

LANCASHIRE BAP SPECIES ACTION PLAN

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

Summary

The Hen Harrier is a bird of prey that nests in the uplands, in northern areas of the British Isles, with the vast majority of the 806 pairs (2004 figure) nesting in Scotland. It is red-listed in "Birds of Conservation Concern" because of a historic decline in population. The only regular English nesting population is in the southern part of the Forest of Bowland. This species is susceptible to illegal persecution and changes in moorland management.

The purpose of this Action Plan is to enable Hen Harriers to expand outside of their Bowland stronghold, and recolonise the other upland moorland areas in Lancashire.

Action Plan Aim – To restore the breeding range of Hen Harrier in Lancashire

Species Description

Hen Harriers are medium-sized, slow-flying birds of prey that mainly breed on moorlands. Adults are about 50cm long with a wingspan of about 115cm. The males and females have dramatically different plumages; males are pale grey with black wingtips, the slightly larger females are brown with a white rump.

Main Habitats

They nest on moors, on the ground among tall vegetation, usually Heather. Food is mainly small birds and mammals, particularly Field Voles, Meadow Pipits and gamebird and wader chicks during the breeding season. They lay 4 to 6 dull white eggs on a nest platform made of twigs and grasses. The female incubates for about 30 days. During the first two weeks the male does all the hunting, whilst the female does all the feeding of the chicks. As the chicks grow the female also starts to hunt, though she tends to remain close to the nest. The young fledge 35 to 42 days after hatching, but are tended by their parents for a further two to three weeks. Males are sometimes paired with more than one female at the same time.

Outside the breeding season they roost communally, and also occupy a wider range of habitats including moorlands, reedbeds, saltmarshes and agricultural land.

Legal Status

The Hen Harrier is granted special legal protection under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). It is also listed in Annex I of the EU Birds Directive, and under appendix 2 of both the Bern and Bonn Conventions. It is classed as vulnerable in Europe with a SPEC category 3 due to a large population decline. (SPEC 3 – Species of European Conservation Concern; Species whose global populations are not concentrated in Europe, but which have an unfavourable conservation status in Europe.)

Although they are “red-listed” in Birds of Conservation Concern, they are not a UK Priority BAP species because the criteria do not include historic decline. However, they are the only non-BAP species included in section 41 of the NERC, a list of England’s most threatened birds.

National Status

Hen Harrier is a resident breeding species. Part of the breeding population is migratory, some moving as far as Europe in winter. Northern European birds also visit Britain during winter and occur on passage.

In 1988/89 the UK breeding population was estimated at 600 pairs (including 570 pairs in Scotland, 6 in England, 14 in Wales and 10-15 pairs in Northern Ireland) (Bibby & Etheridge 1993, Bellamy 1989). The Isle of Man held 40-45 territorial pairs in 1990 (Campbell et al 1994).

A survey of breeding Hen Harriers in the UK and the Isle of Man carried out in 1998 estimated the breeding population as 570 territorial pairs: 436 in Scotland, 19 in England, 28 in Wales, 38 in Northern Ireland and 49 on the Isle of Man. A repeat survey in 2004 showed an estimated increase to 806 territorial pairs: 633 in Scotland, 11 in England, 43 in Wales, 63 in Northern Ireland and 59 on the Isle of Man. Although the overall population showed a 41% increase since 1998, there were declines in south (117 pairs to 73) and east (82 pairs to 65) Scotland and in England (19 pairs to 11) over this period. Given the small population size, the loss of 8 pairs between 1998 and 2004 in England is of particular conservation concern (Sim, I, M.W, Gibbons, D.W., Bainbridge, I.P & Mattingley, W.A. (2001), Status of the Hen Harrier in the UK and the Isle of Man in 1998. *Bird Study* 48: 341-353; Sim, IMW, Dillon, IA, Eaton, MA, Etheridge, B, Lindley, P, Riley, H, Saunders, R, Sharpe, C and Tickner, M (2007), Status of the Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* in the UK and the Isle of Man in 2004, and a comparison with the 1988/89 and 1998 surveys).

Typically, the Bowland population represents around 70% of the annual nesting attempts in England. In 2008, 82% (14 out of 17) of nesting attempts and 80% (8 out of 10) of successful nests in England were in Bowland.

In 2003 an isolated pair nested on heathland in southern Cornwall well outside the normal range. Despite nesting successfully, they have not reappeared in subsequent years.

Regional Status

Breeding birds occur in parts of the Forest of Bowland in Lancashire, with occasional breeding on the moors of Cumbria. Outside the breeding season, the species is scarce but widespread in suitable habitat throughout the North West region.

Local Status

In Lancashire, Hen Harriers breed mainly on the moors in the southern part of the Forest of Bowland. Nesting attempts also occur elsewhere in Bowland, and birds are occasionally seen in suitable nesting habitat elsewhere in Lancashire, for example a pair attempted unsuccessfully to nest in the West Pennine Moors in 2003. They are scarce, but widespread during winter, particularly on ungrazed saltmarshes and the moorland fringes.

Formerly, Hen Harriers bred throughout the Lancashire uplands, as well as on the lowland moors but they had become extinct as a breeding bird by 1876. The first evidence of their return was in 1969, when a nest with three young was found in Bowland. Since then numbers have fluctuated, ranging from 39 nesting attempts in 1980, down to just a single attempt in 1987. In 2008, there were 14 nesting attempts fledging 25 young, the vast majority being in southern Bowland. Only two other pairs of Hen Harriers bred successfully in England in 2008 (from 3 attempts).

A five year average from 2003-07 for the southern Bowland core area is 9 nesting attempts annually. Two or three nesting attempts annually is currently typical in the remainder of Bowland.

Current Factors Affecting the Species

Hen Harriers are threatened by direct persecution on some grouse moors (eg, Etheridge, et al, 1997), and by loss of nesting habitat through inappropriate burning or overgrazing. Whilst afforestation can have short term benefits to nesting Hen Harriers in the early stages of establishment, in the long term, once the canopy has begun to close, it leads to loss of nesting and feeding habitat, which is a potential factor in Lancashire.

As a ground nesting bird, Hen Harriers are possibly vulnerable to predation, though they do breed more successfully in areas where there is no intensive predator control, suggesting this is not currently a significant factor.

Unlike some other birds of prey, they are not particularly targeted by egg thieves or illegal falconers. This is because they lay very plain eggs, and have a slow hunting style that is not conducive to falconry. There is some evidence that specimens are collected for taxidermy, but this may be a consequence of persecution.

Hen Harriers are vulnerable to human disturbance, particularly given new access rights to upland areas under CROW. However, the majority of Lancashire's Hen Harriers nest on United Utilities land that has had open public access for more than a decade, and in recent years the population has actually increased in size and productivity. Incidental disturbance by walkers exercising CROW access rights is therefore unlikely to adversely impact upon the species. Reckless disturbance of nesting Hen Harriers, or their dependent young, would be a criminal offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), as amended by Countryside & Rights of Way Act (2000).

Outside of Bowland, higher levels of current access, and demands for further access, could place constraints on Hen Harrier expansion.

Winter habitat might be lost due to overgrazing of saltmarsh and rough pasture, and drainage of roost sites.

Wind farms may become more of a factor in both breeding and wintering areas as they become more numerous.

Although these various factors can, or have the potential to have, an effect on Hen Harriers, by far the most significant factor limiting Hen Harrier populations in Lancashire, as for England as a whole, is illegal persecution due to a perceived conflict with grouse moor management.

Current Actions/Mechanisms

Policy Moorland management and heather re-establishment options are available in the Higher Level Scheme (HLS) of Environmental Stewardship. The UU/RSPB Sustainable Catchment Management Programme (SCaMP) is delivering and advocating sustainable upland land management, and is increasingly being seen as a model for upland management.

Site Safeguard The Forest of Bowland and the South Pennine Moors are both designated SSSI and SPA. The West Pennine Moors are a BHS, and are being considered for SSSI designation.

Species Management and Protection RSPB works closely with United Utilities (and its tenants) to monitor and protect the breeding population on the UU Bowland Estate. Natural England operates a national Hen Harrier species recovery project with the aim of restoring the range and numbers of Hen Harrier. In 2003 the Police launched Operation

Artemis, which aimed to counter illegal persecution of birds of prey, though this has largely been succeeded by the new National Wildlife Crime Unit, for whom Hen Harrier persecution remains a priority, and Operation Moorwatch, which has aims similar to Artemis.

Land Management Appropriate moorland management and extensive grazing systems, such as that advocated through SCaMP, provides suitable nesting habitat. SSSI management and the use of HLS provide mechanisms for delivering suitable habitat mosaics in the uplands.

Advisory NE, RSPB and FWAG currently offer advice on management of upland habitats that will benefit Hen Harriers and other upland birds.

Research and Monitoring RSPB work with UU to monitor all Hen Harrier nests on United Utilities' land in the Forest of Bowland. The movements of Lancashire bred Hen Harriers have been monitored by wing tagging, undertaken by volunteer bird ringers, since 1998. Since 2002, this has been added to by NE, who have been radio and satellite tracking young birds. NE and LCC undertook an assessment of likely impacts of access on Hen Harriers in Bowland in 2005/06.

Public Relations RSPB, NE and UU currently publicise the breeding fortunes of Lancashire's breeding Hen Harriers. A public engagement exercise has been underway since 2007 with video footage of an active Bowland Harrier nest on view at the Lancashire County Council Beacon Fell visitor centre. RSPB is currently running a bird of prey campaign which aims to reduce and ultimately eliminate persecution of birds of prey. As the species most affected by illegal persecution, the Hen Harrier is central to much of the campaign messaging.

Species Targets

Target	Area	Measure	Timescale
Increase the Bowland population to 20 breeding females, across the Bowland Fells SPA. (A higher target could be possible longer term based on likely carrying capacity)	Bowland	Number of breeding females.	2020
Increase the Lancashire breeding population by a further 10 females outside of Bowland. (A higher target could be possible longer term based on likely carrying capacity)	South Pennines, West Pennine Moors.	Number of breeding females.	2020

Proposed Actions

Action (Priority H, M, L)	Area	Milestone/Measure	Partners	Timescale
Policy				
Ensure that the requirements of Hen Harrier are included in all reviews of agri-environment schemes.(H)	Throughout	Heather regeneration and reduced grazing options available in the schemes.	RSPB, NE	Ongoing
Species Management & Protection				
Work with shooting estates to provide	Throughout	Alternative land management and other techniques deployed	NE, RSPB Landowners	Ongoing

solutions that ensure Hen Harriers are not perceived as conflicting with grouse management (H)		that remove perceived need for persecution.		
Ensure that Hen Harriers are allowed to nest free of persecution.(H)	Throughout	No evidence or reports of nesting failures due to human persecution.	RSPB, NE. Police Landowners	Ongoing
Ensure that non-breeding birds are allowed to exist without persecution.(H)	Throughout	No evidence or reports of human persecution.	RSPB, NE, Police Landowners	Ongoing
Research and Monitoring				
Undertake annual monitoring of key areas (H)	Bowland	Nest sites identified and landowners and tenants informed/involved	RSPB, NE	Ongoing
Collate all available data for Lancashire for Hen Harrier.(M)	Throughout	Up to date database compiled	RSPB, NE L&CFS	Ongoing
Survey Lancashire for breeding and wintering Hen Harriers as part of the 2006-2010 Atlas.(H)	Throughout	Surveys complete	BTO, L&CFS, RSPB, NE	2010
Participate in regular UK-wide breeding surveys for Hen Harrier.(H)	Throughout	Surveys complete	RSPB, NE	2008 and every 10 years
Review, with view to continuing to ring and wing tag all young birds and monitor movements through sightings. (M)	Throughout	All young birds tagged and wing-tagged each year.	RSPB, NE	Ongoing
Attach radio tags to young birds to enable detailed monitoring of movements (M)	Throughout	Young birds radio-tagged.	NE	Ongoing
Site Safeguard				
Ensure the West Pennine Moors are designated as SSSI. (H)	West Pennine Moors	SSSI designation	NE RSPB LA's	2008
Land Management				
Encourage moorland owners to create a dwarf shrub/grassland/blanket bog mosaic (M)	Parts of South Pennines and West Pennine Moors where white moor dominates.	Hectarage of dwarf shrub cover created on white moor.	NE RSPB UU Landowners	2010
Advisory				
Where	Parts of	Advice provided	NE RSPB	2010

appropriate, provide information to moorland owners on re-establishment of dwarf shrub cover.(L)	South and West Pennine Moors.		FWAG	
Public Relations				
Promote Hen Harrier as a flagship indicator of healthy moorlands among moor owners, the public and schools.(H)	Mainly Forest of Bowland but throughout.	Good publicity for Hen Harrier achieved	Media, RSPB, UU, LCC, land owners and land managers, schools.	Ongoing
Promote Hen Harriers as a flagship species for the plight of bird of prey through the bird of prey campaign (H)	UK wide	Good publicity achieved and concurrent changes in attitude of moorland owners and managers	RSPB, media, various other bodies as appropriate. Landowners and landowning bodies, etc.	2010

Related Action Plans

Moorland

Merlin