

The extent of the losses of eagles and endangered birds to poisoning in this country highlights the need for us to challenge our mindset and reconnect with our heritage, writes **Allan Mee**

# ON A WING AND A PRAYER

**M**AN and eagles: can they co-exist? The extent and widespread nature of recent losses of protected bird species — including reintroduced white-tailed sea eagles, golden eagles, and red kites, as well as buzzards and peregrine falcons — to poisoning have brought into sharp focus the relationship between man and the animals we share this earth with.

More than 100 years ago our two native eagles, red kites, buzzard, osprey, goshawk and marsh harrier all disappeared following persecution and the destruction of their remaining habitat. Visiting Killarney, Co Kerry, in the early 19th century, Isaac Weld wrote: "Eagles are commonly seen on small islands in the Lower Lake, particularly on some which abound with rabbits, watching for their prey; and on a calm day, being unwilling to take the wing, exhibit all the appearance of tameness and familiarity, and will suffer a person to approach within a very short distance."

Weld was clearly describing one of the last of its kind, a native Irish white-tailed sea eagle. By the end of the same century, they were gone. The advent of guns and later poison, made the sea eagle an easy target. Although long regarded with reverence in ancient Irish folklore, somewhere along the line this long-held connection between man and eagle broke down, perhaps paralleled by the disintegration of Gaelic culture.

Restoring our once thriving populations of eagles and kites is as much about re-establishing this disconnect as it is about biodiversity. Efforts are under way to establish viable populations of golden eagles in Donegal, red kites in Wicklow, and white-tailed sea eagles in Kerry and beyond. The first golden eagle chick born in the wild in Ireland in more than 100 years hatched in Glenveagh National Park in 2007. Kites bred in Wicklow in 2009 for the first time in more than 200 years. The first pair of sea eagles, a three-year-old male and a two-year-old female, has established a range around Waterville in Co Kerry.

Within two years, we may have the first breeding attempt by the species since 1898. Sea eagles have spread far and wide, travelling as far as the Orkney Islands off the north coast of Scotland and back to Kerry. One sea eagle, a female named Fiadhna after nine-year-old Fiadhna Tangney from the Black Valley in Kerry, has traversed Ireland twice since her release in August 2009, visiting 28 of the 32 counties, and is now to be found in the Sperrin Mountains in the North.

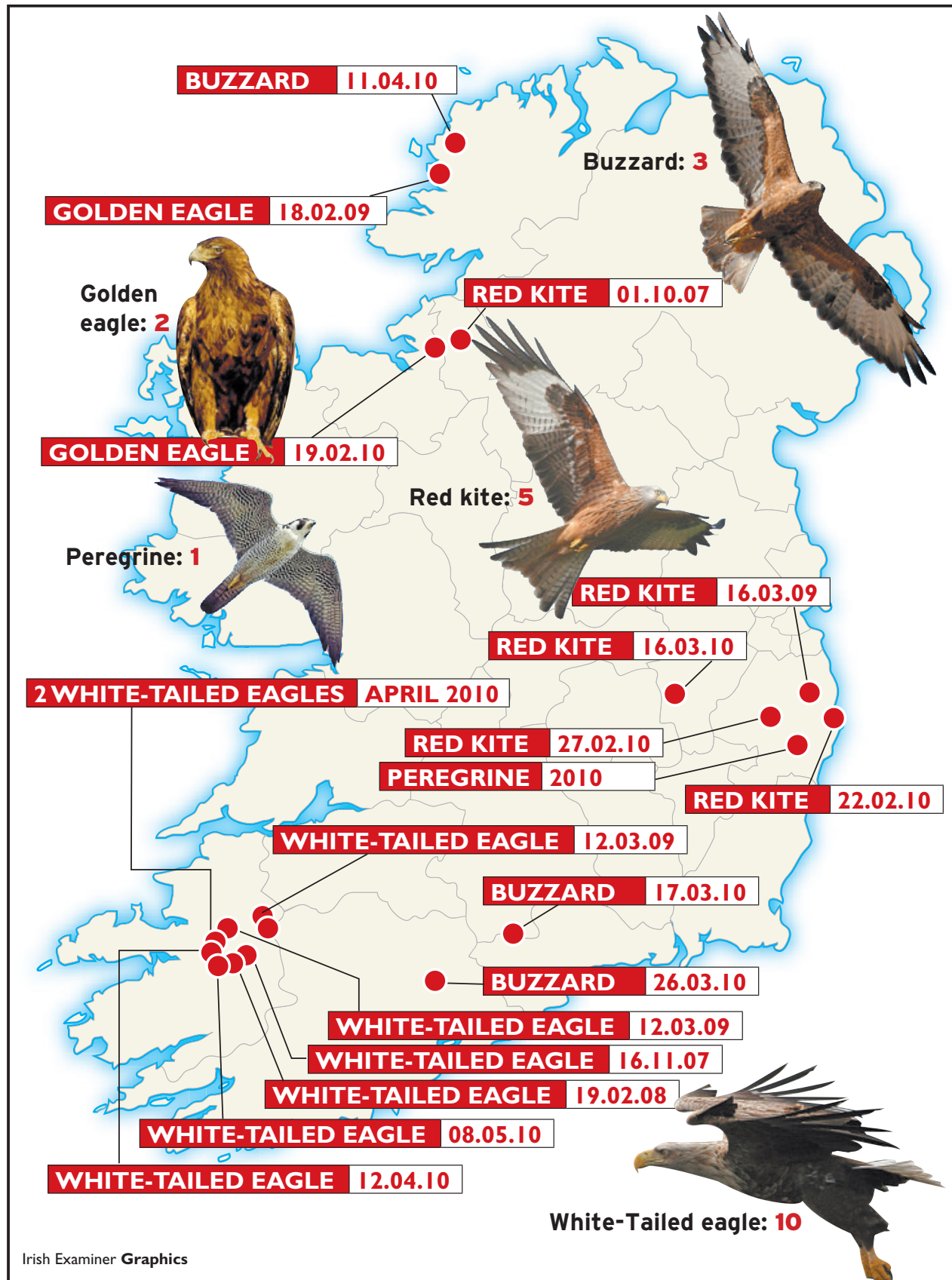
But poisoning is once again threatening the viability of this project. Fourteen sea eagles are now dead out of 55 released to date. At least seven have been confirmed poisoned. Most poisoning is undoubtedly accidental rather than deliberate efforts to kill these spectacular birds. However, the end result is the same. Wildlife law

**“** We need to restore the disconnect in our psyche that perpetuates or condones killing eagles or burning a whole mountainside regardless of the effects **”**

as it stands is not sufficient to protect these birds. An amendment to the legislation is proposed that would allow the Gardaí to prosecute cases of indiscriminate poisoning of protected birds.

More importantly perhaps, we have to challenge the mindset that allows this to happen. I believe that the vast majority of farmers do not use poisons and do not want to, unwittingly or otherwise, kill eagles or kites. Both can coexist as they do in Norway, where poisoning has been banned since the 1970s and a healthy population of sea eagles exists side-by-side with farming and fishing communities without conflict. Indeed in northern Norway sea eagle tourism is now one of the main sources of income for these rural communities.

Today we are at a crossroads. We are in the midst of a global extinction crisis unparalleled since the loss of the dinosaurs. About 122% of the world's bird species are threatened with extinction. Several have been lost forever



The above map shows where and when birds have been killed. The first golden eagle born in the wild here in more than 100 years hatched in Glenveagh National Park in 2007. Kites bred in Wicklow in 2009 for the first time in 200 years.

within recent years. We all have a part to play in halting these losses.

Perhaps more critically for us as a people, we need to restore the disconnect in our psyche that perpetuates or condones killing eagles or burning a whole mountainside regardless of the

effects. Eagles, bogs and mountains are as much part of our heritage as Skellig Mhichil or the Book of Kells. Would we contemplate or condone destroying them and how much poorer would we be for their loss? We owe it to children like Fiadhna and future

generations to pass this irreplaceable heritage on at least as healthy as we found them.

■ Allan Mee is project manager of the reintroduction of the white-tailed eagle in the Black Valley, Beaufort, Co Kerry

## What we give them, we take away

**Sorley McCaughey**, policy and advocacy officer for Christian Aid Ireland, explains how tax evasion harms aid programmes and how it must be stopped

**C**HRIStIAN Aid's new report, entitled Tax of Life — How tax dodging undermines Irish support to poor countries, highlights that between 2005 and 2007, Irish Aid programme countries — Mozambique, Uganda, Tanzania, Lesotho, Ethiopia — lost an estimated €82 million through two types of tax dodging — transfer pricing abuse and false invoicing. This amounts to almost 17% of the total Irish Aid budget to these countries during these years.

The scam involves companies manipulating cross-border transactions to shift money out of a country, often to secretive tax havens. For example, when a company based in a developing country sells goods at deflated prices to a subsidiary company elsewhere in the world, or buys goods at inflated prices, money is shifted out of the country. The company can then declare lower profits and pay less tax.

Given that 60% of the world's trade now takes place within, rather than between multinationals, there is ample opportunity for multinational corporations to engage in abusive transfer pricing. Unrelated companies can also make secret deals with the same effect — a process called false invoicing.

In fact, the figures may be higher. Christian Aid's research is based only on trade in commodities, and does not include intangibles such as management services, or intellectual property rights.

There is always the risk in any aid programme that other government policies fail to support the objectives of the aid programme. The area of international taxation is one such policy area. Taxation has the potential to do great good in poor countries. The right kind of tax system can ensure governments have the money they need to finance health and education in the long term. But it can also challenge corruption.

When governments are dependent on their citizens for revenue, they are more likely to act in the interest of the people. This is not an argument for undermining aid — the poorest people in the world need it more than ever. But when all expenditure is being reviewed and examined through a value-for-money lens, a specific focus on ensuring coherence between Ireland's role in supporting ethical tax practices and breaking financial secrecy, and Irish Aid support to developing countries would be both timely and desirable.

In the words of Trevor Manuel, former South African finance minister: "It is a contradiction to support increased development assistance, yet turn a blind eye to actions by multinationals and others that undermine the tax base of a developing country."

Encouragingly, Irish Aid and the Department of Finance have started to explore ways in which they can address these areas of incoherence against an international backdrop of moves towards greater transparency.

And international action is what is required. The G20 have taken forward tax haven reforms, albeit in a piecemeal fashion, and recently the European Commission explicitly recognised the link between taxation and development. But these reforms need to go further.

Christian Aid has consistently called for the Irish Government to support the establishment of a truly multilateral agreement for the automatic exchange of relevant tax information, as well as government support for a binding country-by-country reporting standard for multinational companies.

This information, accompanied by support and technical assistance, would enable tax authorities and civil society in the countries Irish Aid support, to hold companies to account for their activities and the taxes they pay in developing countries, and would enable governments to see when assets are being hidden in secret tax havens.

Ultimately, this could have the effect of moving countries away from a reliance on aid to more sustainable and predictable source of income.

## Stemming the tide of medical tourism

STEM cell tourism is a term that has emerged to describe the increasing number of people heading overseas for medical stem cell treatments that are not approved or available in Ireland.

In Ireland, and many other countries around the world, stem cell therapy is only approved to treat blood disorders such as leukaemia.

While research is moving rapidly and showing great promise, the use of any type of stem cell as a therapy for diseases like type 1 diabetes, cystic fibrosis or Parkinson's are still firmly classed as experimental.

Not all countries have such strict protocols for demonstrating the safety and worth of a medical treatment, and a number of stem cell "clinics" have taken advantage of this lack of regulation.

Often advertising via the media or internet, the treatments offered at these privately run centres are often extremely expensive and have little to no scientific rationale.

Worryingly, the International Society for Stem Cell Research has also shown a large number of these programmes have little regard for patient health and safety, and in many cases, are highly unlikely to provide any benefit whatsoever.

There are places where you can find out more. If you are considering any kind of overseas medical therapy, your first port of call should always be your medical specialist or healthcare provider. They will be able to give you a rundown of what is, and what may soon be, available to you.

The Irish Stem Cell Foundation has several web pages of informa-

**Dr Stephen Sullivan** advises those seeking cures through stem cell treatments to be aware of the pitfalls.

tion, including handbooks of the essential questions that a prospective patient and their carers should have answered before travelling abroad for treatment. As well as providing lots of information about how stem cells work, the foundation aims to provide the information required to make an informed decision.

Questions a patient should ask include:

■ **Is the treatment offered within a mainstream medical environment?**

In Ireland, proven stem cell treatments are available through the Irish health system. All experimental treatments and clinical trials must be undertaken at an institution that has been accredited by a relevant Government agency. Not all countries place such a focus on patient safety, so understand what regulations do exist and make an informed decision of the potential risks versus the advertised benefits.

■ **Does the provider charge for the treatment?**

In Ireland, any accepted mainstream stem cell treatment will

**Q & A**

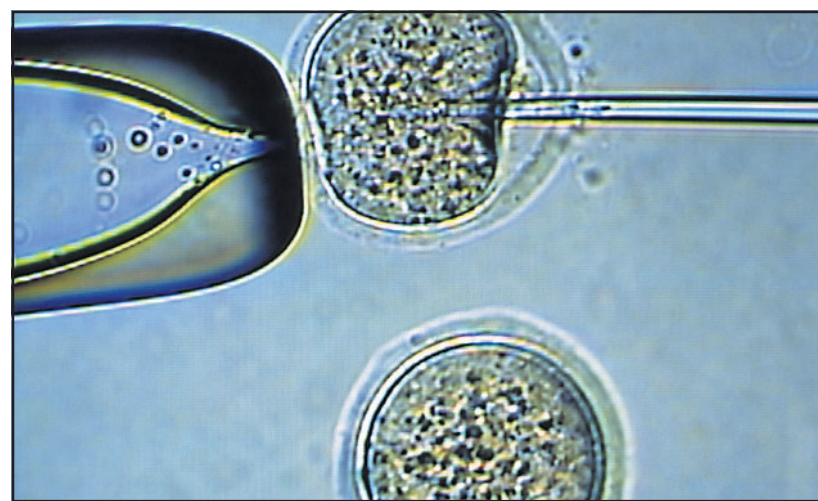
receive some level of reimbursement from your medical insurance company. Experimental treatment received as part of a clinical trial should not incur any charges at all, and this is the case in many other countries as well.

■ **What evidence do they use when promoting the therapy?**

The best way to assess if a therapy is effective is to check if it has been written up in the scientific literature and been assessed by government-sanctioned clinical trials. Don't be shy to ask for copies of their research publications, results of clinical trials and copies of relevant government approvals — they will gladly give them to you if the therapy is proven and accredited.

Patient testimonials and media coverage are not evidence that a therapy is safe and effective. Remember it is possible to make all kinds of unproven claims, particularly on the internet, so contact a local health agency or disease advocacy group to establish their credentials.

■ **Where do the stem cells for**



An increasing number of people are heading overseas for medical stem cell treatments that are not approved or available in Ireland.

**the treatment come from?**

While we talk about stem cells as a single entity, there are in fact a number of different sources of cells that can act in very different ways.

If the proposed treatment involves stem cells from an external source (for example donor tissue, cord blood or embryonic cells) it is highly likely that your body will reject the foreign cells unless immune-suppression therapy is also given. If the stem cells have been taken from animal tissue there is a risk of infection from animal viruses. Embryonic stem cells, if introduced in an undifferentiated state, may become cancerous cells.

■ **What does the therapy involve?**

While the type of stem cell used is important, so is the process by which it is administered.

While the basic hygiene of the medical centre is obviously important, the standards of any associated laboratory procedures are also critical to prevent contamination and infection.

Many therapies involve quite serious medical interventions such as lumbar punctures. These procedures themselves can be risky and really should only be conducted when absolutely necessary.

Finally, make sure you identify if follow-up medical care is provided.

● A booklet for patients considering stem cell treatments is available from [irishstemcellfoundation.org](http://irishstemcellfoundation.org)