

Mindre meddelelser

Successful breeding by a three-year old female White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*

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The present report gives details of a successful breeding attempt by a three-year old female White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*. Birds that young only very rarely succeed in raising young. Normally, White-tailed Eagles start breeding when 5-6 years old, and although younger birds may pair up (usually with an older partner) and build a nest, they have generally been assumed never to breed (Fischer 1970, Glutz von Blotzheim et al. 1971, Cramp & Simmons 1980). Looft & Neumann (1990), however, concluded that birds might occasionally breed already when three years old, although this was inferred from shed rectrices collected at active nests, and tail pattern may be a rather uncertain criterion of age (Helander et al. 1989).

That the female in question was a rather special bird was further confirmed during the following year, when she was able all by herself to raise a young from hatching to independence; a similar occurrence seems never to have been reported before.

The story begins in the spring of 1997 when a White-tailed Eagle pair began building a nest in southern Fyn, Denmark, in an area where eagles had frequently been observed since the autumn of 1995. On 21 March 1997 a young, very big female eagle entered the area; plumage and other characters (see below) indicated that her age was almost two years (third calendar year). She was seen flying in, arriving from the direction of the island of Als (G. Knudsen pers. com.). Five days later, the young female chased away and replaced the female of the established pair.

The age of the young female (spring 1997) was determined on basis of the following characters: 1) No yellow on the bill; 2) no sign of moult of primaries or secondaries before 23 September, when the first feather was molted; 3) broad wings, especially the hand. These characters clearly indicate that the bird hatched in 1995 (Helander et al. 1989, Bertel & Génsbøl 2007), which was also the conclusion of several observers, including Berndt Struwe-Juhl and Volker Latendorf from the German White-tailed Eagle project in Schleswig-Holstein. The age of the bird was further confirmed in June 1998, on basis of the colour of the bill: yellow lower mandible and yellow on half of the upper mandible. In April 1999 the tail of the bird was mostly white but still had a dark band at the trailing edge.

The age of the male was known exactly because he was colour ringed (left: black over white ring; right: red or orange); this indicates that he was born in Schleswig-

Holstein in 1993 (cf. www.cr-birding.be and Grünkorn & Struwe-Juhl 1998).

During three weeks in the autumn of 1997, the young female and her four-year old partner built a nest. In the following winter at least five different White-tailed Eagles frequented the area, but only the pair was seen within a radius of 2 km from the nest. During most of the spring the pair was closely watched. About five observers participated so that the nest was under observation for at least 2 hours per day. On 15 February 1998 Berndt Struwe-Juhl and Volker Latendorf visited the nest area and agreed that the pair was unlikely to initiate breeding, due to the young age of the female. Nevertheless, during the days 11-13 March the female was seen lying high in the nest, suggesting that laying was imminent. From 13 March onwards, the female lay deep in the nestbowl. A young was first observed on 9 May, and six days later it became clear that there were two young in the nest. Both young fledged successfully. The successful breeding of this three-year old White-tailed Eagle was briefly mentioned by Struwe-Juhl & Grünkorn (2007).

The pair laid again in 1999, but it is not exactly known when the first egg appeared. However, the female lay deep in the bowl of the nest on 17 March (suggesting incubation); on 17 April she appeared for the first time to lie high in the nest (suggesting hatching), and on 20 April a hatched chick was seen.

In the meantime, however, the male had disappeared. He was last seen on 18 April, and on 22 April the female was heard calling loudly for more than an hour. On the 24th the female left the nest and collected scraps of food in the wood where a fox had left a dead Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*. On the 29th a small group of people made a search for the missing male in the wood, but nothing was found (the wood is closed for the public). As it turned out, however, the female eagle was able to protect, feed and rear the single young all by her own. It fledged successfully and was first seen flying on 10 July, but probably left the nest some time before that.

That the male was not merely overlooked, but had in fact disappeared, is supported by the fact that he was never seen again. Furthermore, the nest is easy to watch, and observer activity was rather high. During the month before the disappearance, the author spent more than 15 hours in the area, mostly on rather short visits on 24 different days; during the month following the disappearance, the total time at the site amounted to

more than 18 hours on 28 days. During the first period, the female was seen on 14 of the days and the male on 16, during the second period the female was seen on all 28 days (and the male not at all).

In August, when the fledgling was able to take care of itself, a pair of adult White-tailed Eagles arrived to the area and took over the territory, displacing the young bird and its mother. Since then, the new pair has bred successfully in the nest built by the old male and his big young wife.

Discussion

The female eagle which is the subject of the present note appears to be first known three-year old female White-tailed Eagle succeeding in raising young. Later, a similar case has been published from the Netherlands (Hauff 2007) – the age of the members of what was actually the first known breeding pair in that country was three and six years, respectively, for female and male, when they fledged a single chick in 2006. A case of a three-year old male White-tailed Eagle fledging a young (together with a five-year old female) is known from Denmark (Tofft 2002).

On the other hand, the achievement of the female eagle in 1999, when she single-handed raised a chick from hatching to fledging and independence after the disappearance and probable death of the male, seems to be unique. We have no detailed data on the prey brought to the nest, but suppose that the fine, dry weather prevailing during spring in 1999 was one of the factors making the incident possible; another may have been the presence of a nearby lake (Arreskov Sø) containing about 60 tons of fish (estimate by Fyns Amt/County) and supporting large numbers of waterbirds (40 Pochards *Aythya ferina*, 800 Tufted Ducks *A. fuligula* and 2300 Coots *Fulica atra*, together with other ducks and grebes, were counted on 17 July 1999 (own unpubl. data)).

Since the arrival of the new pair later that summer, rumours have circulated among local birdwatchers that the female of the new pair is the same as the young female from 1998-1999 (cf. Fabricius 2002). This is definitely not the case (L.B. Rasmussen pers. com.; own unpubl. data). The misunderstanding can probably be traced to the similarity between the tail pattern of the former male and the present female.

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Resumé: Vellykket yngleforsøg af tre-årig Havørn

Et af landets fortsat besatte territorier af Havørn *Haliaeetus albicilla* ligger ved Arreskov Sø på Sydøen. Fuglene i det par, der i 1998 gennemførte det første yngleforsøg på stedet, var en tre-årig hun og en fem-årig han; hunnens alder er bestemt på dragtmarkerer, mens hannen var farveringmærket som unge i Slesvig-Holsten. Havørne begynder normalt først at yngle i 5-års alderen, selv om de godt kan danne par og bygge rede tidligere.

Indirekte evidens for at enkelte fugle kan starte så tidligt som tre år gamle har dog været kendt i næsten 20 år, og fra Danmark kendes et indiskutabelt tilfælde, nemlig den farveringmærkede han i parret ved Hostrup Sø 1996 (Tofft 2002). Men hunnen i parret i Arreskov – der fik to unger på vingerne – synes at være det første konkrete eksempel på så ung en ynglende hun. Siden er et tilsvarende eksempel rapporteret fra Holland (Hauff 2007).

Den unge hun viste sig året efter virkelig at være en speciel Havørn. Lige omkring tidspunktet, hvor parrets enlige unge udklækkedes, forsvandt hannen (formentlig død). Alligevel lykkedes det hunnen at opfostre ungen, der fløj ud tidligt i juli. At en enlig Havørn har været i stand til det, kendes der ingen andre eksempler på. Det formodes, at det lune og tørre vejr i foråret/forsommeren 1999 har været en af de faktorer, der gjorde denne bedrift mulig. Siden, i august samme år, blev både hunnen og den udflyjende unge fordrevet fra området af et andet havørnepar, som har holdt til i territoriet siden.

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