

INSIGHT #9 - From the Highlands to the Nullarbor

August 2014



Hell-Oaaarr theerrre Luddies un Lussies!!

Fit Layke? Nae bad? Tawin awaa aye? Dinna kin fit Aim blaaabberin' aboot? Me nay-thurrrr!

Let's dive straight into this version of INSIGHT by renaming it S.U.S.H for a second. "What is that?" I hear you ask. Simmo's Update of the Scottish Highlands of course! And what better way to begin than with a language lesson!

I can tell you are totally confused by the above sentence, but I did warn that the Scots are thrice as hard to interpret as the Kiwis! To translate: 'Fit like' is the Scottish way of saying 'what's happening?' or 'how arya?', and somebody is 'nae bad' if they're 'not bad, or 'tawin awa' if they are 'going well' or happen to be 'plodding along'. This was just the start of the language laughs I encountered - and don't worry, the Locals gave me plenty back for being a 'Strayan'!

The above photo shows me holding an incredible Golden Eagle chick, reading to be 'ringed', with my friend and Scottish tour guide Stuart taking a photo. But more on that soon...

I arrived in 'Boornie Scorttlund' in the second week of May after a very long and cramped flight. No, being 6'8" doesn't mean you can simply be cut in half and tucked into a plane in a neat package! It was brilliant to be in a new place and I didn't take long to find a nice pub with cold beer and hot meals. But I was barely one sip into my pint and a lady burst into the pub and asked:

"Does anyboordy nuuuu a thung orr twooo aboot burrrds? There's a weee ducky ootsayde an' she cunna get o'er the faairnce!" We rushed outside to find a distressed family of ducks 'stuck' in the beer garden of the pub. What happened next? You can read the whole story on my blog at the below link (but don't forget to come back here afterwards - I haven't finished yet!):

<http://simoncherriman.blogspot.com.au/2014/05/stuck-ducks-near-bucks-burn.html>

I spent the first week exploring the surrounds of my first port of call, Aberdeen, basing myself in a small but tidy room at the Staging Post pub (the duck experience had such a good vibe that I decided to stay here). Also this accommodation was close enough to visit my sick Aunty, who after having a brain haemorrhage just a week before my arrival, was recovering in the Royal Infirmary Hospital. While the circumstances were not the best it did mean I was able to see my cousin for the first time in 17 years, meet her family, and offer some kind of support at this difficult time.

The River Don became a huge and beautiful playground for me, and as the sounds and smells of spring filled the air, I discovered some wild places and wildlife totally different to anything in Australia. This included seeing the 'Dipper', not a crazy rollercoaster ride as you might think, but a small and unique songbird which 'dips' beneath the surface of babbling brooks to catch prey. My friend Stuart Rae from Canberra grew up in this area, and when he arrived in the second week I was privileged to be shown around by one of the most knowledgeable Scottish ecologists you can meet. Before the end of May I had seen deer, found buzzards and kestrels nesting, taken pictures of some wonderful waterbirds, and wandered through woods and fields full of brilliant flowers that epitomised

a Scottish spring. You can read more details in my May blog posts that can be found here:

http://simoncherriman.blogspot.com.au/2014_05_01_archive.html

Durness to the Cairngorms

Stuart and I headed north in late May, travelling through vivid green countryside to Inverness, then weaving our way among the giant Gneiss rock formations until the signs of civilization gradually waned. We arrived at the Cape Wrath Lodge, near Duurrrrrrneeeess (that's it, roll the r's and draw out the e's!!), where Stuart's good friends met us with some of the warmest hospitality I have ever known. Durness is the northern-most town in Scotland, and is set in the beautiful Highlands, shrouded in mist and sombre spray from the North and Norwegian Seas. I quickly learned that, contrary to popular Australian belief, the Highlands are not full of krrrrrazy, kilt-wearing Scotsman who play bagpipes and gnash their teeth at you from behind ragged red beards!! Funny that. A bit like our streets not being full of kangaroos!



Up north I was taken to a hidden glen and saw my first Scottish Golden Eagle. The icy air and slight drizzle were not ideal conditions for birdwatching, but when I saw a speck appear at the top of a crag, hover for a moment on the oncoming breeze, then tear across the rock-faces and rip down in an exhilarating dive, talons extended, towards its cliff-ledge nest, I forgot all about the weather. Nigel, my wonderfully friendly guide who had agreed to show me the nest site, had a high-powered scope which allowed us a crisp view from our vantage point about a mile away. We were totally thrilled when we saw a fluffy white head appear from within the nest. It bobbed briefly before the brooding adult tucked its body over the eaglet, keeping in the warmth. What a sight!

You can see other northern highlights, which included

ground-nesting shorebirds, migratory greenshank, seals, coastal wildflowers and more, at these links:

<http://simoncherriman.blogspot.com.au/2014/05/ground-nesters.html>
<http://simoncherriman.blogspot.com.au/2014/05/the-far-north.html>

In June we based ourselves at Stuart's brother's place near Aberdeen and every minute that was not spent sleeping had us out doing bird research of one sort or the other. The magical Cairngorms are less than 2 hours away and here I saw Ptarmigan, Dotterel, Mountain Hares, Osprey and many others. Ringing (banding) a few Golden Eagle chicks was by far one of the highlights, and as I wrote soon after, "I felt privileged to have been defecated on by such a wonderful bird!" There were plenty of other special moments, many of which you can read about here:

http://simoncherriman.blogspot.com.au/2014_06_01_archive.html

When you visit this link, you will see that one of the first entries is about Sea Eagles in Singapore - the next part of my overseas adventure! After leaving Scotland, it was a brilliant experience finding and filming another of the world's large eagles, made even more fun by working with friends Clare and Scotty from my NZ filmmaking degree ☺ The footage I captured will be used in the 'Singapore, Wild City' TV documentary currently being produced in time for Singapore's 50 year independence celebrations next year. While in this mighty city I also took time to talk (hard to believe, I know!) to the Nature Society about my eagle research in Australia in a one-hour Saturday evening presentation.



July - West to the Nullarbor

I landed back in Australia at the beginning of July and picked up my new car (a Toyota Landcruiser 'Troopy'), a very exciting milestone that I've been working towards for the last few years now. Gill flew over east to meet me and we drove off into the sunset (yes, very romantic I

know), ready to spend the next few weeks camping in the outback. This began with the wonderful Wollommi National Park, where we helped my good friend Dan with his PhD fieldwork on Dingoes. We then headed to arid NSW, spending time at Mutawintji and Mungo National Parks, before stopping off to catch up with another good friend Kylie at Arid Recovery (<http://www.aridrecovery.org.au/>) in South Australia. As you can imagine, I had quite a few eagle adventures along the way, and it felt great for the focus species to once again be the mighty wedge-tail, after I'd had a taste of international varieties.



Wedge-tailed Eagles, like this adult (left) and juvenile enjoy a free meal of road-killed kangaroo.

Aside from eagles, Gill and I saw many other beautiful landscapes, and got up close to species of birds I'd not seen before. We marvelled at the 30 or so Southern Right Whales that lolled around in the shallow waters of the Great Australian bight, a truly remarkable and moving experience. And we watched the weather warm as winter waned and Spring slowly sprang around us. You can see snippets of our journey on my blogs from July here:

http://simoncherriman.blogspot.com.au/2014_07_01_archive.html

Eagle Tracking - How are they going?

As we sailed the Nullarbor, I kept track of my juvenile Wedge-tail Kuyurnpa, who also sailed this vast country (using a slightly easier mode of transport than us - how I longed for wings!). It was astounding to see that at one point, Kuyurnpa had headed so far south that she too crossed part of the Nullarbor and ventured into South Australia, heading right towards us! She then turned north again, venturing back to the Pilbara region and taking her 'odometer reading' to over 9000km!! Kuyurnpa will now

Look very similar to the bird pictured above right, which is probably also leading a similarly nomadic lifestyle.

You can read all about the updates and see the latest maps of our tracked eagles' movements on the website here: www.wedge-tailedeagletracking.blogspot.com.au

WHAT NEXT!?

As you've seen in the email message, 'Where Do Eagles Dare?' will premiere on 9th December 2014, with a follow up screening on 12th December. Between now and then I'm working solidly on finishing the film. Next year I am threatening to start a PhD, and will continue to keep the eagle tracking project aloft. But more on that next time.

Well, here we are again at the end of another newsletter. Are you still awake!? It's been another wonderful catch up, so thanks heaps for tuning in.

Keep track of the below websites for more regular updates, and do remember to have fun outdoors! If you ever encounter an interesting problem that needs solving then remember, your answer can often be found in nature:

"Don't think outside the box... just think outside."

Very Best Wishes,
Simon

Save a tree, please don't print this e-mail unless necessary

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