

NERF 2014 FIELDWORKERS' CONFERENCE (16 Nov)

Held at the Agricultural Business Centre, BAKEWELL, DERBYSHIRE

Hosted by the South Peak Raptor Study Group & the Peak District Raptor Monitoring Group

We are grateful to following organisations that helped sponsor the event:-



A SUMMARY OF SPEAKER PRESENTATIONS

Alan Fielding- *"Updating the Hen Harrier Conservation Framework"*

Alan described the work of a team who have been updating the Hen Harrier Conservation Framework last published in 2011. The latest update is complete but not yet published. It has looked anew at the factors which influence UK populations, distribution and productivity to assess whether the Hen Harrier is in a "Favourable Condition" across its range. Methods have included statistical models, literature reviews and detailed assessment of habitat maps.

For the whole of Scotland, over the period 2003-12, the number of fledged young per breeding attempt has generally declined from about 1.7 to 1.2, largely due to falls in productivity of the Orkney population. Taking best estimates of 36% survival of 1st year birds and a 70% annual survival rate of adults then modelling indicates that there must be at least 1.6 young per breeding attempt to meet the Favourable Condition target of not needing immigrants for the population to be sustained. The western Scotland population currently has a favourable conservation status.

A variety of breeding density figures are available from 5 pairs per 100 km² (Potts) to other studies showing 2.9 (range 2.1-3.5) and more recently 4.1. When combined with an updated assessment of suitable habitat from mapping these figures lead to an estimated natural carrying capacity for the English northern uplands of between 125 and 298 breeding pairs; average 245.

Factors affecting survival, abundance and productivity include:-

Weather – eg spring rainfall has more than doubled in the southern uplands in recent years.

Forestry –Forestry Commission and private planting have greatly helped the species but it tends to have a cyclical impact.

Wind-farms –there is little evidence of these having a detrimental effect.

Sheep Stocking –In some areas in recent years, fewer sheep have coincided with increases in the numbers of breeding Hen Harriers

Persecution – Despite introducing more stringent acceptance criteria the review body has concluded persecution to be a significant factor. Most known cases relate to nest destruction but there are constraints away from breeding areas

Alan Charles – Derbyshire Police & Wildlife Crime Commissioner “Wildlife Crime”

In a keynote speech, Commissioner Charles said that tackling wildlife crime had featured in his election manifesto and he remained strongly committed to the cause. Derbyshire Police now has a central coordinator to link with its various local Rural Liaison Officers. Possible Hen Harrier breeding attempts in the county in the current year had shown how well coordination with other organisations can work. Volunteers from the public to help tackle a wide variety of wildlife crimes are being sought and a poster campaign has been launched aimed at local engagement in recording such crimes.

The Commissioner is planning a parliamentary petition after the next election to introduce vicarious liability on landowners and other measures.

Jon Stewart – “The High Peak Moors Vision and Action Plan”

As the General Manager for the Peak District, Jon reminded the audience that the National Trust is not just about stately homes but was formed to preserve special natural places. 2013 had seen the launch of the High Peak Moors Vision initiative which might be viewed as a model for future upland management elsewhere. Land use includes tenancies with farmers and shooting syndicates.

There are 5 key aspects of the Vision:-

- People being inspired
- People looking after the land
- Secure, healthy peat bogs
- Tree planting in valleys and cloughs
- A full and vibrant suite of wildlife

Trevor Grimshaw & Mike Price – “The Status of Raptors in the Peak District”

The two speakers compared the fortunes of four key species in the White Peak and Dark Peak areas based on the long running monitoring by their respective raptor study groups.

Trevor explained that in the White Peak the Peregrine population had seen year on year growth since the birds first returned to upland quarries in the early 1990's. In 2003 birds began to use natural crags, then lowland urban sites by 2006 and more recently lowland quarries. In 2014, of a total of 30 sites ten pairs failed but the remainder fledged 38 young. Habitat for Merlin in the White Peak is limited and a long term decline has been noted; most recently 6 pairs in 2012 and 2013 worryingly dropped to just one pair in 2014. There is little evidence of persecution of Goshawk in the area with 11-15 territories occupied annually, typically leading to 7-10 successful pairs. The county population estimate for Common Buzzard now exceeds 350 pairs.

In marked contrast, Mike drew attention to history of raptor persecution in the areas of the Dark Peak. In 2011 a Bird of Prey Initiative was launched involving key stakeholder groups to change attitudes and provide estates with an opportunity to show they can act responsibly. Mike believed that conservationists must be more proactive and highlighted that raptor study groups offer a

unique perspective with evidence based facts as to the true status of birds of prey. There are at least 21 sites where Peregrine have bred in the past in the Dark Peak, 10 of are considered as “primary” breeding sites, but illegal persecution has limited occupancy to about 9 sites of which typically only 2-3 pairs are successful each year, two of which are regularly breeding at RSPB Dovestone/Longdendale Valley. In the mid-1990’s there were about 20 occupied Goshawk territories of which about 10 pairs were regularly successful at fledging young. More recently the number has fallen to 3-5 territories with 0-2 pairs successful. There were no young fledged in 2013. Merlins are relatively stable with 18 occupied territories in 2014 raising a remarkable 62 fledged young from 18 successful pairs.

Richard Sale - “Raptors and Wildlife in the Arctic”

Delegates were genuinely treated to wonderful images and inspiring tales of survival in the high Arctic as Richard told of his conservation work in Canada, Iceland, Norway and Kamchatka studying, especially, the charismatic Gyr Falcon.

Andrew Dixon “Peregrinations: satellite tagging of Peregrines in Arctic Russia”

In collaboration with the Sokolov brothers, Andrew studied birds satellite-tagged in 5 area of northern Russia, with 3 distinct subspecies being identified, *peregrinus*, *calidus* and *japanensis*.

Birds from the *Yamal peninsula*, where gas production is increasingly affecting the habitat, feed on waders as their principal food. Birds were captured on the nest using a noose, fitted with a transmitter and released. Nine birds wintered respectively in Portugal, Kish Island (Persian Gulf), Crete, south Sudan, southern Russia (2), Baghdad, Saudi Arabia (coastal strip more fertile than inland), and Janvu on the Red Sea. This last area is a well-known falconry area and birds are sometimes captured for the falconry trade – estimated at 2% of those tagged. At least one of these has subsequently escaped and found its way back north.

Birds from the more easterly *Lena delta* migrate to the Andaman islands and S Asia using the same stopovers on both migrations. This takes 35-40 days and is noticeably slower towards the end of the journey, reflecting the toll taken on the birds.

Birds from yet further east in *Kolyma* followed the east coast of Asia with one arriving in east Java and another in Vietnam where it was possibly killed.

Juveniles from 4 nests were tagged in the *Kola peninsula*. One of these wintered in southern Spain, one did not leave the area and one stopped migration. It was noted that the harness used to secure the transmitter can occasionally cause lesion through rubbing.

All the birds from the *Taimyr peninsula* went to N India and Bangladesh, flying directly over the Himalayas.

Future work will concentrate on genome sequencing to determine the amount of gene flow between the subspecies.

Ron Downing “*Thirty years of Merlin in Angus*”

Ron’s study area is the east glens of Angus where Merlins lay usually in the first half of May. Weather fluctuations affect the nesting success, particularly if poor conditions in April affect the adult female’s capacity to accumulate body fat and bring them into breeding condition. Food included Meadow Pipit, Skylark, Chaffinch and Starling. In the period of his study, there has been a decline of 29% in eggs hatching and a 37% decline in eggs resulting in fledged young. This decline has been accelerated since 2011, and has caused Angus to mirror the decline in the rest of Scotland.

PTT rings have been used but these need to be used over multiple study areas to get meaningful results.

Heather burning may affect the availability of nest sites, with bracken growing in resulting burnt areas then requiring spray treatment.

Mark Thomas (RSPB) “*The Full Monty (Montagu’s Harriers)*”

Mark described conservation methods used by the Dutch after it had been found that a large percentage of nests were being destroyed by harvesting. The situation was much the same in France (50% failure). The Dutch increased survival to 92% by fencing off the area of the nest before crop harvesting. Playing a tape of human voices at the fence deterred predators once the surrounding crop had been cut.

After poor years in 2012 and 2013, 2014 was a very successful year for Montagu’s in England, with one pair nesting in a Humberside reed bed. The nest here was found by using a radio controlled drone and one young fledged. Security measures were put in force and 2 eggers intercepted.

Dutch satellite tagging showed where 10 males foraged, and they strongly favoured trial feeding plots. There appeared to be no risk in using tags (unlike some other raptor species) and these showed the wintering area to be in Senegal and other parts of equatorial Africa. Interestingly birds crossed the Straits of Gibraltar at night probably to avoid mobbing by gulls.

Dutch scientists went to Africa to follow the birds’ wintering period, using the satellite tagging. Males transmit once every 48 hours (smaller tag) and females once every 24 hours. The main risk on migration was crossing the Sahara and this is limiting population survival. Having reached Senegal, dry grassland was the preferred habitat and locusts the main food. Birds used trees much more than in Europe and roosts of up to 5000 birds were found. Wintering territories were typically just 2 km in radius but may change during the winter. Birds did not necessarily return to the same breeding site and are nomadic in nature.

In the UK, polyandry and polygamy were observed at the same site. One bird featured on the BBC’s “One Show” was subsequently shot on the Sandringham estate. The way forward in the UK was to use more satellite tags, more volunteers to protect nests and fence off nests as the Dutch do.

Mark thanked Mark Constantine for financial support.

David Walker, “How much do we know about Golden Eagles?”

In this thought-provoking talk, David challenged many of the accepted, even ingrained ideas, about interpreting studies of this species, on which much has been published. In fact, little is known about eagles outside the breeding season. Even breeding status can be misinterpreted (examples were given) – it is easy for survey workers to miss sites or wrongly interpret breeding evidence, resulting in more favourable outcomes recorded than was actually the case.

Habitat change, such as large amounts of tree planting affecting prey, and wind farms, and climate change, may be affecting survival. Outcomes at nest sites may be impacted by food supply, weather, or a combination of both. However, sites which have been vacant for several years may be unexpectedly successful, so all sites need comprehensive assessments with more visits than is currently the case, and surveyors need to be experienced and properly trained.