

North of England Raptor Conference, hosted by Calderdale RSG, Risworth 21 November 2015

Summary of Speaker Presentations

The Work of the PAW - Superintendent Chris Hankinson, Chair of the Raptor Priority Group, Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime.

Chris spoke of how his natural passion for wildlife had led him in early 2015 to volunteer to chair the priority group within PAW looking at raptor persecution. He'd immediately realised that this was a very varied group with both conservation and shooting interests and with that came challenge. To find common ground and understand the respective issues he'd committed, in his own time, to spend a day with each interest group. He cited the previous production of poison-incident maps and the recent successful relocation of stolen Peregrine chicks found in Bury as good examples of cooperative working. Whilst asking the audience to accept that wildlife crime could not be an absolute priority for any police force in the current financial climate, he felt that NERF's award of Partner of the Year 2014 showed that agencies and voluntary organisations could nevertheless work together very effectively and achieve very positive results.

Introducing the new IPMR and Nest Record Scheme – Carl Barimore, BTO

Carl presented on the changes to the BTO Nest Recording Scheme and also introduced the new on-line recording software which is due to be launched in the spring of 2016 to replace the existing IPMR.

Fieldworkers studying Schedule 1 species should by now be making sole use of Nest Record Cards for their end-of-season submissions. Guidance is available for codes that have been introduced to ensure 'absence' or 'occupancy of a territory without a nest', can now be recorded.

The BTO Breeding Bird Survey was well suited to providing information on population trends for many species and Carl showed an index for "Meadow Pipit" as but one example. However, for raptors he suggested a more focused survey approach was needed. This might include Nest Box schemes for Owls or Kestrels and here the new IPMR on-line system would be more user friendly than before. The new system will also make use of Google maps on a nest location screen and all the information will be stored centrally to avoid the risk of users losing their data through home pc faults. The usual nest record data will be requested but there will be a greater degree of standardisation. All data will be held securely and such things as access to the location map by third parties will be fully protected.

The Natural England Hen Harrier Recovery Project – Stephen Murphy, Natural England

Stephen looked first at the breeding data for 2015. There had been 13 nesting attempts in England, 6 of which had been successful in fledging a total of 18 young. Of those young that had been fitted with satellite trackers, 3 had lost their signals by September whilst still in northern England and investigations are ongoing. Across the extended study period 1986-2015 the population in northern England had shown some fluctuations but an overall decline from 2008 highlighted the species' vulnerability. The Forest of Bowland has hosted the majority of nesting attempts with over 60% successful here yet this level of productivity has failed to deliver any real resurgence in overall numbers.

The aim of the research has been to gather evidence on movements essential to informing land management practices that will benefit the species' conservation status. The initial programme of

radio tagging fledglings provided interesting but labour intensive data. It wasn't until 2007 when satellite transmission tags began to be fitted that the true and fascinating picture of movements was revealed. To date, 47 satellite tags have been fitted which have provided location information for between 3 and 30 months duration. Two females are still transmitting as they approach a full 3 years. The data has allowed the four stages of the life cycle to be better understood, namely "independence", "leaving the natal area", "autumn & winter ranges" and "return to breeding". Although capable of significant daily movements the majority of English born females have their autumn and winter ranges within the North Pennine uplands probably within 70-100 km of their natal site and certainly favouring heather moorland. Some key locations are especially important. Males are more nomadic and far ranging, including those that have been tracked to France and Spain.

Of 133 birds fitted with either radio or satellite tags 48% appear to have died (signal loss) within their first 9 months. The corpses of just 14 birds have been recovered.

In summary: Dispersal is complex with very different behaviour between males and females; their mobility makes conservation more difficult; females are largely year-round upland birds and males more nomadic; high 1st winter mortality feeds through to lack of annual recruitment.

Future plans must be for more fieldwork and research. Land owners and managers must be provided with the information upon which they will be encouraged to aid the species' recovery. A number of peer-reviewed papers will be published.

The RSPB Hen Harrier LIFE+ Project. David Hunt, RSPB

This is a 5 year project funded by the EU and aimed at enhancing the breeding population of Hen Harriers in the UK. Amongst a range of project objectives, David's focus is on improving the understanding of movements and investigating instances of indirect or direct persecution throughout the seasons, all aimed ultimately at securing the species long term protection. The Hen Harrier is a citation species for the Bowland and the North Pennine Special Protection Areas (at 13 and 11 pairs respectively) – current levels fall well short, so action is clearly needed.

The RSPB Hen Harrier LIFE+ project is able to support the costs of satellite tags on young birds in parallel to the work of Natural England. Private sponsors of tags are also now stepping forward. David stressed the importance of the use of information submitted to the RSPB Hen Harrier Hotline and the value of working closely with local raptor study groups through NERF. He recounted his experiences in his first full year of working on the project.

The Work of the Northern England Raptor Forum. Paul Irving, Chairman NERF

Paul reviewed recent events and issues of interest to NERF. He was delighted to acknowledge the award received by NERF from PAW as their "Partner of the Year 2014" – a very pleasing recognition for the voluntary contribution members make in species' monitoring and publishing the information collected. Members of NERF's raptor study groups had recently logged over 4000 hours of field observations during the spring and summer of 2015 under the RSPB LIFE + Hen Harrier project.

NERF continues to reject the need for invasive brood management to be introduced at Hen Harrier nests whilst ever the English population is so critically endangered. The Hen Harrier is not alone in suffering illegal persecution; NERF's data clearly demonstrates a lack of tolerance to upland Peregrines and perhaps even Short-eared Owls. NERF remains anxious to see that any applications to control

Common Buzzards at game-bird release pens be properly assessed in full accord with the EU Birds Directive. The recent draft bill stemming from the Law Commissions study seems disappointing in that the possibility of vicarious liability being introduced in England appears to have been set aside.

A Fieldworker's Guide to Forensic Science. Guy Shorrocks, RSPB

The RSPB have 6 priority raptor persecution species in the UK; Goshawk, White-tailed Eagle, Golden Eagle, Red Kite, Peregrine and Hen Harrier. Over 2000 examples of persecution of bird species have been reported between 1990 and 2014 but by their very nature the number recorded must represent only a very small part of the real levels of persecution. Of those people successfully convicted of crimes against birds of prey, two-thirds have been gamekeepers. The first custodial sentence and the first prosecution for vicarious liability have recently been seen in Scotland. Guy explained that the work of RSPB Investigations was not really about generating friction with shooting estates but was about providing evidence for Governments to be able to do the right thing and forcibly uphold the law.

Importance was drawn to anyone coming across a potential wildlife crime to "recognise", "record" and "report" the information safely and accurately without disturbing the evidence. Examples were given of how forensics now make use of both human and animal DNA matching to secure convictions. Guy reviewed the very detailed scientific analysis which had confirmed that the Hen Harrier "Bowland Betty" had indeed been shot.

Cumbrian Osprey Project – a 5 year perspective. Nathan Fox, Forestry Commission.

The story of Cumbria's Ospreys is a very positive one which might perhaps provide lessons for the protection of other birds of prey. Ospreys have now bred successfully in the Cumbrian Lake District for the last 15 years raising a total of 30 chicks from what is now over 6 sites. The species' status might now be considered to be in a phase of 'establishment'. The project has been managed as a partnership between the Forestry Commission, RSPB and the Lake District National Park consulting with and involving other interested parties as required. Its aim was to show people the birds and inspire visitors; the Dodd Wood view point has attracted over 1.2 million and about 100 volunteers now register 3000 hours per annum. The value to the local economy has been estimated at £2 million pa and has created over 30 jobs. The project's longer term aspiration is to have 20 pairs by 2020.

Several young birds have been fitted with satellite trackers and these have revealed some fascinating information on life cycles. A young male made a 5 day crossing of the Sahara on its first autumn migration before settling in Equatorial Guinea for its first winter where it stayed for its subsequent first full year. It returned to northern Europe in its second spring and eventually came back to the Lakes later that summer before once again returning to Equatorial Guinea in the autumn.