees provided them with shelter, boats and oars, bows and arrows and spears, ploughs, fruit, nuts, and the basis of fire that changed everything. Trees mattered to them. Some were landmarks, some sacred, some both. The first 'churches' were trees, nave, chapel, cloister and spire in one ready-made kit. An early bard might have written:

*The trees of the Great Wood, they were as clustered and prolific as stars in the midwinter sky, they had ascended to the mountains' shoulders and they would soon have conquered the stars too, softening the profile of Venus herself, smothering the Red Star with the green of pines, had not the mountains suddenly begun to shrink to accommodate the capricious demands of the Gods,*

*their volcanic fire, their glacial ice; begun to shrug the trees from their lowered shoulders with every new upheaval of granite, gabbro, sandstone, gneiss. The Gods had grown anxious at the forest's advance, fearful that the trees might smother their realms, and then how would they see the Earth beneath, how watch over and manipulate the land and the sea and those creatures they had made in their own image? How find the North Star that made sense of all their heavens if their view was impaired by a thick screen of branches?*

*So before the trees grew so dense that they shut out the view of the Milky Way and made a darkness of the aurora, the Gods shrank the mountains with their fire and ice and the trees slithered away downhill. The Gods commanded the grazing tribes – the aurochs, the deer, the boar, the horse, the goat, the sheep, the beaver, to put the trees in their place. They equipped the beaver with the instinct both to graze and hew, the people with the instinct to hew and burn. All that not only put the trees in their place, it also made their place smaller and smaller and lower and lower down the mountainsides so that they dwindled the way a flood tide abates to a low ebb. For of course the Gods overdid it, the way Gods do when they get the bit between their teeth, leaving the impoverishment of lone and level sands and salted mud, and all of that was as naked and cold as Venus in the winter sky.*

Those first nature writers, they had begun by praising the trees for all their gifts. Then they saw how it was between the trees and the Gods, and they began a new work and that was a lament for the trees.

### **Woodland That Was Not**

Scent the distilled whisky of the land.

Scan the sheep-shorn glen.

Toast the woodland that was not.

Drink:

To every willow

that never wept with the joy of being.

To every silver birch  
that never found its crock of gold  
at summer's rainbow's end.

To every rowan  
that never raised a green banner over an eagle's throne  
and to every eagle eyrie never built  
and every eaglet  
that never fledged and never flew  
from a rowan-bright nursery.

To every hazel, oak and alder  
that never shadowed the burn  
and every trout and salmon  
that never lingered in pools never shaded.

To every songbird  
that never pierced each silent May Day dawn  
and never lived to die in the fast clutch  
of every sparrowhawk  
never weaned in nests that never leaned  
by tall pine trunks that never grew  
in the woodland that was not.

To every tree-creepering, wood-peckering, owl-hooting thing  
that never clawed bark that never wrapped  
all the ungrown wood,  
and every roe and stoat,  
badger and bat,  
squirrel and wildcat,  
four-legged this and that,  
that never stepped into clearings

all across the whole unwooded glen.

To every woodland moth and mite and moss  
and tree-thirled lichen,  
a health to you wherever you prospered.  
It was not here  
in the glen grown barren as a hollow tree.

#### **Four**

So then I was looking for a way out of my book about trees into a new book about eagles, determined to sustain the momentum of this seam of work and to pursue it wherever it led. There is a kind of grapevine out there that people like me lean on from time to time, benefit from, and contribute to... it's a two-way communication channel between a few like-minded souls. We tend to discover each other by a process of osmosis, occasionally word-of-mouth, occasionally we bump into each other as complete strangers in the unlikeliest of circumstances and decide nevertheless that we have common ground. And one morning, my most reliable grapeviner phoned me with exciting news – there were three young sea eagles roosting in a pinewood high above Loch Tay. I should come early one morning and have a look.

So we went, we were in place by sunrise waiting for three sea eagles to emerge from the trees, which they did, one by one, over about half an hour. The real surprise – for both of us – was that they were followed out into the morning sunshine by a noticeably smaller fourth eagle – a young golden eagle. This was news! It became clear that day as we walked the hills within a couple of miles radius of the pinewood that all four birds were hanging out together. It also became clear that the sea eagles were young birds from an east coast reintroduction site on the Tay estuary. But the young golden eagle had most likely come from the west.

My first thought was this: is this completely new behaviour, or is it very old behaviour indeed and the circumstances that make it possible had only just

begun to recur. Sea eagle reintroduction began in the Hebrides in 1975. There is now an established breeding population in the west, and one of its strongholds is the island of Mull. East coast reintroduction began in 2007 and lasted for five years. I took a particular interest in this east coast enterprise because its location in north Fife is on the south side of the Tay estuary, the first of all my landscapes. I had begun to hear about some young sea eagles that had flown straight across the country from east to west. If you draw a line on a map of Scotland west from the Tay estuary, you hit the isle of Mull about halfway up. And about halfway across, that line bisects Loch Tay. And any sea eagle travelling from east to west will discover that the second half of that journey is through established golden eagle territories all the way to Mull.

You might ask yourself how young sea eagles knew about Mull and how to get there. They had, after all, been plucked from the nest in Norway at a few weeks old, flown to Scotland in a plane and driven to the release site. By the time they could fly, they had had no schooling at all by adult sea eagles, yet they found their way to a breeding population 120 miles away in their first year. My best guess is this: the birds were sourced on Norway's island-strewn west coast, Norway has no east coast, and some sense of race memory urged them to seek out a sunset-facing west coast rather than a sunrise-facing east coast.

In the days that followed that early morning on Loch Tay, I stumbled on a new possibility. Was it possible that because of the east coast reintroduction, a kind of two-way coast-coast eagle highway was evolving? Some young sea eagles were travelling west, then back again, and in the process they were falling in with young birds from the west and with young wandering golden eagles. The coast-to-coast highway is a natural route because although sea eagles do not need the sea, they do need large bodies of water. Simply following the Tay west to Loch Tay takes them halfway across, and beyond that the lie of the land lures them through Glen Dochart to Loch Awe and Loch Etive, the Atlantic seaboard and Mull. And new tracking data has shown that once in a blue moon, even young golden eagles have begun to turn up in the essentially Lowland east coast realm of Fife. Is it possible that the presence of sea eagles lured them there?

There is a further attraction for me in the route of this Eagle Highway. In the 26 years that I have been writing for a living, and for another dozen years before that, I had adopted a nature-watching territory of my own in what is now the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. The value of a home territory is something I learned from watching golden eagles. You become intimate with nature's way of doing things, you recognise patterns and anomalies, you begin to understand first principles. Then you discover that when you travel beyond your territory, what you have learned is transferable. The principles hold firm from Balquhider Glen to Kodiak Island.

The Eagle Highway I was now daring to contemplate as the basis for the fourth book had its origins in the place where I grew up and its destination on one of my favourite islands, but it also passed right through my home territory. In the months that followed I began to see that the native golden eagles I had known and followed into the hills of my writer's territory for more than 30 years were increasingly having sea eagles for company. *The Eagle's Way* as this fourth book is called, had fallen right into my lap.

In conclusion then, and to bring the mission more or less up to date, here is the prologue of that book, entitled *What Now?*

***[Prologue from The Eagle's Way]***

NINE IN THE MORNING and the sun has already gone from the crag. All day now the eyrie will be in shadow. But she is a pale eagle, and she brings to that gloomily overhung north-east-facing rock ledge the luminosity of a ghost. When she settles low in the cup with her one surviving chick her head is a pale outcrop on the nest's steep-sided pile of timbers and greenery, like a cairn on a mountaintop. When she stands and walks to the edge she is slow and clumsy like a sideways duck; and eerie. When she steps off, flaps twice, and lays her wings wide and still on the mountain air, she sails from shadow into sunlight and she becomes in a transforming moment what ornithology says she is – golden.

For a few seconds of level flight she presents her slimmest profile, the taut, unfurled scope of her wingspan's leading edge, seven or eight feet of it from wingtip to wingtip, all of it made more memorable by her light tawny pallor.

She begins to cross the glen, pauses in mid-flight to shake herself from stem to stern, scattering the night's dew so that it puts a glittering halo about her that catches the sun, then fades and falls away in shimmering, dimming droplets, and she resumes her easy, level, gliding flight. She is a hundred feet above a certain rock when she banks and looks down, side-headed, at the quiet, mountain-shaded shape that looks up at her, that has been looking at her for hours now. Its watcher's eyes see through raised glasses a single golden eagle eye, a glint of hooded amber as the sunlight laves her.

A wide, banking turn realigns her flight from east to north-west, and for a moment the sun lights up her underwings, and there her plumage is almost blonde and almost pale gold, and the watcher beneath her shakes his head in frank admiration. There is wonder at work here. She turns her back on him, and still without a wingbeat she re-crosses the glen, folding into a shallow glide that builds formidable speed. The only thing that can live with her in this mood is her own shadow that hurtles ahead of her among rocks and trees, races across the river and starts to climb the glen's west flank. Now she is 200 yards south of the eyrie buttress, and now she stalls on the air and drops to a yard above a chaotic terrace of rock, birch scrub and mountain grasses, all of it broken by burns and waterfalls, and there her shadow waits for her. Together they begin to inch south down the glen, rippling over the contours, her shadow always a yard ahead, towing her south. Her airspeed is the nearest that nature will allow her above zero knots; it has slowed and slowed until all that is left now is stalling, but she does not stall, and nor does she pause, and nor does her shadow.

They travel half an unswerving mile together. Then, abruptly, they part. She has flung herself up the face of a shaded buttress and when she climbs beyond it she is a black cut-out bird against the blue-white western sky. She levels out and her wings beat a dozen times as she starts to circle, and as she starts to circle she

starts to climb. She climbs and climbs until, in the watcher's glasses, she is the size of a blown leaf in an autumn wind, and just when he thinks she is lost to him she eases out of what proves to be the topmost circuit, levels again, half closes her wings and flies east again, bridging the glen's tall chasm in seconds, powering over the skyline behind the watcher's back, so that he must first twist then stand and turn to follow her flight.

And now she is an absence. And now the glen has emptied of its most vital life force. She has loaned the watcher five minutes of her time, his reward for an early rise, an hour's climb, and four hours of waiting at the base of the rock where she knows he often waits. She does not know why he waits there, for he provides neither threat nor food, nor performs any useful function that she can detect. He is there from time to time and he waits and watches and she is indifferent to that.

With the eagle's disappearance, an old familiar doubt descends and hovers over me, a cold cloud of misgiving out of a clear sky. The doubt takes the form of a question: what now? I am earth-bound on the upper-floor of the glen, the eagle is God knows where. Whenever I seek her out, the long hours of her days are mostly far beyond my reach, or she is a huddled pale blur on the eyrie. And on the good days she lends me five minutes of her time. Now I will climb to the watershed, scour the square miles of what I know of her territory, and perhaps our paths will cross again for a few moments or a few minutes more. My idea of her life is formed from gleaned scraps she lets fall like discarded feathers. I gather them up gratefully, make what I can of their meaning. Yet still I think that she embodies some kind of key for me, the means of my understanding of her world as she sees it, and of her portion of my own territory as I see it.

This matters. In the wolf-less Scotland I was born into, and where I have lived and worked all my life, this eagle is Nature's ambassador, the catalyst that stirs wildness into its most primitive endeavours. I think that if I cannot pin down some sense of her place in Nature's scheme of things (and in my country in my lifetime that scheme of things is deprived of all the prime movers and shakers of

northern hemisphere wilderness, and especially deprived of the wolf), I fail myself as a writer and I fail the very landscape where I have set out my stall. I need more from her, but she is eagle and I am a fragment of her landscape, sometimes travelling between known haunts of her territory like this rock, like a small rowan on the watershed, like that far skyline rock where once I watched her mate sit more or less motionless for four hours. I never rationalised what he was doing there all that time and I learned nothing from him beyond my own limitations as a watcher: he was still there when I left in the dusk (he may have been there all night, and I wish I knew). Hence the old familiar cloud of doubt. It is – it should be – part of the nature writer's condition.

This notion troubles me more since I wrote my wolf book, *The Last Wolf* (Birlinn, 2010) and I became utterly convinced that in any northern hemisphere land like this one, Nature needs the wolf above all else in order to exercise the full extent of its powers. But right here, right now, the eagle is all the wolf Nature has to work with. So, what now? Nature's terrain is threefold: the land itself (and the native forest in all its complexity and diversity is its preferred state of landscape), the ocean, and the air. This land has been emptied of all the big mammal predators by its people, and its forests all but emptied of ancient trees, also by the people. The ocean slowly empties of its whales and the people's fingerprints are on that outcome too. It may be that these processes have reached some kind of nadir, a rock bottom where a sluggish enlightenment has begun to stir in the gloomiest depths, for here and there and all across the face of the land disciples of Nature are planting new trees and caring for old ones and tree-loving species flock to the first small symptoms of recovery. Beavers, those unsurpassable architects for Nature, are back. A few of them were planned by way of a Government-approved trial in Argyll, many more mysteriously contrived from the ether on the other side of the country on Tayside; however they got here, they are beginning to make their presence felt. Whales have more friends among the people than at any time in the last 200 years, and these have begun to find their voice.

And in the air, the golden eagle still makes waves, still makes a difference, still rules on Nature's wolf-less behalf. The eagle has always had human allies. The native population is just about holding its own. But a change is happening in the eagle's world . Even as the beaver begins to thrive again for the first time in perhaps 300 years, even as naturalists and nature writers take heart and begin to talk more hopefully about the admittedly distant prospect of bringing wolves home for the first time in 200 years, the pale eagle of my early morning vigil is at the centre of the new change. That change is happening fast, faster than Nature could ever hope to achieve by its own devices. Because we, the people, the culprits of so many outrages against Nature for so long, are putting back the white-tailed eagle – the sea eagle – to share the golden eagle's sky. Nature senses an opportunity.

My question as the eagle crosses the morning skyline acquires a double edge: what now?

Scotland is writing a significant new chapter in its story, and not just because membership of the SNP has risen since the referendum from 25,000 to 75,000. There is a sense that suddenly almost anything is possible. My preoccupation (you will not be surprised to learn) is not with new control over tax powers and pensions (I am a nature writer – the tax man does not make much money out of me), but rather it is with the land itself. The singer-songwriter Dougie MacLean, a Robert Burns for our own time, has a song with these lines:

*It's the land that is our wisdom,  
It's the land that shines us through,  
It's the land, you cannot own the land,  
The land owns you.*

In many ways "the land" is another word for Nature. And in a clumsy but nevertheless optimistic way, we are reappraising – along with much else – our place in Nature too, and our relationship with it. Increasingly, before and since the referendum, Scotland has looked towards Norway for a sense of the possibilities at our disposal. Norway, where a sophisticated young man with a

Jeep, a film camera, and an impressive array of computer skills can yet say of a wolf howl – and in a timeless way – “that sound, you carry it with you in the body for many, many, many days.”

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