

Dorset National Park - Short Case Study Series

To supplement evidence submitted in 2013, 2014 and 2018 on the environment, heritage and biodiversity, and the recreational opportunities in the proposed National Park.



5. Osprey Translocation Project for Poole Harbour

The Poole-based charity Birds of Poole Harbour was given the go ahead in 2017 for the first stage of a new and exciting osprey translocation project, aimed at establishing in Poole Harbour a south coast breeding population of this spectacular bird. The project, which continues in 2018/19, is being led by Birds of Poole Harbour in partnership with Scottish charity the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation and local Poole-based business Wildlife Windows. Ospreys, which feed exclusively on fish, historically bred across the whole of Britain and NW Europe, but populations drastically declined in the Middle Ages and ospreys became extinct in England by the mid-1800s. This five-year project looks to restore ospreys to their former breeding grounds in the south of England where they used to have the local nickname "Mullet Hawk". At the same time the project will provide an important stepping stone between breeding populations in Britain and northern France, with the aim of enhancing the long-term survival of the Western European population as a whole. The project is part of a wider conservation recovery plan for ospreys in Western Europe and the Mediterranean region.

Ospreys are annual visitors to Poole Harbour as they pass through on their northward and southward migrations between their breeding grounds in Scotland and central England and their over-wintering grounds in West Africa. Over several years, efforts within Poole Harbour have been made by the RSPB, National Trust, Natural England, The Forestry Commission and private landowners to try and attract osprey to stay and breed by erecting artificial nesting platforms in the hope that the birds will adopt them as their own nests. Osprey are semi-colonial and often choose to nest in areas where other ospreys are nesting, and in 2009 the RSPB went as far as placing decoy birds, supplied by Roy Dennis, on one of their nesting platforms on their Arne Reserve. Although there has been some interest by osprey in these nesting platforms over that period, none have decided to stay and breed and, in 2017, a translocation project was seen as the next logical step to try and encourage these incredible birds of prey to settle on the south coast of England.

Translocation has proved a highly successful means by which to restore ospreys to areas from which they have been lost. The much-admired population at Rutland Water in the East Midlands was established by a pioneering translocation project in the late 1990s and similar work has since taken place in two regions of Spain as well as in Italy, Portugal and Switzerland. This pan-European experience means that the Poole Harbour project, which involves the licensed collection of five/six-week-old chicks from healthy, sustainable populations in Scotland, has the best-possible chance of success. Once collected the chicks are safely brought down to Poole Harbour and held in large holding pens at a confidential site for just three/four weeks to acclimatize them to their new home and prepare for their first flights. Once released they are provided with fresh fish on artificial nests, to replicate normal osprey behaviour and so are likely to remain around Poole Harbour for a further six weeks (the normal post-fledging period) before beginning their long migration to West Africa. During this six-week period the birds imprint on the area and adopt Poole as their new home.

Paul Morton from the Birds of Poole Harbour charity stated....

"The main issue that limits the natural spread of ospreys is their natural dispersal. When young ospreys return to breed for the first time, males prefer to nest in the area where they themselves were raised, while females tend to settle close to where other ospreys are nesting. These factors combined mean that the natural expansion of the species is very slow - often as little as 4 km per year. This project will help to significantly speed up this process and restore the osprey to the south coast where we know that they were once a common sight."

"The experience of other projects in Europe indicates that we should start seeing translocated Ospreys returning to their adopted home of Poole Harbour two/three years after they are released."

Every autumn Poole Harbour can host up to six ospreys at any one time, attracted by the abundance of salt water fish such as Mullet, Flounder and Bass, with the last two weeks of August and first two weeks of September being the optimum time to see them as they fatten up before their long journey south to West Africa.

Ian Alexander, Team leader for Natural England said, "Poole Harbour is a fantastic location for wildlife and no one who has seen the ospreys fishing here during their migratory stop overs can fail to have been impressed with the skill of these spectacular birds. For Poole Harbour to be the chosen location for such an important translocation project is a real accolade".

Osprey tourism is hugely popular with the top four osprey visitor attractions in the UK raising around £4 million each year for local economies between the months of March and August. Paul Morton said, "We hope that this is a project that the whole community will get behind. In other parts of the country there is great excitement when the ospreys return each spring, and in years to come it would be marvelous if there is a similar feeling in Poole and along other parts of the south coast."

Roy Dennis and Tim Mackrill, from the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation, who have great expertise in osprey translocation added, "This project is the next logical step in the conservation of ospreys in the UK and Western Europe. The Rutland project completely changed the distribution of the species in the south of the UK, but they remain a very rare breeding bird in England despite the fact that extensive areas of suitable habitat exist. Establishing a population of ospreys on the south coast, where estuaries provide extremely rich fishing grounds, will be another positive step forward and help to link existing populations in Rutland, Wales and France, as part of a pan-European recovery of the species."

Jason Fathers of Wildlife Windows commented "It is a privilege to be involved in this significant project to restore ospreys to their former breeding grounds in the south of the UK and even more rewarding to know that this step can help the European population as a whole. Much work has been done by local conservation organisations over the last eight years to persuade these wonderful birds to breed here once again and it is great to know we are one step closer to realizing this goal."

Expressing the charity Birds of Poole Harbour's support for the proposed Dorset National Park, Paul Morton said: "Poole Harbour is nestled in one of the most bio-diverse corners of the UK and is home to an incredibly rich and varied range of bird species. Recognising this area as a National Park could offer positive long term economic and environmental opportunities where both nature and communities could thrive."

Birds of Poole Harbour



Image of an osprey in Poole Harbour; courtesy of Peter Moore