Raven © BTO/Edmund Fellowes.

The fifth in a series of articles on upland birds.

Even in the very depths of winter new life stirs. Raven nests, bulky stick affairs usually on cliffs or crags, may be built in January and eggs laid as early as the first week in February but usually in March. This early nesting means that activities such as climbing and hanging gliding don’t generally affect these birds, although replacement eggs may be laid in April or even early May. The pattern of decline from being common throughout Britain in the early 19th century due to persecution from some gamemasters and shepherds is similar to that experienced by golden eagles. More recent land use changes, such as the expansion of arable and afforested land in the middle of the last century, led to reduced food availability. However, food supply increased where livestock and/or deer densities increased and large flocks can now be seen in some parts of the country. 

Vital Statistics
Length: 64 cm
Wing-span: 200 - 150 cm
Weight: Males 1080 – 1560g, Females 800 – 1315g
Habitat: All types of country, mainly mountains, moorland and sea cliffs.
Food: Animal and plant material, carrion, harriers sick and injured animals.
Voice: Low-pitched, gruff croaking tone, short barking ‘puk’ or ‘krak’.

Sue Haysom is a professional ecologist and Mountain Leader with Greyhen Adventures.

Raven © BTO/Edmund Fellowes.

BOOK REVIEW

Risking Life and Limb – Celebrating fifty years of the Ogwen Valley Mountain Rescue

Judy Whiteside
Reviewed by Mal Crossley

This book’s attractive cover certainly grabbed my initial attention. George Madley’s artwork identifies and clearly illustrates the Oggy team’s ‘backyard’ and the scene of many an epic struggle for both rescuers and casualties.

The book starts with an historical section with some interesting stories of the early days when the only folk on hand to help were the local farmers, shepherds and men from the quarries. Casualty care was pretty basic and unfortunately, in many cases, all they could do was simply pick up the pieces and carry the casualties off the hill. This section also highlights a number of individuals such as Wilson Hey, a doctor and mountaineer, who first recognised that morphine could be a proven lifesaver in mountain rescue.

What is perhaps more pertinent is how the author highlights particular events that helped to move things forward as there was a realisation that with increasing numbers enjoying the hills and crags, there was a growing need for a more organised approach to mountain rescue in the UK.

Reading the book it becomes obvious that OVMRO has benefitted from several members with specialised knowledge from their day job, an inventive mind and a desire to develop, as a result significant contributions have been made to search and rescue equipment and techniques, not only throughout the UK but also in many other parts of the world. No two ‘shouts’ are the same, so ‘devise and adapt’ has often been the key.

As one would expect the book contains many real life stories and it is a stark reminder to all that the hills are to be respected; those taking liberties with a lack of equipment or knowledge, (or both) do so at their, and team members’ peril. Some of the tales towards the end of the book are especially poignant but why is it that one particularly sad event is mentioned so briefly?

There is a lot of text to this book, and at almost 300 pages including over 60 filled with photographs the font is small – far too small in my opinion – and this is not helped by the material. The book has over 230 photographs and what really stood out for me was the breadth and depth of the index, which extends to 11 pages (with around 1900 entries). This is not only an auto-biography but an encyclopaedia of climbing! And herein lies a clue to the mind set of this legendary man and the awe-inspiring life he has led.

Douglas Scott is one of the country’s, indeed world’s, top climbers having led numerous first ascents across the globe and his book is a tremendously detailed account of the world of climbing during that era. It’s also a testament to his staggering memory, given the clarity in which he recalls his life. There’s no doubt that climbing is in every sinew of his body and the book is very honest; I suspect that writing it was also cathartic. He writes with true passion but his humility and the way he talks about the raven. They’re birds which make us stop and stare and they feature powerfully in our folklore.

What can you do for the raven?
- Recognise, celebrate and record the live ones via BirdTrack or by emailing your sightings giving grid reference, site name, date and number see whatstup@bto.org
- If you have the misfortune to find a dead raven remember that, being carrion feeders, they’re particularly vulnerable to poisoned bait. Don’t touch it, if you suspect a wildlife crime may have occurred telephone the non-emergency Wildlife Crime Liaison Officer for your area. Alternatively, if you wish to remain anonymous, call Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

Sue Haysom

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