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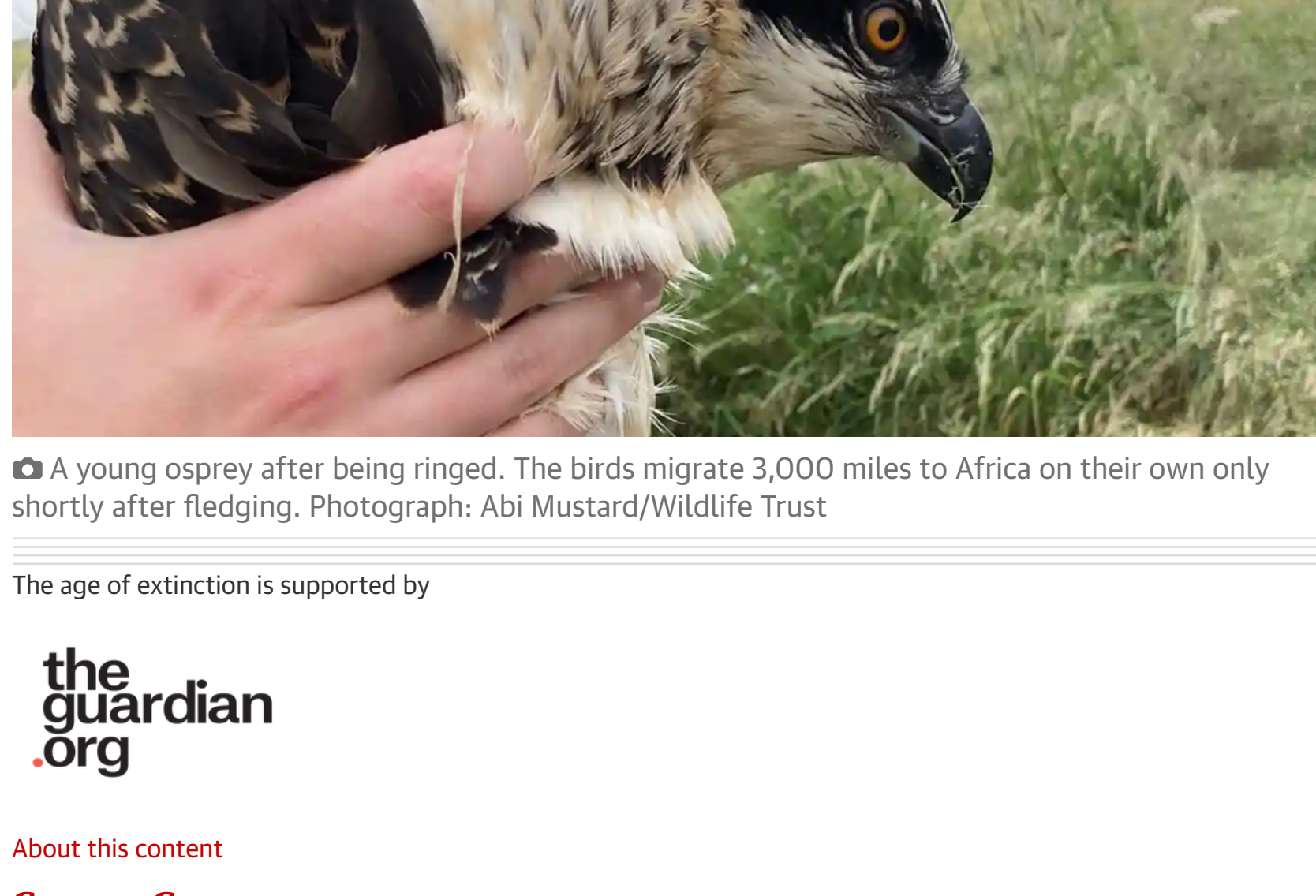
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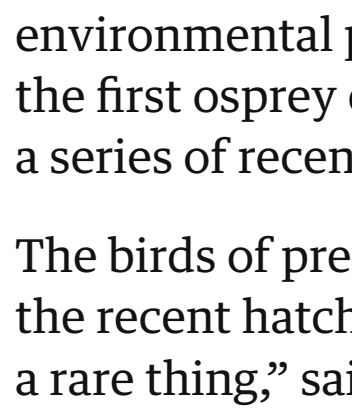
Ospreys make triumphant return as breeding pairs spread across UK

Conservationists hail success after first chicks in two centuries hatch in Leicestershire



A young osprey after being ringed. The birds migrate 3,000 miles to Africa on their own only shortly after fledging. Photograph: Abi Mustard/Wildlife Trust

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Graeme Green

Sat 10 Sep 2022 07:00 BST

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“I’m over the moon. We’ve waited a long time for this.” Beth Dunstan, environmental project manager at Belvoir Castle is celebrating the birth of the first osprey chicks in Leicestershire for two centuries this summer, one of a series of recent successes in bringing the osprey back across the UK.

The birds of prey were at one time extinct across the country, which makes the recent hatching of the two osprey chicks cause for celebration. “It’s such a rare thing,” said Dunstan. “There are only around 30 breeding pairs of ospreys in England, so to have a pair on our land breeding and raising chicks is so exciting.”

Powerful raptors with a wingspan of about 150cm (5ft), the osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) became extinct as a breeding bird in England in 1840 and in Scotland in 1916, due to persecution. The birds were shot by gamekeepers, who considered them a threat to trout and salmon stocks; they were hunted for sport and taxidermy; and their eggs were sought by collectors. Habitat loss, the destruction of nest sites and industrial pollution of water sources also contributed to their decline.

With safer conditions and more legislation in place, including bans on shooting and egg collecting, osprey populations slowly started to recover. In 1954, two Scandinavian birds flew to Loch Garten in Cairngorms national park and nested. The birds bred successfully in 1959, thanks to Operation Osprey, a 24-hour RSPB protection watch.



Ospreys are the world’s second most widely distributed raptor species. Photograph: Andy Morffew/Wildlife Trust

After a slow start, several pairs bred successfully in other parts of Scotland, with the population there rising to about 250 pairs by 2018. Scotland is now home to most of the UK’s ospreys, with the total population in the UK believed to be about 1,500 birds.

In England, it was thought that natural recolonisation would take 100 years, so nature was given a helping hand. Leicestershire & Rutland Wildlife Trust made the first reintroduction to England through the **Rutland Osprey Project**, translocating 64 osprey chicks from Scottish nests and releasing them at Rutland Water between 1996 and 2001, with 11 more females translocated in 2005.

The first breeding pair successfully raised a single chick at Rutland in 2001. There are now about 26 adults in the Rutland area, with up to 10 breeding pairs. More than 200 chicks have fledged.



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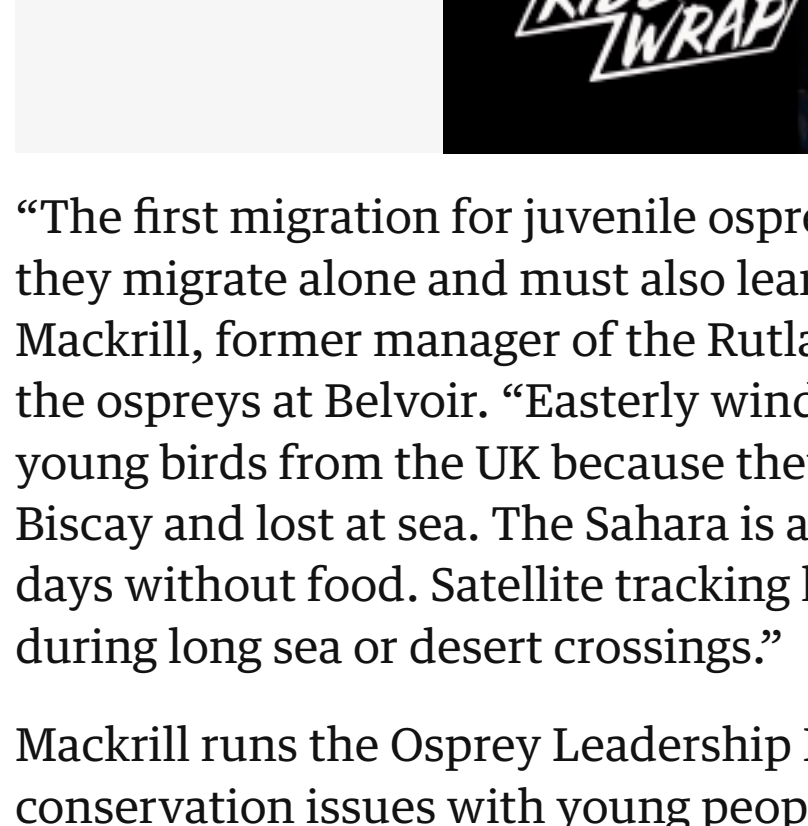
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“It’s been a tremendous success,” said Joe Davis, Rutland Water reserves manager. “Birds from Rutland have spread out across England and Wales, or they’ve been translocated. From a human perspective, we’re making good on what we destroyed.”

“We shot ospreys out of existence. We’re bringing the birds back and undoing the harm we did. They bring people so much happiness and they’re important in the food chain, including for healthy fish stocks.”

Ospreys are now found breeding in **Cumbria**, **Northumberland**, and north and **west Wales**, while the **Suffolk Wildlife Trust** is working to bring breeding ospreys back to East Anglia for the first time in more than a century. Essex Wildlife Trust has also put up nesting platforms around Abberton reservoir to attract the birds.

On Bolton Castle estate, near Leyburn, North Yorkshire, a young adult osprey pair recently produced two chicks - the first known ospreys to breed in the county since records began in 1800. But successes are often fragile. Earlier this year, an osprey pair in **Poole harbour, Dorset**, produced eggs, the first in southern England for 200 years. **Two chicks** hatched; one of them was later **killed by a goshawk**.



Tim Appleton, site manager at Rutland Water, rings an osprey chick. Photograph: David Tipling/Wildlife Trust

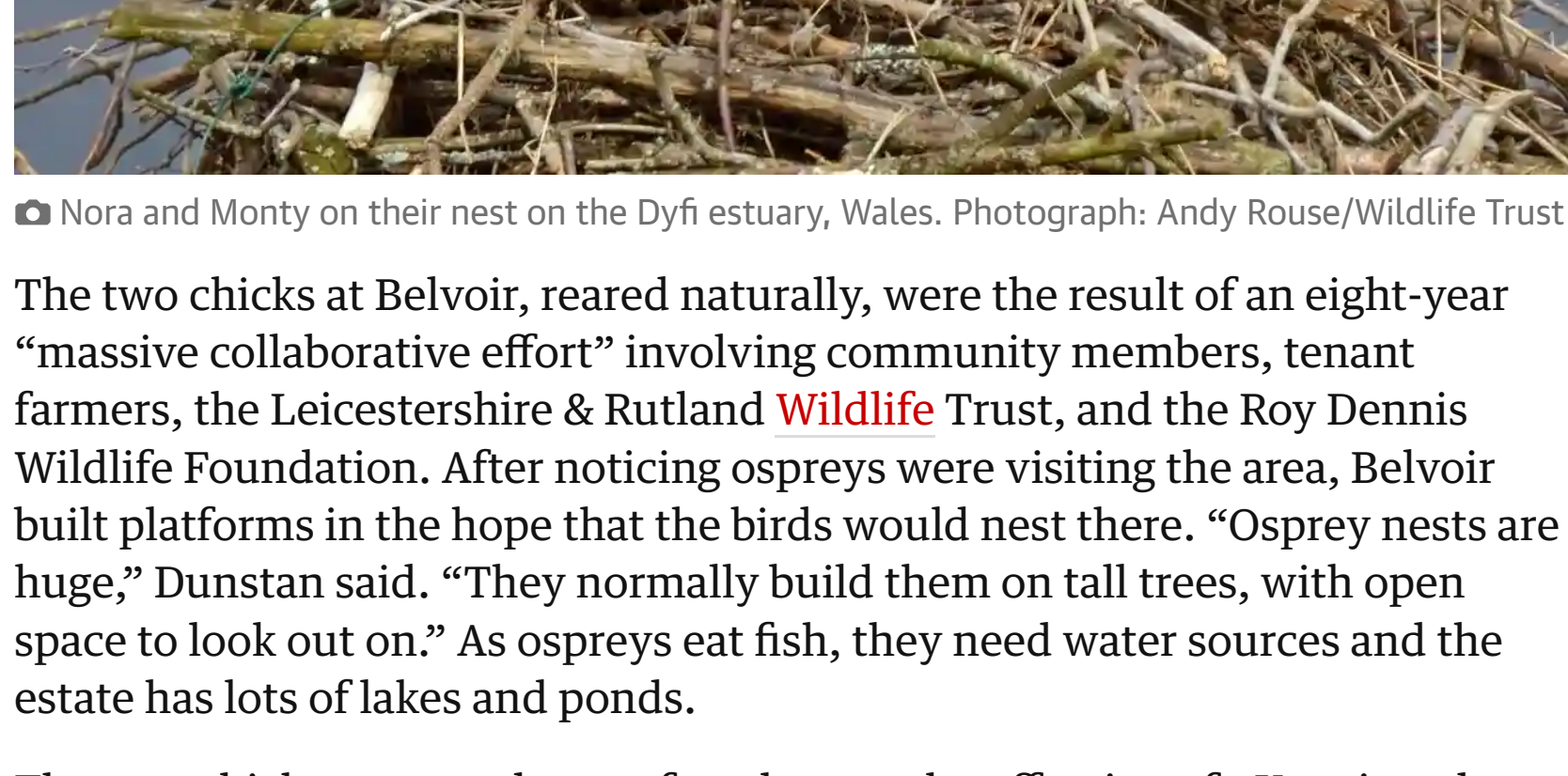
The global population of ospreys is estimated to be fewer than 100,000 birds, though it is the world’s second most widely distributed raptor species, after the peregrine falcon, with the birds found as far apart as China and Venezuela. In the US, numbers have steadily increased since the 1970s, largely due to the widespread ban of DDT and other pesticides.

Though the number in the UK is steadily growing, there are still cases of people taking osprey eggs or felling nests. The birds face other dangers, too, on their migratory route through Europe to Africa.

“The first migration for juvenile ospreys is particularly hazardous because they migrate alone and must also learn to catch fish en route,” said Tim Mackrill, former manager of the Rutland Osprey Project, who helped with the ospreys at Belvoir. “Easterly winds in autumn can be problematic for young birds from the UK because they may be blown out into the Bay of Biscay and lost at sea. The Sahara is also a challenge - the birds go four to six days without food. Satellite tracking has shown mortality is most likely during long sea or desert crossings.”

Mackrill runs the Osprey Leadership Foundation, which works on conservation issues with young people in the UK, Senegal and the Gambia. “The birds also face human-made threats as they head south,” he said. “Illegal killing is an issue in some areas. It’s estimated the number of ospreys killed in the Mediterranean region each year ranged from 47 to 349. Many of these birds are shot.

“There’s a need for simple, local action to limit human-made threats, such as electrocutions [on pylons], but also international collaboration to address overfishing and the illegal persecution of migratory birds. There’s also a need to protect the best wetland habitats along migratory flyways and on wintering grounds for ospreys and other migratory species,” Mackrill said.



Nora and Monty on their nest on the Dyfi estuary, Wales. Photograph: Andy Rouse/Wildlife Trust

The two chicks at Belvoir, reared naturally, were the result of an eight-year “massive collaborative effort” involving community members, tenant farmers, the Leicestershire & Rutland **Wildlife Trust**, and the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation. After noticing ospreys were visiting the area, Belvoir built platforms in the hope that the birds would nest there. “Osprey nests are huge,” Dunstan said. “They normally build them on tall trees, with open space to look out on.” As ospreys eat fish, they need water sources and the estate has lots of lakes and ponds.

The new chicks - one male, one female - are the offspring of 4K, a ringed male bird born at Rutland Water in 2013, and an unringed female osprey, thought to be from Scotland. 4K is fitted with a satellite tag, allowing the wildlife charity **Conservation Without Borders** to monitor his 3,000-mile migration to Guinea in west Africa each autumn and his return trip in the spring. One of the chicks has already migrated and the second is expected to migrate soon.

“Ospreys are magnificent birds,” said Dunstan. “It’s insane to think the chicks have just fledged and they’re migrating 3,000 miles to Africa, completely alone, with no one to guide them. It’s one of the wonders of the animal kingdom.”

● This article was amended on 12 September 2022 to clarify that the osprey pair in Poole harbour produced two chicks, rather than one, earlier this year.

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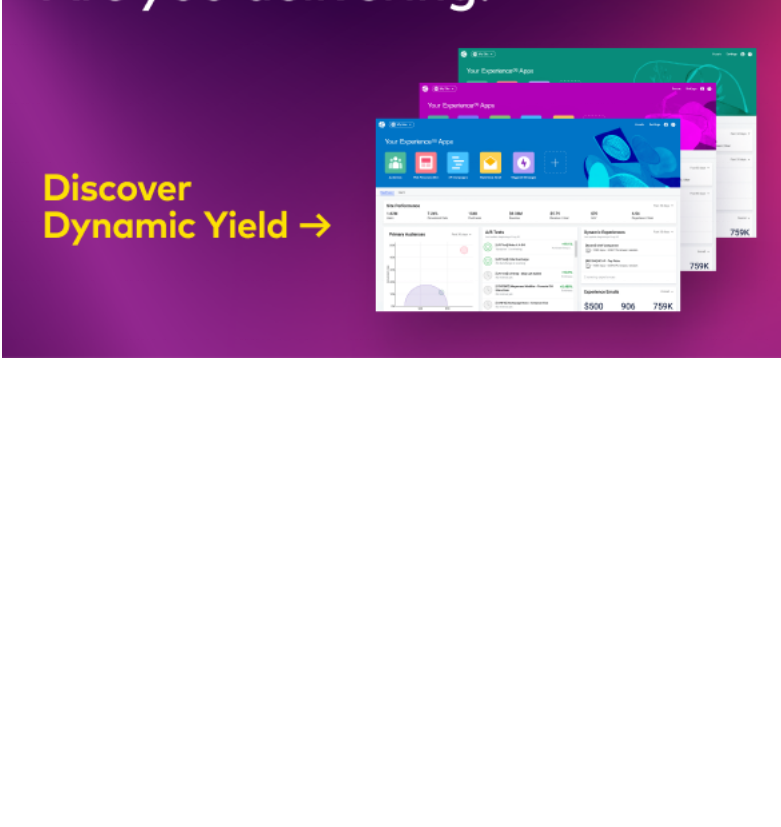
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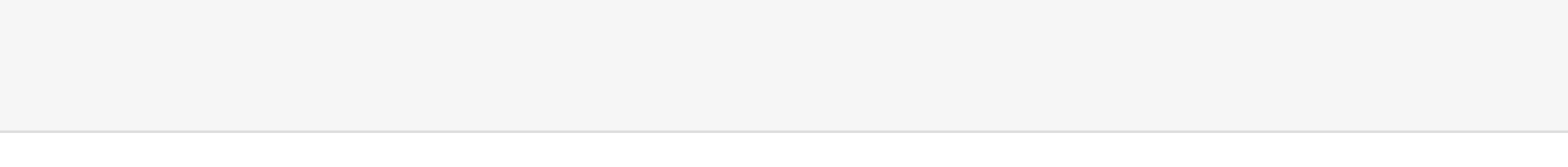
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