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Police confirm satellite-tagged Golden Eagle was persecuted

Representatives at Police Scotland have confirmed they are confident that the disappearance of a satellite-tagged Golden Eagle is due to persecution.

Merrick (F43), a female eagle from the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project, was reported missing in autumn 2023.

Project Manager, Dr Cat Barlow, explained :*"We can confirm that Police Scotland has found clear evidence that a wildlife crime has been committed. They are confident Merrick's disappearance was due to persecution.*

"The South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project is incredibly angry, upset and disappointed that her disappearance appears to have been at the hands of an individual or individuals who consider themselves above the law."



Merrick was brought to the south of Scotland in 2022 to help boost Golden Eagle numbers (South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project).

Raptor persecution condemned

Merrick (F43) originated from Rottal Estate near Kirriemuir in the Angus Glens, a traditional sporting estate, which is accredited by Wildlife Estates Scotland (WES) for its commitment to protecting and restoring wildlife and biodiversity. Speaking about her disappearance, estate owner and Chair of Scottish Land & Estates (SLE), Dee Ward, said: *"We utterly condemn raptor persecution in the strongest possible terms and it is right and proper that anyone who commits such an act is prosecuted and convicted.*

"Merrick is an eagle our own family estate donated to the project and we're incredibly proud of the part we and many other estates, land managers and gamekeepers have played in the success of the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project. Indeed, the project has otherwise been an incredible success built on respect and co-operation between keepers, farmers, foresters and raptor conservationists.

"This incident makes us all the more passionate about continuing that support and we will do all we can to prevent, detect and condemn anyone who thinks this kind of abhorrent behaviour is acceptable."

Each of the project's eagles are fitted with a state-of-the-art satellite tag which transmits regular, reliable and accurate information about the bird's wellbeing and movements. Until her disappearance, Merrick's tag had been transmitting normally. During the eight days before her disappearance, she was exploring the Moorfoot Hills. Then on 12 October, her tag suddenly stopped transmitting, indicating 'no malfunction', which strongly suggested human interference.

Blood and feathers found at roost site

On a visit to check on a juvenile eagle in the area, Eagle Officer, John Wright, inspected the relatively bare branches of a Sitka Spruce, Merrick's last known roosting spot. He very quickly noticed a small golden lanceolate shaped head feather, two small wing coverts and some white under-down laying on the moss directly below the tree. Recalling his visit to the site, John said: *"I saw a film of blood stretched across the grass stems. It subsequently turned out that a considerable amount of blood was present in and below the moss layer. As I stood back from the feather and blood location, I could see small downy feathers scattered in the dense spruce foliage below the roosting branches.*

"Merrick had been roosting (sleeping perched) in a tree when her tag stopped transmitting. Golden Eagles, as apex predators, have very few natural predators and so fears that Merrick had been fatally injured while roosting were quickly dismissed. Police Scotland have told us that they are confident humans were involved in the demise of this eagle."

The Project team contacted Police Scotland, who promptly reached the site before weather destroyed any evidence to investigate the incident. This allowed them to confidently eliminate most other potential causes of death or disappearance. The nature and pattern of feathers and blood, and all other evidence, indicated to the Police that Merrick was shot and killed.

Dr Barlow added: *"Looking at the evidence, Police Scotland believe she was shot then fell to the ground, where she bled considerably through a single wound. Police Scotland believe that someone then removed her body and destroyed her satellite tag.*

"The Project's translocated eagles have captured the hearts and minds of all our supporters, from conservationists, and raptor workers to landowners and the wider community, including children, visitors and business operators, who all share in our utter shock and disappointment.

"However, this incident, and the staunch support we have had, makes us utterly determined to fight the persecution of Golden Eagles and continue our successful translocation work to reinstate a resilient population of golden eagles across southern Scotland."

Anyone who has any information is asked to contact Police Scotland on 101. For more information, visit www.goldeneaglessouthofscotland.co.uk.

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