On a wing and a prayer

Shot and stuffed by the Victorians, the rare and beautiful diver's survival is still at risk, this time from egg thieves, acid rain and the rise of the wind farm

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It is strange that the diver, one of our most beautiful and vulnerable birds, should have been so greatly misunderstood. Early naturalists and sportsmen, keen to have a bird with such stunning plumage in their taxidermy collections, went to great lengths to shoot divers. But they would then be inaccurately portrayed standing upright among other avian specimens in the display case.

Above: The red-throated diver keeps a low profile. **Right:** An elegant landing by a great northern diver.

Perfectly streamlined with a submarine-like shape and legs set far back on its long body to aid propulsion through water, the diver seldom if ever stands erect. In fact, this is a bird that is clumsy on land. It is the size of a large duck or small goose, and resembles them in shape when swimming. Like ducks and geese, its toes are connected by webbing, but unlike them its belly is submerged when swimming.

The call of the diver is one of the most evocative sounds of the natural world. Once believed to be the cries of the souls of the dead, the eerie, melancholy wailing epitomises the wild and lonely places the diver lives.

I first heard this magical sound as a child on a camping trip in North Uist. It began in the middle of the night amid the emotive winnowing from drumming snipe and the sad little high-pitched peeping of golden plover on their boggy breeding grounds. The sound made by that red-throated diver hung in the midsummer gloaming like a fine bagpipe lamentation and left an indelible mark. The other two members of the diver family – the black-throated and the great northern – have searing vocalisations too, and also emit other distinctive sounds.

The red-throated diver is the most common of the three species found in Scotland, with approximately 1,500 breeding pairs. Most of these are found in Shetland and Orkney, Caithness and Sutherland, and the Outer Hebrides. Red-throats depend on undisturbed lochs close to the sea where they can fish, though they may travel considerable distances to salt water to find sustenance. They nest either on islands or

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close to the water's edge and will also use man-made nesting rafts. Constant changes in the water table can prove disastrous, and high rainfall, flash floods and human disturbance mean many eggs and chicks are lost each year. Threats also come from predators such as gulls, skuas, mink, otters, foxes, rats and pine martens.

The rarity value of divers' eggs has long been a problem, particularly those of the black-throat. Reports suggest there are just over 200 pairs in Scotland at present – the entire British breeding population. With breeding numbers so low, even one stolen egg is a disaster, yet this despicable practice continues, placing the future of these birds in jeopardy.

Nicknamed the northern doucker, the black-throat is highly territorial and loyal to its breeding lochs. These are shy and secretive birds, and it is unusual for more than one pair to nest on any loch, as rivalry can result in heated battles.

Threats to divers, which are good indicators of the health of our ecosystems, are many. They feed on small salmonids, Arctic char and water insects, so finding small enough prey for their young can be difficult and often means the adults have to fish on lochs further away, increasing the risks to the chicks. Highland lochs are being damaged by acidification from forestry blocks and by chemical leaching from fertilisers and other agricultural activities. Habitat loss takes place almost every day, with valuable wetland drained for development.

Divers are poor breeders anyway and rarely rear more than three chicks in a good year. When a clutch is lost, a second may be laid, but as the season advances the chances of survival fall. In many places, enlightened landowners who are keen to encourage these birds have found that man-made floating rafts can dramatically help survival rates.

The largest member of the diver family, the great northern, is impressive. Non-breeders are seen at sea in summer with a dark greenish-black head, red eyes and immaculate chequerboard plumage. Their haunting cries are often heard drifting in off the water. In winter, when they are seen in larger numbers off the west coast, their plumage appears nondescript: mottled dark grey above and white below. During the Victorian era, like the other two divers, they were frequently shot at sea and added to taxidermy collections. It was many years before it was realised that rather than being two distinct birds, divers have two totally separate plumage phases – a drab one in winter and a magnificent breeding attire in summer.

Though there are some potentially excellent places for great northern divers to nest in Scotland, there is only one breeding record, from a site at Loch Maree in 1970. Every year there are reports of possible great northern diver breeding activities but these are never verified. The remote reaches of Rannoch Moor, with its sprawling lochs, inaccessibility and lack of disturbance, would surely be an ideal site for the great northern to breed, but even such places are now more populous as walkers and climbers explore further into wild places.

In North America the diver is known as the loon, a name that has Norse origins relating to the birds' low moaning calls. An area of bog and loch on mainland Orkney called The Loons remains a stronghold for red-throats. The Shetlanders call it the 'rain goose' and still believe it is the best weather forecaster of all birds. An old Shetland rhyme illustrates how they think the diver's behaviour can predict a storm:

If the rain gose flees to da hill,
Ye can gan to da heof when you will,
But when sho gangs to da sea,
Ye maun draw yir boats an flie.

Habitat protection is key to the survival of the diver. Our impact on these fabulous birds is far more serious than we accept. For example, Shetland is the ultimate stronghold of the red-throat, and the proposed massive wind farm right in its heart must surely raise major concerns for the bird's future. Wildlife surveys where 'experts' claim that the addition of roads, hydro schemes and wind farms has little or no impact on our wildlife appear to be woefully skewed in favour of the developers. Divers are as fragile as fine bone china on a demolition site, and breeding success depends on isolation and peace. Time will tell what impact encroachment into the wild has, but by then it will be too late. Sadly, this thought makes the melancholy cry of the diver all the more poignant. SF

Top left: A great northern diver protects its chick. **Top right:** A red-throat gives its melancholy cry. **Above:** The summer plumage of the black-throated diver.