



The Conservation

For twenty years the Hawk and Owl Trust has watched in dismay as an increasingly adversarial and acrimonious argument has raged between environmental campaigners and grouse moor interests. In this time the Hen Harrier has been virtually wiped out as a breeding bird in the English uplands. Hence the ten Trustees of the Hawk and Owl Trust, after listening to all of the conservation evidence, concluded that a new route must be sought if we are to break this impasse.

Striving For A Way Forward

As all members will know, the guiding principle of the Hawk and Owl Trust is set out in our long held Mission Statement "Working for wild birds of prey and their habitats".

These habitats, spread throughout the UK and known by conservationists as the wider countryside, are largely managed by farmers and other land managers. These are the areas on which wild birds of prey and many other species crucially depend. The Trust has a long, proud, practical and pragmatic history of working with those who manage the countryside and who are the guardians of the raptors that hunt, roost and breed there.

The future for the Hen Harrier as a breeding bird in England is dire. Breeding numbers on the heather moorlands of Northern England have once again



plummeted to appallingly low numbers.

Why has this happened? The Hen Harrier with its methodical, low level hunting flight is an easy target for any unscrupulous gamekeeper bent on illegally furthering the interests of those who own or manage heather moorland for the sport of shooting driven grouse. This is a crime which the Trust utterly condemns as abhorrent. But, the reality is that this crime is very difficult to detect and, if detected, is extraordinarily difficult to prove in law.

The Trust has watched with dismay as an increasingly adversarial and acrimonious argument has raged for almost twenty years between environmental campaigners and grouse moor interests. This conflict has become increasingly bitter and is one which will have no winners, only a loser. And that will be the

Hen Harrier.

The Trust has thought long and hard about how this adversarial impasse might be broken. Under the guidance of the conflict resolution skills of the Environment Council, a Hen Harrier Stakeholders Committee made up of those representing both environmental and land management interests have worked to come up with a formula that points a possible way forward.

This is known as the Defra Joint Hen Harrier Recovery Plan and has six components:

1. An increased focus on law enforcement, crime prevention and intelligence involving senior police officers with the Hen Harrier as a priority.
 2. An increased monitoring and protection of Hen Harrier breeding and winter roosting sites
 3. Increasing surveillance of Hen Harrier movements using satellite tracking technology
 4. The diversionary feeding of breeding Hen Harriers to reduce predation of grouse chicks
 5. Research into the translocation and reintroduction of young Hen Harriers into other suitable habitats throughout England
 6. A trial into the feasibility of the movement of Hen Harrier chicks to aviaries for safe rearing and then release of these full grown juvenile birds on to other receptive moors.
- This is known as brood management.

The six point plan has been agreed in principle by all parties but has yet to be ratified as one member believes that the

brood management trial should be delayed until Hen Harrier numbers have recovered to a pre-determined number.

This is a worthy but sadly unrealistic objective, as it is not always understood or appreciated that Hen Harriers, as colonial or semi-colonial nesters, will become concentrated on a small number of individual moors. The fact of this concentration places these birds at huge risk of further persecution.

The Hawk and Owl Trust, with experts in the various aspects of this field, has been asked by Defra, to put forward its in-house expertise to carry out a five year research trial into the brood management element of the Defra Joint Hen Harrier Recovery Plan.

It is gratifying to learn that the Trust is thought to be the one conservation organisation that has suitable in-house expertise and experience in this area of conservation of birds of prey.

This expert panel would consist of well-known raptor scientists, experts in the field of captive breeding, husbandry and release, and avian veterinary surgeons.

Before agreeing to talk with Defra about the details of a trial, the Trust created three immovable provisos and conditions for taking part in a brood management scheme trial.

These are:

- All Hen Harriers fledged and released within the trial would be safely satellite tagged to enable their movements to be tracked. This safeguard should work towards reducing the possibility of illegal persecution, and monitor the success of the release programme and the survivability of

the young Hen Harriers

- If any member of the moorland management representative organisations were found to have illegally interfered with or persecuted a Hen Harrier on their moors, the Trust would pull out from its involvement with the trial - this puts the onus firmly on the moorland interests to stay with the programme
- If, after five years of a trial, Hen Harrier numbers, taking into account natural but not unnatural mortality, have not increased along the expected trajectory towards the SPA target, then the Trust would call for a licensing arrangement for shooting driven grouse on heather moorland.

A further observation that the Hawk and Owl Trust states is that this potential trial brood management of Hen Harriers is for the benefit of moorland management. It is done on the understanding that this does not set a political precedent for any other raptor species.

The Hawk and Owl Trust is clear that a different approach is needed. Behavioural change is seldom achieved by outright adversarial opposition. A smarter solution is needed. Without it, any solution is highly unlikely.

What is necessary is a change in both attitude and behaviour among some moorland owners and some game keepers. The ten Trustees of the Hawk and Owl Trust met formally in February and decided unanimously that a new way forward was needed.

Hence a trial of brood management will demonstrate whether conservation and moorland management interests can work together for conservation on the moors of Northern England to provide a new future for the Hen Harrier and save this magnificent bird from extinction as a breeding bird of prey in this area.

More Information

This article on the Hen Harrier debate has been prepared for publication in the forthcoming 2015 Spring/Summer issue of the Hawk and Owl Trust's *Peregrine* magazine.

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