

Fish Suppers

by Susan Gray

The sun was rising at the top of the Great Glen, a pink glow behind Ben Nevis. Eric looked up the loch, and said: "Bother! It's going to be a clear day."

Einmar peered out from the comfort of the nest at the top of the tree. "What's wrong with that?" she asked.

"Honestly, Einmar, have a think, will you? It's going to be sunny. It's nearly a Bank Holiday – guess who'll be coming to call?"

"Who?"

"Goodness me, Einmar, does that stupid tag on your wing not remind you about anyone?"

"Oh yes – that bird man."

"Correct. And blow me, here he comes already. Where are Peter and Inga?"

"Out practising flying. I won't get them back in time to hide. And anyway Eric, you're too fat to lurk behind the branches."

Eric tried unsuccessfully to suck in his abdomen, nearly falling off the branch in the process. They watched the high speed rib approaching from Oban, men clinging to their seats as it bucketed over the outgoing tide. It cruised along the shore, the occupants scanning the coast with enormous binoculars. Einmar was pushing the youngsters back into the nest, but it was too late. With a final snarl, the boat circled into the small bay, the engine noise bouncing off the rocks and disturbing a family of otters who were taking advantage of Eric's late rising habits by doing some early fishing.

"Bloody RSPB man," the mother said, snatching her brood and diving beneath the surface.

One of the men stood up, holding a large loudhailer, while trying to keep his binoculars to his eyes with the other hand.

"Oh God, it's that pest Rupert again," Eric said.

"Ahoy there, Eric! Don't be coy, we can see you!" the man shouted.

Eric flapped a wing wearily in acknowledgement.

"How's the new tag doing?" Rupert continued, "Is it staying on any better?"

Eric adopted a cod Scandinavian accent. "Oh yes, Rupert. And I particularly like the bright emerald colour. Certainly tones in."

"Can we drop the Norwegian act, Eric?" Rupert went on. "You're Scottish now. You were

always Scottish.”

“No I wasn't. My dad's from Stavanger. Forcibly transported, I might add, worse than an Australian convict.”

“Well it would help things if you tried. Have you learned any Gaelic yet?”

Einmar sat down hastily on the shreds of Gaelic dictionary which had been used to line the nest.

“No I have not,” Eric said. “I am not a Celt, I am Norse, Eric Ericsson, and my children will be Norse too.”

“Well let's leave that just now.” Rupert tried a different tone. “We were wondering if you could help out this weekend?”

“Let me see, English Bank Holiday, is it? And I thought we had a deal, Rupert.”

Rupert's binoculars wobbled. “Well, I know -”

“Burn out, I was suffering from, Rupert. In and out for all those flipping boatloads at Jura, never a moment's peace before the next lot arrived, all those long lenses – worse than being Brad Pitt.”

Einmar sniggered in the background. He rounded on her. “And you can keep quiet – you never had to do it – cushy number I got you here.”

“Ah yes, Eric, perhaps not so much burnout as a very messy divorce, I seem to recollect,” Rupert said.

“Messy divorce? I was a saint with that bird. And it was an arranged marriage. Then you send over nice young birds like Einmar, and what's a fellow to do?” Eric fluffed out his chest feathers. “And I kept my end of the bargain. I have hardly touched a lamb since we moved here.”

“That's as maybe, Eric, but we had an agreement you would do a scheduled number of flyovers. Have you got the Calmac timetable?”

“Yes, and I have been doing them. Now and then.”

“Sightings are down, Eric. We are losing out to the whales. They've even lined up orcas on the east coast now. VisitScotland are threatening to cut our budget.”

“Well, I can't help it if they have overactive whales. Couldn't you harpoon a few? And what's in it for me anyway?”

“It's always the deal with you, Eric. No empathy for your fellow birds.”

“None at all, mate. The Donald Trump of the Western Isles, I am. Oh look, there's a ferry going by behind you. Looks like I've missed that one. Never mind.” Eric settled back on his perch.

“We could relocate you again.”

Einmar squawked in dismay. Eric spread his wings menacingly. "Don't even think of threatening my family."

Rupert looked desperate. "So what would you suggest?"

Eric thought. "Fish suppers," he said. Einmar flapped in agreement. "One per fly past, dropped from the ship's cafeteria."

"In a box, and a bag for carrying," Einmar added. "Nice lining for the nest. And no food preparation."

Rupert and his colleague had a quick discussion. "That might be possible," he said.

"I think it had better be possible." Eric spread himself out to his full wingspan. "Let's start tomorrow, shall we? Today's flights will be for free." With some preliminary limbering up, he took off from the branch, which bounded upward, almost catapulting Einmar into the air. She watched him appreciatively.

"Look at him go," she said.

Certainly, in the air, in full flight, Eric did lose some of the turkey-like appearance he had on land. He soared out over the firth, and headed towards Mull, catching the thermals higher and higher, until he was a distant dot.

"I do hope he comes down a little – stretching the long lenses a bit up there," Rupert commented.

"Of course he will," Einmar said, "he's a professional."

The summer passed, and the October half term brought the autumn migration of tourists, all eager to watch the eagle sweeping in for his plastic prey, scooped from the wake of each passing ferry. Einmar did worry a little about weight gain, but really it was so convenient, and she could always pop out to the fish farm if they needed something fresh.

In the spring a herring gull out of Oban delivered the new timetable.

"Just a minute," Eric said. "There's more ferries now."

"RET mate," the gull said. "Hadn't you heard? They've made the crossing cheaper, so the tourists are flocking over to Mull like bloody starlings. They've had to bring the "Corruisk" down from Mallaig."

"I'll be suffering from burnout again soon," Eric complained, but Einmar hoped the extra flying would return her husband to the shape which had first lured her into his nest. There was a new brood to feed, and the extra fish was really very handy.

Down in Gourock, an assiduous accountant was entering all these fish suppers into a ledger, under sea eagle expenditure.

Once something is down on paper, it can only be so long before someone in authority gets to

hear of it. Eric and Einmar were enjoying a happy afternoon of summer sunbathing between his shifts, when they saw a fast Fisheries cutter roaring up to the entrance to Loch Linnhe. An inflatable was lowered, and a man was ferried to the shore. He stepped carefully onto the shingle, clutching a briefcase to his chest. "Eric Ericsson? And Mrs Ericsson? HMRC," he said.

"Who?" Eric asked. "You'll have to be quick, I'll be off to the next ferry in a minute."

"Exactly," the taxman said. "You have been receiving benefits in kind for some time now, without making any declaration on a tax return."

"I didn't know a fish supper was taxable," Eric said.

The man laughed. "Everything is taxable. And you are very much in arrears."

Tears were beginning to drip down Einmar's beak. "We don't have any money," she said.

"I can only suggest that you take up some salaried employment extremely quickly," the taxman said. "Have the RSPB no funding?"

"They're concentrating on ospreys this year," Eric said gloomily. "And golden eagles – they've a new relocation scheme in Dumfries – costing over a million."

"Well, then, how about the private sector?" the taxman asked. "You could try the Majestic Line, new outfit, out and about in this area."

Eric had seen the little converted trawlers rolling up and down the loch, had even given them a few free flybys. "They're certainly local," he said, "but perhaps a bit small fry? I'm thinking more along the lines of the "Hebridean Princess" - a well heeled clientele, only one cruise a week."

"Excellent," the taxman said. "I happen to know they already have a deal in place with minke whales off Coll. It should be pretty easy to set something up. They can open a bank account for you in Oban and we'll just get a direct transfer."

So it was that occasionally, the fish suppers bobbed uncollected in the wake from the "Isle of Mull". Those were the nights when Eric and Einmar had sunset dinners of smoked salmon and monkfish, or perhaps a little Dover sole. No batter, so much better for the waistline.

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