

5

FALCON THEFT

While Scotland's reputation as a wildlife haven and wildlife tourism destination was growing during the latter years of the 20th century, it was also attracting unwanted attention from a group of specialist wildlife thieves. The big attraction was our population of peregrine falcons although golden eagles were also a target for a short while.

As I've already mentioned in relation to the Argyll wildlife collection case, the early 1980s were a very interesting time for the small world of British falconry. ('Falconry' is a term restricted to those who actually fly falcons at game, while 'austringers' fly hawks.) Prior to the huge boom in raptor keeping, brought about by the advances in artificial insemination techniques, very few people kept peregrines and goshawks or even buzzards and kestrels in the UK. It was even rarer to own a golden eagle or a merlin.

Despite the widespread success in the late 1960s of the book *A Kestrel for a Knave* and the subsequent film *Kes*, falconry remained a mainly elitist sport. Practised by enthusiasts who had the time and money it needed, there were few applications for the tight quotas of licences to take wild chicks from nests. In Scotland, these were administered by the Scottish Home and Health Department of the Scottish Office in Edinburgh. Links with the RSPB and the NCC were close, through a body known as the Advisory Committee on the Protection of Birds in Scotland, set up under section 11 of the 1954 Protection of Birds Act. It was even possible, at one time, to get a licence to take a golden eagle chick for falconry.

It should not be thought that there was no pressure from falconry, through nest robbing, on peregrine and eagle populations in those early days. As I have already explained, the effects of widespread use of organochlorine pesticides had been catastrophic in some areas. In the late 1970s, for example, the population of peregrines in southeast Scotland had crashed to around half a dozen breeding pairs. At its height in the late 20th century, this population had risen to over 90 pairs. Despite this, they were still under attack from chick thieves. In 1984, my new colleagues regaled me with tales of 24-hour watches on remote hillsides and of entire communities guarding 'their' peregrines. Little did we know that that was just a taster of what was about to occur.

Before modern captive breeding techniques became accessible, falconers obviously had to take wild birds. Many old books contain details of the robbing of eyries to obtain peregrine

chicks, often from cliff nests which have been known for this reason for centuries. I recall visiting a regularly-robbed cliff in the Borders, which, George Carse informed me, had supplied birds for Mary, Queen of Scots. In latter decades it had been supplying a gang of thieves with drug-dealing convictions from the shabbier parts of Newcastle.

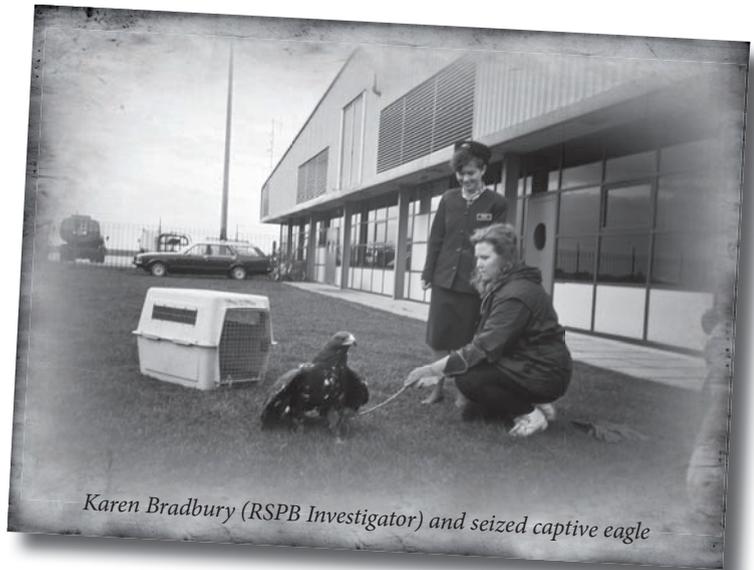
In the pre-Protection Acts days, Scottish falconers would take and train eyasses (nestlings) from wild nests, use them for a few seasons until they escaped or were simply found wanting as hunters and were released. The most prized birds were passage birds, young peregrines of the year which had already learned to fly. These had to be trapped, using nets and live traps.

I learnt much of the above from legitimate professional falconers. As the thefts began to build up throughout the 1980s, such knowledge was valuable in understanding not only the *modus operandi* or M.O. – to use the term beloved by crime investigators! – of falcon thieves but also their motivation, or that of the end users of the birds. The robbers themselves were always driven purely by money. These were professional criminals who could make very easy money this way and found themselves in no danger of being jailed, as conservation legislation was so weak.

Sadly, the legitimate side of falconry was very slow to accept what had become obvious to those of us in the front line: that more and more peregrine nests were being robbed in Scotland to satisfy the growing demand of a rapidly expanding hobby. This led to considerable unnecessary and divisive conflict between organisations which should

have been working together to catch the criminals. As I have said with regard to shooting, the RSPB was the one conservation body with an openly-stated neutral position on the killing of game, whether with a shotgun or with a falcon.

The logic which was being applied by the falconry world was that surely no one needed to steal peregrines, when increases in captive breeding were drastically reducing the price of legitimate captive birds? This surprised us too, for some time, until we heard the criminals boasting of selling 'pure-bred, wild stock, Scottish birds'. It appeared that those falconers with enough money – initially in the Gulf States but also in Germany, Austria, Belgium and Holland – were indulging their fantasies of flying 'the best falcons in the world'. These were the people who were paying ridiculous prices – thousands of pounds, dollars or Deutschmarks – at a time when you could buy a captive bird in the UK for £350 to £500. It should always be remembered, though, that those high prices were for birds which had



Karen Bradbury (RSPB Investigator) and seized captive eagle

already been through several pairs of criminals hands and which, having been smuggled across several borders, arrived at their destination fully grown, fully trained and fully acclimatised to the heat.

If anyone still doubts this, they should consider the case of Jeffrey Lendrum, caught smuggling live peregrine eggs to Dubai and convicted as I write in August 2010. This comes at a time when such countries have had temperature-controlled breeding aviaries for years. The only explanation is that they are desperate for peregrines with a proven UK bloodline.

The context in which the following Scottish case histories are told encompasses all of the above: an expanding world market, poorly understood at first by those suffering the consequences and trying to prevent conservation damage, and also poorly understood by many within falconry. This lack of understanding was often, I believe, due to criminals within their own ranks, feeding in disinformation, in what is again a close similarity with the UK shooting community.

MONDAY, 16 JUNE 1986

It's early afternoon and a police patrol car in the Dumfries-shire town of Annan notices two Newcastle-registered cars, a Saab and a Ford Granada, driving through the centre and heading east. Although they have no record of the cars, something about them attracts the attention of the policemen and they radio the details, including the fact that they were full of young men, to their HQ in Dumfries.

A short while later the cars are spotted by an unmarked CID car, which tries to follow them. The CID officers later told me that they had had a recent tip-off about a gang of thieves coming to Stranraer to raid a supermarket. They thought they were dealing with conventional criminals but began to wonder what was going on when the vehicles headed up into the Galloway Hills. They finally lost the car amongst the maze of forest tracks and small roads west of New Galloway and headed back to Dumfries.

The next sighting of the cars, some hours after the CID lost them, found them heading towards Dumfries from the Galloway direction on the main A75 trunk road. When they drove through Dumfries, they made the idiotic mistake of shouting and waving at female pedestrians, not only attracting attention but also giving the police the perfect excuse to stop them.

When I spoke to the arresting officer, after a call for help and a dash down to the police office from Edinburgh, he was still a bit stunned by what had happened. By now it was 1 a.m. 'My colleague was talking to the occupants and I opened the boot and saw three pairs of eyes staring back at me! I got a real shock and slammed the lid back down!'

In the boot of the Saab were three very large, fully-feathered live peregrine chicks.

At this time, and for some while after, three of the men, all found in the Ford Granada, claimed they knew nothing about the Saab, the two men in the Saab or, of course, the peregrines in the boot. I was present at the search of the Granada and spotted some 'chick fluff' on one of its seats (chick fluff, or down, is a common sight around fledging time when many raptors moult it out as their feathers grow in. It is also very sticky, clinging to any surface, including an intruder's clothes). I also recognized the names of three of the men. One was the head of the already notorious 'Geordie' gang of peregrine thieves, along with two of his more active henchmen. Under a back seat in the Granada, we also found a keychain with a

picture of a goshawk and falconry jesses on it. The local Procurator Fiscal was contacted and granted a warrant for their overnight arrest based on these links. As always, I was aware of the lack of a power of arrest under the 1981 Act, a thorn in our side for years to come. During their confinement, the police were able to carry out further checks on the men and discovered that another of them had given a false name. He was also, in fact, a known criminal and was then charged with an attempt to pervert the course of justice: a serious charge, with possible serious consequences in terms of a jail sentence.

So, all in all, it was rather a good, unexpected capture. My job really started then, though. I had to take photographs and officially identify the birds and give a statement about peregrines and peregrine theft. I learned in later years to save all that for later, when back in my own office, but things were moving fast on this one. Now for the part that all too often gets second billing in such cases – we've got five criminals banged up and retrieved three peregrine chicks, but what will we do with them?

After talking to the CID men and making several middle-of-the-night calls to Raptor Group contacts, we got a likely nest location for the robbery, someone to show us the way and a local forest ranger to help. Also, essential to the case, I obtained permission from the Stranraer Fiscal – my old friend Mr Walkingshaw, in whose Stranraer jurisdiction the theft had taken place – to release into the wild what was, in fact, the main evidence. It was always my priority to get live birds back into nature as soon as humanly possible. Over many cases, the provision of corroborated (witnessed) photographs of live birds and a statement from me, detailing their fate, was accepted by sheriffs as fully adequate to allow for a prosecution to proceed.

The next morning found a bleary-eyed couple of RSPB Investigators (I had Iain Macleod with me on this one) approaching a crag high in the Galloway Hills. With us were Dick Roxburgh, the grand old man of the Southwest Scotland Raptor Group, and Frank McGhie, the Forestry Commission Ranger (and an amateur falconer). To our great relief and pleasure we found not only a recently-occupied, empty peregrine nest but adults still in attendance. After a nest is robbed – a sight I saw all too often – peregrines will usually drift away to another, presumably less traumatic, part of their home range. If birds are still calling at a site, it's usually a sign of a very recent robbery. With great care, we replaced the chicks on the nest ledge (these were very large chicks, known as 'leapers' in peregrine monitoring terminology) and walked away down the hill. As we went, we kept looking back until we spotted an adult land close to the chicks. Success! Frank monitored the birds until they were safely fledged a few days later.

That same day, the five men appeared in court and pled 'not guilty' to charges of taking and possession of peregrine chicks. I contacted Frank Walkingshaw and was able to supply him with details of the men's previous convictions. That last statement may seem strange, particularly to any policeman, but the fact was that for the greater part of my involvement in this work, record keeping and retrieval by courts and the police was woefully inadequate when it came to Summary (lower court) cases such as wildlife. By 1986, RSPB Investigations Section already had a sophisticated record keeping system on offenders which, as the decade wore on, was accessed on many occasions by the police and Fiscals. It was, of course, all completely legitimate and something of which we were rightly proud. At this point, I doff my

hat to the long line of hardworking collaters who ran this system, from the remarkable Penny Tedder on. Its accuracy and comprehensiveness was essential and woe betide any Investigator (including myself) who forgot to send in case details, no matter how hard pressed they were.

The results of a failure by police and courts to access this information, or of trying to avoid involving us, were all too apparent. You can imagine my anger at seeing convicted individuals described by their defence agents as ‘never having been in trouble – this was a one-off crime’ when you know they have been caught and fined for the same type of offence in some far-off English magistrates court. I had to endure that more than once and would be very surprised if it didn’t happen still, even in (or possibly because of) today’s all-singing-and-dancing computer culture.

As so often happens, all five accused entered guilty pleas at a later hearing. Sentencing took place on Monday, 22 December 1986. All five received fines of £2,000 and one man received a jail sentence of three months (already served) for giving a false name. A grand total of £10,000 in fines, far and away the largest ever given in a wildlife case in the UK at that point. Three of the gang appealed against sentence and on Thursday, 17 December 1987, they had their fines cut to £1000, £500 and £500).

These large fines of course, did nothing to slow down the increasing rate of nest robberies. The prices allegedly being paid for peregrines (there was very little real inside information at that time) combined with the fact that the chances of being caught were very low and that a fine would be the worst penalty a court could impose.

Every ‘peregrine spring’ was the same, with a sprinkling of new pairs as the population continued to recover from the pesticide crash. April tended to be an optimistic month, with reports coming in from all over Scotland of birds sitting. Then would come the inevitable phone calls and letters from raptor workers carrying out later checks: ‘nest empty, no sign of eggshell, footprints above the cliff, etc...’ As the RSG network grew in size and efficiency, we started to become aware of the robbery hotspots and the true extent of the problem. In Southeast Scotland, Moffatdale and Tweedsmuir; in Southwest Scotland, the Solway Coast of Wigtownshire and the entire Ayrshire population; in Central Scotland, the hills around Loch Earn and Loch Tay; the edges of the A9 from Fife to Inverness. Very specific patterns emerged, as with eggshell thefts. There were ‘traditional’ robbery sites and many, although not all, were the smaller, easily climbable crags.

At the same time, persecution of peregrines was also continuing on grouse moors, but the methods used there were different and often quite blatant – the shooting of adults, the laying of spring traps on nest ledges, poisoning and smashing of eggs. We did occasionally hear of gamekeepers being approached by falcon thieves and being offered money, either to take chicks and pass them on or to turn a blind eye when the thieves were at work. One keeper contacted me through a third party after receiving just such a phone call, worried that he would be implicated.

This was a frustrating time for me – on the one hand, we had a higher profile than ever, due to a growing number of prosecutions, particularly of egg shell thieves, but on the other, I had a growing number of angry and upset raptor workers. For the first time, I was seeing the size of the wildlife crime problem, just on the wild bird side of things, and realising how pathetically inadequate was the conservation and justice system response. Ironically, as

I write, when eggshell theft and widespread falcon theft are rarities, the might of modern 'virtual conservation' is still aimed at these phantom thieves while estate-based persecution, the politically difficult but very real threat, is either ignored or conveniently sidelined by the authorities.

SUNDAY, 8 APRIL 1990

On Saturday, 7 April, Charlie Hall, an RSG member, was monitoring one of his peregrine sites, southeast of Stranraer. He found the nest where all appeared well, with two freshly-laid eggs and a pair of healthy, vocal peregrines in attendance. He also noticed an unusual vehicle, a German-registered VW camper van, parked nearby. He took the number and carried on with his bird work. This alertness was soon to pay off. Returning to the nest the same evening, he found it had been robbed and raised the alarm, giving the police the German vehicle number.

At 4.30 p.m. on the following day, a Sunday, I received a phone call at home, from the Duty Sergeant at Stranraer police office. Could I come and help? 'We've just caught two German nationals red-handed, in the act of stealing peregrine eggs.' I can't recall if the police got my number from the local Fiscal, a local birdwatcher or from one of the police I had worked with in the past. All of these were possibilities as I gave out my card to anyone I could think of, with the words, 'Don't hesitate to call, day or night.' I was greatly angered to read the following statement in a recent book written by a retired police officer: '...time can be wasted by a person waiting to report a crime to an agency...' (the RSPB) '...that works 9-to-5, Monday to Friday.' For over 20 years I was on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, a fact that was known and used by police officers, Fiscals and a host of civilian raptor group members. Time and again, I saw cases damaged by a lack of response when incidents were first reported to the police. That situation had changed little, due to apathy or a lack of organisation, by the time I left the job in 2006. The man concerned would not enjoy a conversation with my adult daughter, who complains that I was never at home as she was growing up.

Stranraer, I had already found out the hard way, was one of the more remote parts of Scotland as regards travel from an Edinburgh office or home – a three-and-a-half hour drive, on a variety of roads, from motorway to a long twisting, narrow coastal route. I jumped in my car (by then I had a vehicle available at all times between March and August), collected photographic and climbing gear from my office and set off. I had had a few hours' rest after traveling back from a search for illegal traps in Cowal, followed by a lecture to a birdwatchers' group in the same area the night before.

Arriving at Stranraer at around 8.30 p.m., I was met by police officers very keen for me to identify eggs found concealed in an incubator within the VW camper van belonging to the two German men. What I saw astonished me: a complex home-made system consisting of an incubator box, thermally sealed and containing a thermostat alarm, all wired up to the vehicle's battery. The incubator contained nine peregrine eggs. I was also shown a plastic bucket with a lid, containing egg cartons and packing and another thermostat alarm. The bucket had been found with the German men when they were caught near a peregrine nest.

Where had the eggs come from? A series of phone calls within the RSG network throughout the evening and some rapid checking of local sites had produced only Charlie's certain

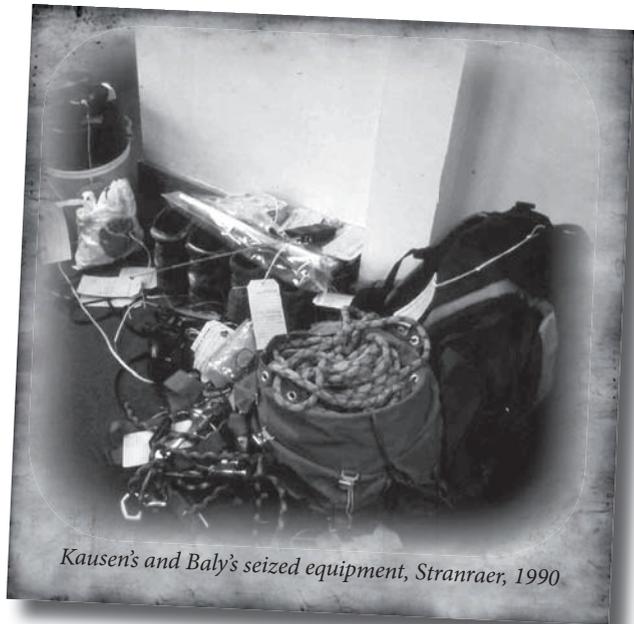
robbery. Once again, the close working relationship with Frank Walkingshaw, the local Fiscal, paid off and I was able to get permission to take two of the eggs to return to Charlie's nest.

Monday morning, early, and I'm handed two peregrine eggs by the Stranraer police. By 11 a.m., I've abseiled into the nest, on a low Solway coast cliff and replaced the live eggs where they belonged. Adult peregrines were still in the area. The remaining eggs were kept in the Germans' incubator, which was being looked after by Sgt Ken Bruce, Dumfries and Galloway's first police Wildlife Liaison Officer (WLO). A birdwatcher, with a special interest in buzzards and bird ringing, Ken was a great asset in those early days. Unfortunately, later WLOs in that force appear to have been picked more for their interest in fieldsports than for their knowledge of wildlife.

The two Germans, Peter Baly and Leo Kausen, young men from Cologne with an interest in falconry and who gave their employment as cobblers, were brought to Stranraer Sheriff Court from custody the following day and pled guilty to charges of taking and possession of peregrine eggs. Their defence agent, speaking on their behalf, said that Baly had not realised that taking peregrine eggs was illegal in Scotland and that the eggs were for their own use (the two men had earlier told the arresting officer that the eggs were for consumption!) The Fiscal asked for sentencing to be postponed until Wednesday, two days later, and the sheriff agreed. After explaining to the defence that this was a serious matter, with a possible £18,000 fine, he refused bail as the men were 'of no fixed abode' and asked for social background reports.

By 1990, we were well aware that there were many German nationals involved in international falcon theft and smuggling. My colleagues in England had made good contacts with German customs and police officials. When Baly's name was mentioned, alarm bells immediately started ringing. I was told that he had previously been caught in Iceland while stealing live gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*) eggs, had been fined the equivalent of £8,200 but had absconded on a German freighter without paying the fine. The refusal of the freighter captain to hand over his passenger had caused a minor diplomatic incident. I passed all this information to the Fiscal, so that there would be no protestations of innocence, again, at sentencing.

I talked on the phone to Helmut Brücher, a German falcon theft expert with official links to Customs and police, who said he would arrange for searches of the two men's homes and



Kausen's and Baly's seized equipment, Stranraer, 1990

premises. Helmut helped us out on many occasions back then and I was delighted to be able to return some favours by arranging for him to talk at a police Wildlife Liaison Officers' conference in the UK and showing him round some of our birding hotspots, including peregrine crags. He had helped retrieve chicks stolen from some of these very nests.

At some point it entered my mind that the Icelanders, having some unfinished business with Mr Baly, would love to get their hands on him again. I imagined how we Scots would feel if it was the other way round. How, though, to find out about extradition and Icelandic legal matters? Who did I know in Iceland? Then I had a brainwave: Magnus Magnusson. Probably the world's most famous Icelander, Magnus was a well-known supporter of conservation in Scotland and was, in fact, made President of the RSPB in 1995. Through a series of increasingly unreal phone calls, I spoke to the RSPB hierarchy, Magnus himself, the head of the Icelandic Parliament and the editor of Iceland's most prestigious newspaper. The Icelanders seemed very excited by the whole idea, which generated considerable publicity, in both Iceland and Scotland (after the Stranraer sentencing, of course). Sadly, I was eventually told that the Iceland offences had gone out of time, so that extradition would have been pointless. It was, though, an interesting dry run.

WEDNESDAY, 11 APRIL 1990

We all arrived for Kausen's and Baly's sentencing. Mr Walkingshaw outlined the events of the previous Sunday, when the police, already alerted by Charlie, had done an excellent job in locating the vehicle and then the two men, who had tried to run off along cliffs and a rocky shore close to a peregrine nest site to the west of Stranraer. After describing the equipment found on the men and in the vehicle, the Fiscal went on to describe the background to peregrine theft, using the information I had been able to supply. He said that German nationals had been caught raiding falcon nests from Spain to Turkey. He also described the finding, the day before, by the German authorities, of three 'breeding machines' (incubators) in Baly's flat and a price list for falcons and eagles.

In summing up, he calculated that all their equipment (including the vehicle, incubators, climbing ropes and the eggs) were worth a total of £45,000. He asked for forfeiture of all of this and added the fact that the men had been uncooperative with the police when first interviewed.

The sheriff then asked the social worker that had interviewed them about their means. Baly had admitted the Iceland affair. He was 28 years old and worked with Kausen, who was the same age. They shared an interest in falconry. He claimed he taken the eggs to hatch, then fly the birds himself.

Next came the defence agent's plea in mitigation: in my own experience, these always include the fact that 'my client loves wildlife', no matter how awful the offences. This could be the hardest part of a case for me, when I had to listen to a string of obvious second-hand lies and blatant red herrings, with no regard to facts or evidence. Such mitigation can only be challenged by the prosecution if there is a claim of good character when the accused has, in fact, convictions of a similar nature. I saw that used only once but to electrifying effect. In this case, it was claimed that Baly and Kausen had not known that it was a policeman chasing them; they denied that they had said they were going to eat the eggs; they claimed no knowledge of German or Arab prices for birds and repeated that the eggs were for their own

use. The defence agent then made a strategic error in suggesting that the possible fines were extreme. Sheriff Smith interrupted him to say that ‘Parliament was of the view that this was a serious matter and that is why they set the fines so high.’ The agent went on to claim that the men had learned about peregrines in this area from reading a book in Cologne library and that the vehicle was virtually worthless, as was their equipment.

In his summing up and sentencing, the sheriff made the very useful remark that ‘this legislation creates a dilemma [in having no direct jail provision]: what do I do with people with no money?’ He then proceeded to fine them £6,000 each with the alternative of imprisonment for non-payment, knowing that they had only £600 on them. He also said he didn’t believe that they didn’t know this was against the law and that ‘this was a professionally-organised visit for profit’. In imposing a fine of a third of the possible maximum, he told them he was being lenient. He also forfeited their vehicle and all their equipment.

The Germans were taken to Barlinnie jail in Glasgow.

Barlinnie is not a nice place and it contains some unpleasant people. I know this officially, having received a written reply from the governor to my forwarded complaints from nearby householders who had seen prisoners fishing for ‘seagulls’ using bread on bits of string. They throttled the gulls, then threw out the bodies. The governor’s letter was a masterpiece of tongue-in-cheek understatement: ‘I will look into the matter but you must understand – we have some unpleasant people in here.’ Fair enough. He now had two more. I genuinely hope he got the gull killing stopped.

This case still had one last twist: within a week, a German national flew into Glasgow Airport, carrying a bag containing £12,000 in Deutschmarks. He took a taxi to Barlinnie where he tried to pay the fine for Baly and Kausen. The prison authorities said they could only accept sterling. So the unknown German got a taxi back into the centre of Glasgow, changed the money and returned to Barlinnie. Stepping out of the taxi, he left the money bag on the back seat, only to see the driver pull away. I’m sure the warders and inmates heard some interesting new words at this point. It was then that the unbelievable happened: the taxi driver found the bag, saw what was in it and took it back to Barlinnie! The story made the national press.

Sometimes, I think God is looking the other way.

The following year, Baly and Kausen had their fines reduced by the Court of Appeal in Edinburgh to £5,000 each. Big deal. We still needed prison sentences under the 1981 Act.

What we had seen here, I believe, was a couple of greedy Germans trying to cut out the middle men – UK nest thieves, bogus breeding launderers of peregrines and German couriers or smugglers – but who had, in fact, miscalculated the laying dates of Scottish peregrines. They had arrived too early. Another week or ten days later and their haul would have been twice as big. They had also underestimated our defences, although I’d be the first to say that there was a fair degree of luck involved here. Once again, though, RSPB skills and connections were what counted in getting a successful outcome. These were still days of true ‘partnership working’ although we would have called it ‘using common sense and working together’. We just got on with it.

Around this time, several groups of Germans were caught and a good deal of intelligence was gathered from within the falconry community suggesting that a high volume of live eggs

and chicks were being stolen and smuggled by, or on behalf of, German nationals. In the early 1990s, though, this was largely unknown to the general public. One April morning, a worker at an active quarry beside the A9 in Inverness-shire arrived early and surprised two men in the quarry. They were carrying climbing ropes but what impressed him most was that they were speaking to each other in German. Being an active quarry, there were considerable quantities of explosives stored in a shed on site. The two Germans left, without properly explaining what they had been up to. The quarry worker came to the conclusion that they must have been international terrorists trying to steal the explosives and immediately contacted the police. He had managed to take the number of their car, a hired Mercedes saloon. This, of course, triggered a wave of intense police activity.

By the time the site manager arrived at the quarry, the police were there in force. Fortunately, he was well aware of the peregrines nesting in the quarry – local RSPB staff monitored the site every year – and came to the correct conclusion when he heard about the climbing equipment. The men had been peregrine thieves.

I was sitting in my office when the phone rang. Colin Crooke, my RSPB colleague in Inverness, had now got involved. He passed me on to the police officer in charge. 'We've traced the car to the Europcar office at the top of Leith Walk in Edinburgh. A DC Gosling at Gayfield Square nick is handling it. Could you go round and tell him everything you know about Germans and peregrine smuggling?'

The top of Leith Walk? Gayfield Square? That's about two minutes' walk from my office. I grabbed a couple of files and headed off at a run. As I was going into the police office, it struck me that I was a) about to downgrade the officer's inquiry to a 'bird matter' and b) that his name was Gosling.

He took it well. Particularly when I told him about the size of the fines being handed out and the type of people involved. A period of frantic activity ensued, with communication between the police, Customs and Excise and RSPB HQ. At some point it was decided – I suspect by Customs – that the Germans would be allowed to run until they were stopped at a UK Border. I also suspect that this was to allow for more serious consequences: the Endangered Species Act and smuggling legislation would come into play, with jail as the likely outcome. And so it came to pass. The two Germans were caught trying to go onto a ferry at Dover with an incubator hidden in their glove compartment area, containing several live peregrine eggs. They pled guilty and were given sentences of 18 months and six months in jail.

Working most of the time in Scotland, I was at the sharp end of the peregrine and golden eagle thefts. Year after year, I visited robbed nests and diligently reported and recorded the crimes. We knew who the thieves were and they knew who we were. Outside court, on the few occasions when they were caught, and during police searches of their homes in the Newcastle area, when we acted as expert witnesses, the thieves would talk to us on first-name terms. They knew that while the law stayed weak, they could carry on with relative impunity, facing not jail, but just a fine. They were very cocky. On one occasion, I was about to abseil into a nest in Moffatdale – an area notorious for the attentions of the 'Geordie gang' when I spotted a message scrawled on the rock face. 'Dave 88 3' which translates as, 'We took three chicks from here in 1988, Dave.'



Above: Peregrine chick close to fledging

Below: Author with alphachloralose egg baits, 1988

