Conservationists praise Civil Air Support crew after first white-tailed eagle chick fledges in England for 240 years

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Raptor enthusiasts are ecstatic that a small breeding colony of Britain's biggest bird of prey has become established in England again, having successfully hatched a healthy eaglet for the first time since 1780.

Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation and Forestry England began the process of restoring the breeding population by translocating young white-tailed eagles from Scotland to the Isle of Wight in 2019, but the project came to an abrupt halt at a critical point when the Covid pandemic took hold in early 2020.

The logistics of moving young birds from the Outer Hebrides required overland transportation with travel time of at least 24 hours, needing teams of professionals who would depend upon hotels and other facilities to support them during their journey. This was simply not possible with Covid lockdown restrictions, but Civil Air Support was able to provide a solution.

One of the aviation charity's pilots Graham Mountford was living at home in a Covid 'bubble' with his daughter Helen, who happens to be a zoologist! The pair were able to work together in isolation from other humans and offered their services to relocate a batch of white-tailed eagle chicks from Stornoway to the Isle of Wight. The twin-engine Cessna 340 took just 2 hours and 30 minutes to complete the flight, and the birds of prey were delivered safely to licensed ornithologists waiting in Bembridge.

The first eaglet, a male chick born to parents who were transported to their destination by the Civil Air Support crew has now reached the grand old age of 12 weeks and has been able to leave his nest for the first-time. The young eagle will continue to be fed and nurtured by his parents for the next few months, but with a wingspan of 2.5 metres, his confidence and ability to sustain himself will develop quickly. Fitted with a satellite tag, the historic chick's progress and location will be tracked through his life to provide experts with a greater understanding of how the eagles are adapting to their environment again, after centuries of absence.

Dr Tim Mackrill of the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation was quick to recognise the important role played by the Civil Air Support crew.

"*Without Graham and Helen's help back in 2020, we would not have been able to translocate any eagles that year, which would have been a major setback for the project in only the second year. The fact that two of the eagles Graham and Helen transported that year have now reared the first white-tailed eagle chick in England for over two centuries is testament to the integral role they and Civil Air Support have played in the project.*"

Far from being a one-off event, the celebrated flight of 2020 which relocated the eagles who would become proud parents was just one in a sequence of similar missions flown by Civil Air Support. Working closely with Forestry England and the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation, the same crew made several flights during 2020, 2021 and more recently as part of a dedicated and sustained effort to support this important project which is licensed by Natural England and NatureScot.

With Covid restrictions no longer a barrier, it has been possible to fly the route in segments with a short stop at Turweston Aerodrome where specialist veterinarian professionals have been able to check the health of the birds and ensure they are properly sustained for the remainder of their journey.

With a further two territorial pairs of white-tailed eagles established on the South Coast and ten other younger eagles also getting established, conservationists are hopeful that the species will become a regular sight across coasts and wetlands of southern England.

Civil Air Support would like to thank Highland Aviation Services, Turweston Flight Centre and Bembridge Airport for their generosity and support for the charity's involvement in helping the conservation project team achieve its objective.

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Civil Air Support

T. 07976853378
E. will.ingleby@civilairsupport.com
W. https://www.civilairsupport.com/

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