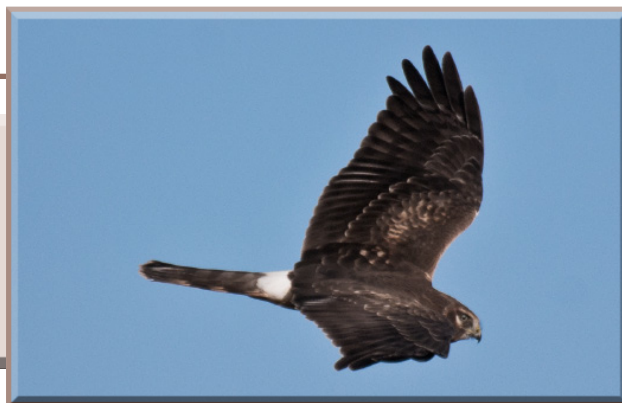


# Hen Harrier

## Our objectives for this species are:

to ensure the successful breeding of any hen harriers attempting to nest in Nidderdale AONB, and that within ten years hen harriers are breeding at a natural density on the AONB's moorlands.



## Introduction

The hen harrier is a bird of open country breeding in the UK on moorland, generally below 500m. It nests in old, tall heather as well as young conifer plantations. The preferred habitat appears to be moorland managed for grouse shooting.

The male hen harrier is identified by all grey plumage with black wing tips and a white rump, whilst the slightly larger female is all brown, again with the characteristic white rump. The diet of the hen harrier includes meadow pipits and short-tailed field vole as well as both adult and young red grouse.

Some male hen harriers may be polygamous and mate with more than one female, which is why breeding attempts are usually quoted as the number of breeding females rather than breeding pairs. The clutch size is normally four-six eggs with research by the RSPB in Scotland showing breeding productivity of 2.4 chicks per breeding female on moorland not managed for grouse.

One of the most contentious issues relating to the uplands is the relationship between birds of prey, especially hen harriers, and the potential effect that they can have on the autumn surplus of red grouse available for shooting. Published scientific reports by a number of different organisations suggest that illegal persecution is the main factor limiting hen harrier populations in Northern England. Government sponsored research has estimated that there may be enough suitable habitat in England for over 300 territorial hen harriers (A Conservation Framework for Hen Harriers in the United Kingdom (Joint Nature Conservation Committee, 2011)) although, in 2012, there were no successful nests in England.

According to the 'Conservation Framework', in 2008, there were records of only five successful hen harrier nests across the UK extent of driven grouse moors, yet estimates based on habitat area indicated that there should have been almost 500 pairs. The absence of breeding hen harriers from extensive areas of grouse moors suggest that some, perhaps many, grouse moor managers will not tolerate any breeding hen harriers on their land.

With respect to enforcement, the illegal persecution of birds of prey, with specific reference to hen harriers is identified as a national priority for tackling wildlife crime by the Police National Wildlife Crime Unit and the

UK Partnership for Action against Wildlife Crime. In its 'Strategic Assessment' (2011), the National Wildlife Crime Unit states that "hen harriers continue to decline in northern England, and south and east Scotland, areas dominated by heather moorland that is managed for driven grouse shooting. Productivity from successful nests is high, but very few nesting attempts are successful on grouse moors and there is compelling evidence that illegal persecution is the main factor behind the hen harrier's continued unfavourable status here" and "of all birds of prey in the UK, the hen harrier is the most heavily persecuted in relation to its population size. It is one of the few species whose very existence as a breeding bird in England is threatened as a direct result of wildlife crime".

Unfortunately, illegal persecution of hen harriers is difficult to prove, usually occurring in remote locations and evidence (shot birds, trampled nests, broken eggs, dead chicks, cartridge shells) can be easily removed.

There are many complex issues associated with hen harriers and red grouse populations, some of which have been investigated by the Raptor Working Group, established by the Department of the Environment in 1995 to bring together a wide range of organisations to examine a wide range of issues related to birds of prey. The group's terms of reference included determining the impact of birds of prey on game birds and moorland management.

'The UK Raptor Working Group's Report to Ministers' was published by the Department of the Environment in 2000. Research has continued, with the 2011 JNCC publication, 'A framework for hen harrier conservation in the UK' providing an up to date comprehensive review.

The 2011 'Framework' summarises the current situation. "Nationally, efforts are being made to manage and seek solutions to the conflict between hen harrier conservation and grouse moor management. This includes actions to enforce the law and prevent the illegal killing of hen harriers, as well as partnership approaches between conservation organisations, grouse moor managers and representative bodies, with the aim of identifying ways to reduce the impact of hen harrier predation on grouse shooting businesses. These include the ongoing Langholm Moor Demonstration Project and the Natural England led Environment Council dispute resolution process.

Options for resolving the conflict between hen harrier conservation and red grouse shooting include management

to reduce predation rates on red grouse, including diversionary feeding, providing carrion to nesting hen harriers to reduce predation rates on red grouse. Trials have indicated that supplementary feeding can substantially reduce the number of red grouse chicks that are taken. Although it is not possible for this action plan to provide detail of all the national issues or recommendations, it is essential that any relevant changes in national policy, habitat or management recommendations are implemented in the Nidderdale AONB.

The continued decline of hen harriers in England and the concern that this might lead to the extinction of this species as an English breeding bird resulted in 2002 in the establishment of the Natural England Hen Harrier Recovery Project. The objectives of this national project are to monitor the population and breeding success, to identify the factors restricting the number of hen harriers and to take subsequent measures to increase the population.

## National status

Persecution in the 19th Century and the loss of suitable areas of habitat in many lowland areas of the UK, resulted in widespread population declines with only a small population surviving in Western Scotland. A reduction in the number of gamekeepers and consequently the level of persecution after the Second World War, along with newly planted conifer plantations providing temporary suitable breeding habitat, resulted in the re-colonisation of Northern England by birds in the 1960s. By the 1980s a population of around 40 nesting birds had become established. Since then however, the number of breeding attempts have sharply declined. In 2012 there was only one solitary successful hen harrier nest in the whole of England. The 'Conservation Framework' concluded dryly that England was unlikely to be on track to achieve 'favourable conservation status' unless illegal persecution is considerably reduced.

## Regional status

Rare and local breeder in the northern Pennines.

Has bred in the North York Moors National Park.

According to the 'Conservation Framework' it seems likely that the English population is being constrained by poor juvenile and/or adult survival. Initial findings from radio-tracking work by Natural England suggest that over-winter survival of first year birds also appears to be very low in the uplands of northern England where grouse moor management predominates.

## Local status

It is extremely difficult to attempt to estimate how many breeding hen harriers the moorland areas of the Nidderdale AONB could support. There is a wide range of different hen harrier breeding densities that have been derived from a number of other hen harrier study sites. Hen harrier breeding densities will vary from area to area depending

on habitat quality, prey availability, habitat management regimes and levels of persecution (if present).

There are approximately 24,000 ha (59,200 acres) of upland heath in the Nidderdale AONB, in addition there are 16,000 hectares of rough marginal habitat suitable for hunting. An area of this size should support a healthy breeding population of at least 10 pairs of hen harriers. Human interference is the only feasible explanation of why hen harriers successfully breed only occasionally in the Nidderdale AONB.

Although detailed monitoring of hen harriers has not been possible, members of the Yorkshire Dales Upland Bird Study Group (YDUBSG) have been observing hen harriers in the Nidderdale AONB and in the adjoining Yorkshire Dales National Park (YDNP) for a number of years. This has been made easier by the introduction of open access to the moorland, which came into force in late 2004, although access is still subject to restrictions.

Birds have been present in all years since 1990. It is known that there have been at least 18 breeding attempts and five successes with 17 chicks reared in the Nidderdale AONB or just over the boundary in the YDNP since 1991. This includes a pair that fledged six young in 2002. In 2005 a pair reared four young from five eggs. In 2006 two pairs were nest building in the vicinity but both disappeared (building birds do not do this in areas free from persecution.) In 2007 a pair laid five eggs but the adults disappeared in mid to late April. In 2008 a pair displaying in March disappeared. In 2009 no breeding attempt but female present in late March. 2010 to 2012, no birds.

The 'Conservation Framework' notes that once hen harriers are removed from an area, minimal effort may be required to prevent further nesting attempts, for example by burning out suitable heather for nesting and disturbance of any birds attempting to nest.

## Legal status

The hen harrier has been listed as a Species of Principal Importance by the Government.

The hen harrier is on the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern. It is a Category 3 Species of Conservation Concern as there has been a large decline in its numbers across Europe and its status is described as vulnerable. It is also on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, Annex 1 of EU Birds Directive and Appendix II of the Berne Convention. The hen harrier is one of the species for which moorland areas, including the North Pennine Moors, are designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA).

## Current national action

- Natural England's hen harrier recovery project (established 2002).
- The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Moorland Association (MA) and English Nature (now Natural England) in June 2002 has led to both organisations working together to 'secure the sustainable future of the remaining heather moorland in England'.

- Environment Council Hen Harrier Dialogue [www.the-environment-council.org.uk/projects/nature/natural-areas.html](http://www.the-environment-council.org.uk/projects/nature/natural-areas.html)
- England Biodiversity Strategy committed to prevent human induced extinctions by 2020.
- In February 2011, the senior Government and enforcement officers reviewed the 2010 assessment and agreed six UK wildlife crime priorities for 2011-2013. These priorities include Raptor persecution (including poisoning, egg theft, chick theft and nest disturbance/destruction with a focus on six species including hen harrier).
- 2011-2015 RSPB Skydancer Project to raise awareness of issues around hen harrier conservation, primarily based around the Forest of Bowland.
- The Law Commission is considering the merits of extending the concept of 'vicarious liability' (already in place in Scotland) into England.

## Current local action

- Natural England have secured agreements on burning regimes with key estates.
- 12 volunteers currently take part in hen harrier monitoring.
- Nidderdale AONB has instigated a project with Leeds University and Defra which will investigate social issues surrounding land management in the uplands.
- A female hen harrier, which had been radio tracked by Natural England from being nestling in the Forest of Bowland in 2011, was found shot in Colsterdale in July 2012. North Yorkshire police are investigating the incident.

## Threats

- Illegal persecution.
- Inappropriate moorland burning - either during the breeding season or without leaving sufficient breeding habitat (including longer heather).

## Opportunities

- One of the most important issues is to locate birds in areas of potentially suitable habitat in early spring. The Yorkshire Dales Upland Bird Study Group (YDUBSG) undertakes an annual hen harrier survey from open access land and public rights of way to locate any hen harriers that are present. Due to the large area of potentially suitable habitat for hen harriers in the Nidderdale AONB there is a need to increase the number of observers looking for and reporting hen harrier sightings including experienced bird watchers and more casual observers. All sightings, including those considered to relate to passage birds, should be reported to the Hen Harrier Hotline on 0845 4600121 or email [henharriers@rspb.org.uk](mailto:henharriers@rspb.org.uk)

- If signs of potential breeding activity are recorded, then landowners should be approached with a view to gaining access permissions to enable monitoring work to be undertaken. Where possible this should include officers from other conservation organisations and volunteers so that a structured monitoring rota can be arranged. Monitoring work will need to continue until there is an outcome to the breeding attempt. If young birds reach fledging stage consideration should be given to ringing, wing tagging and/or attaching radio transmitters by licensed individuals to allow post juvenile dispersal to be monitored.
- It is hoped that these measures will help to increase the breeding population of hen harriers. If this is not the case then there will be the need to determine the feasibility of additional conservation measures such as co-ordinated nest wardening.
- If there is any evidence that nest failures may be a consequence of deliberate disturbance, or human interference, then this information should be passed to the local Police Wildlife Crime Officer (WCO) and to the RSPB for further investigation ([operationartemis@hotmail.com](mailto:operationartemis@hotmail.com) or [steve.downing@nwcw.pnn.police.uk](mailto:steve.downing@nwcw.pnn.police.uk)).
- Whilst the issues surrounding hen harriers are controversial and there is a wide range of views and opinions, it is essential that conservationists, moorland owners and managers work together to ensure the successful breeding of hen harriers and the continuation of grouse shooting.

Opportunities for the following to work together in partnership:

- NE Hen Harrier Recovery Project
- YDNPA
- Moorland Association
- Moorland Gamekeepers Association
- AONB officers
- YDUBSG
- RSPB
- Police WCOs
- Individual landowners and land managers
- Volunteers

### LINKS WITH OTHER HDBAP PLANS:

**Upland Heathland HAP**  
**Moorland Edge HAP**

