

# Letter from Scotland

**As a million demonstrators were gathering in London calling for a People's Vote last Saturday, a lone osprey was landing at the Loch of Lowes in Perthshire to begin another breeding season.**

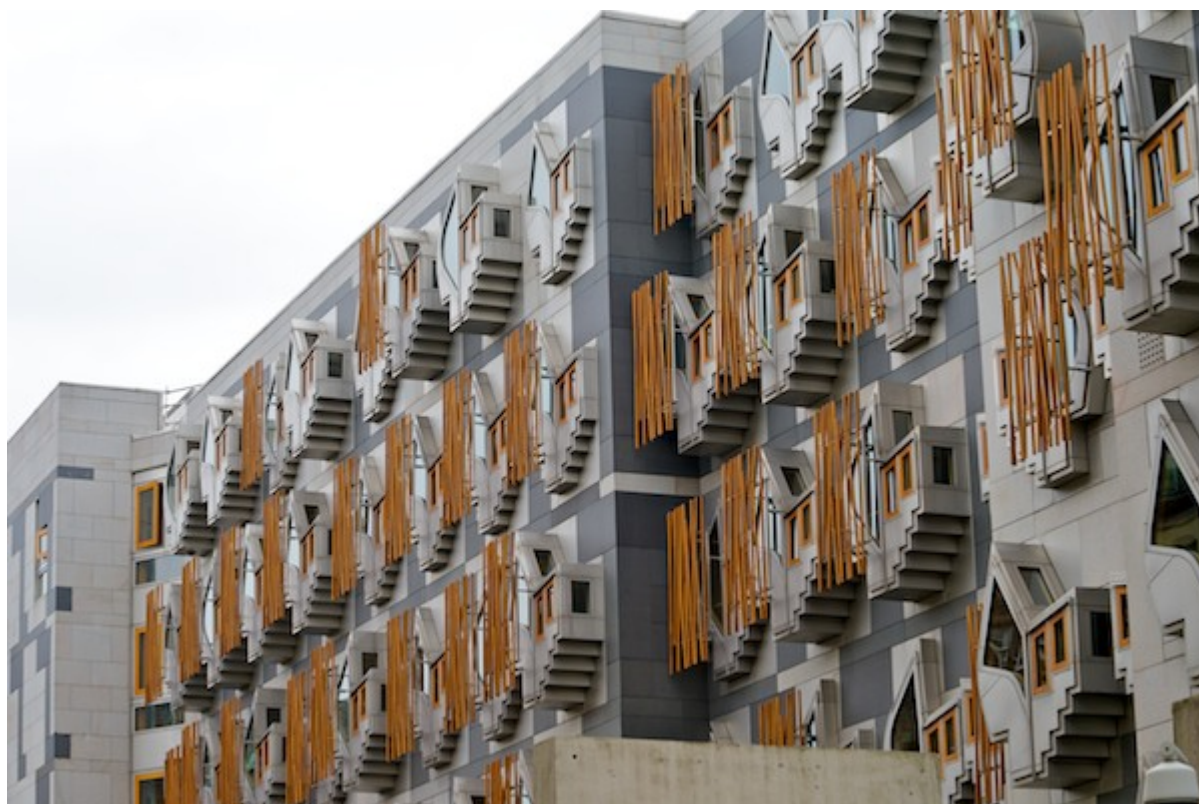
Lassie, or LF15 to give her her scientific name, had flown in from West Africa to join her male companion, LM12, who'd arrived a fortnight before. He welcomed her with a dazzling display of "sky dancing" and a freshly caught fish. He showed her the work he'd been doing refurbishing the nest and the rest of the story you can probably imagine.



Flying in, oblivious of Brexit. Osprey photo by Wilfred Hdez. The happy pair have raised 10 chicks over the last few years and they follow a tradition of osprey breeding that goes back

50 years at the Loch of Lowes nature reserve, run by the Scottish Wildlife Trust. In 1969, there were only a handful of osprey sites in Scotland. The species was declared extinct in 1916. Now there are an estimated 224 breeding pairs.

Ospreys are one of the shining examples of how attitudes to wildlife have changed in the last half century. We are slowly “rewilding”, reintroducing lost creatures such as the sea eagle and the beaver, re-planting native woodlands, preserving peat bogs, cutting deer numbers, re-introducing organic methods to farming. But still we are driving one in every eleven species to extinction, including insects we know little about but on which we all depend.



The Scottish Government has been counting our “natural resources” and concluded that they are worth £273bn. But there are not many insects in the count. Instead it’s all about oil and gas and wind power and water and fish. So, on

this kind of analysis, Highland councillors this week decided to give the go-ahead to a hydro-scheme at Achnacarry near Spean Bridge, without much thought for the future of the butterfly reserve there. But, as the Environment Secretary Rosanna Cunningham said of this first audit of our capital value: "This work cannot capture all the benefits of our environment but it is a huge step forward."

Another resource we are not caring for especially well are our children. Child poverty figures out this week show that in Scotland there are almost 240,000 children living in households with less than 60 per cent of average income. That's almost one in four children starting out in life struggling against the odds. And two thirds of those are in working families. At First Minister's Questions the Labour leader Richard Leonard blamed the SNP. But Nicola Sturgeon told him it was the UK government's austerity policy that was causing the gap between the rich and the poor to widen. The Scottish government, she said, was doing all it could to ensure we meet the official target of ending child poverty by 2030.



## Westminster

Of course, what MSPs really wanted to talk about was Brexit and the shambles at Westminster. On Wednesday, the Holyrood Parliament voted 89-28 in favour of abandoning Brexit unless there is a second referendum. Only the Conservatives voted against, saying everyone should get behind Theresa May's deal and honour the result of the first referendum. Nicola Sturgeon noted that the plan which got most support at Westminster among the eight options offered to MPs on Wednesday evening



was a second EU referendum and she is still holding out for one.



EIF official launch at Tynecastle Photo by John Preece

But whether we are in or out of the EU by the summer, the Edinburgh International Festival will go ahead as usual, challenging us with new art and international perspectives. This week the yellow-covered programme was published and tickets go on sale on 6<sup>th</sup> April. The festival itself will start on 2<sup>nd</sup> August with a grand opening night at Tynecastle football ground when 15,000 people will hear the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra performing a programme of film music by John Williams from Star Wars, ET and Harry Potter.

While it's sometimes difficult to tell film fantasies from real life in these Brexiting days, the all too real adventures of the Scottish arctic explorer Dr John Rae are being re-created by a team of hardy Scots and Canadians. David Reid, Richard Smith, Frank Wolf and Garry Tutte are setting out this weekend from Repulse Bay in Nunavut, northern Canada, to trek 400 miles pulling heavy sledges cross sea ice and the Boothia Peninsula where Dr Rae discovered the "missing link" in the North West Passage in 1854.

## The “Arctic Return”

expedition will seek to tell the real story of John Rae’s expedition, long over-shadowed by his controversial report that the earlier Franklin Expedition had resorted to cannibalism when they became trapped in the ice. It will also be raising funds for the restoration of Rae’s boyhood home, the Hall of Clestrain, near Stromness in Orkney.

Finally, scientists have discovered a woman from Inverness who feels no pain. They are now analysing her genes to see if a new method of pain-killing can be developed. Jo Cameron says she didn’t realise she was different until she went into hospital for a serious operation at the age of 65 and didn’t need painkillers after the surgery. The condition has its disadvantages – she keeps burning herself on the stove without realising it. But she doesn’t have to suffer the pain of watching MPs make a hash of Brexit. Just like the osprey, she can soar above it all.