

## **PEAK DISTRICT BIRD OF PREY INITIATIVE - 2016 & 2017 REPORT**

### **Project Overview**

Five leading land management and conservation organisations in the Peak District National Park got together in 2011 to develop a 5-year initiative in a bid to try and boost birds of prey populations in the Dark Peak.

The organisations involved - the Moorland Association, the National Trust, Natural England, Peak District National Park Authority and RSPB - set five-year targets for healthy sustainable breeding populations of three target species- Merlin, Peregrine Falcon and Short-eared Owl- based on population levels in the 1990s, and from 2016 extended to include Hen Harrier and Goshawk.

Together the five organisations have funded an independent field worker (Jamie Horner) to help ascertain accurate breeding data and to facilitate co-operation between raptor workers and shooting interests.

The two raptor groups in the Peak District work together to monitor and record the breeding success of raptors in the Peak District. The Peak District Raptor Monitoring Group (PDRM) and South Peak Raptor Study Group (SPRSG) are both committed to offering Jamie (and the five funding organisations listed above) their full support and co-operation in trying to achieve the described aims and objectives.

The survey methods being used are in line with the methods documented in Raptors: A field guide for surveys and monitoring, Jon Hardey, Humphrey Crick, Chris Wernham, Helen Riley, Brian Etheridge and Des Thompson- Section 2.2.1 Counts of occupied home ranges and active nests.

### **Overview of Results**

It is widely agreed that in terms of increased raptor populations in the Dark Peak, the Peak District Bird of Prey Initiative 2012-2015 failed to meet its targets.

One area where the Initiative has made improvements is in the relationships between raptor fieldworkers and gamekeepers. However, this fragile relationship is currently under pressure with continued evidence of raptor persecution incidents, a lack of progress with regards to increasing successful breeding populations of the target species, and gamekeepers' concerns about the portrayal of their work in the media and on social media.

Had the Initiative shown any reasonable success in boosting bird of prey populations, it could have been upheld as an example of how raptor conservation and shooting interests could work together to the benefit of all parties. Unfortunately, this has not been demonstrated to date.

All the partners of 2011-15 Initiative agreed to continue the work in 2016 & 2017. It was agreed that the project should be widened to include the South West Peak District Area and to include Goshawk and Hen Harrier in the project objectives. No targets have been set for Goshawk or Hen Harrier.

With the wider scope, the Initiative needs to reconsider the initial agreed targets for the species and the revised area now being monitored. This should include two additional Peregrine Falcon sites and five additional Merlin sites to remain consistent with previous years reporting.

Several proven and suspected persecution incidents have come to light since the 2015 project review and some areas have suffered a catastrophic failure of larger breeding raptors.

The very low numbers of larger raptors breeding successfully in the Dark Peak and surrounding area- in particular the lack of any successful breeding by Peregrines in the Dark Peak in 2017, the first time since they recolonised the area in 1984- continues to give real cause for concern. By comparison, we are offered an insight into what success could be witnessed by looking at the population growth and breeding success that species such as Peregrine, Goshawk and Buzzard achieve in the areas away from the Dark Peak.

### **2016 SEASON- OVERVIEW**

Species	Territories checked	Territories occupied by pairs	Territories occupied by single birds	Pairs known to have laid eggs	No. of pairs known to have fledged young	No. young fledged	Agreed Targets (based on figs. at SPA designation)
Peregrine	21	8	1	4	3	8	15 prs by 2015 (+2 SW Peak)
Short-eared Owl			Please see the species summary below				5-yr ave. 25 prs by 2015
Merlin	48	24	2	15	11	38	27 prs by 2013, 32 by 2015 (+5 SW Peak)
Goshawk	25	8	2	7	4	9	None set
Hen Harrier	Vast areas	0	Sporadic sightings of single birds	N/A	N/A	N/A	None set

### **2016 Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)**

Nine territories were found to be occupied, eight by pairs and one by at least a single bird.

Repeat visits found most of the unsuccessful territories had been vacated during the season.

Of the eight territories known to be occupied by pairs, four pairs are known to have laid eggs three of which were successful and fledged a total of eight young. At the fourth site the eggs or small young were missing from the scrape with the reason for failure unknown. However, there were a large number of reported thefts of peregrine falcon eggs/small young elsewhere in the North of

England in 2016. The lack of evidence of natural loss leads to the suspicion that this nesting attempt may have suffered the same fate.

The addition of the South West Peak District to the project area resulted in one additional successful Peregrine nesting attempt at the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust site, the Roaches.

### **2016 Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)**

No Short-eared Owls were recorded breeding in the Peak District in 2016, the weather and the suspected low vole productivity are thought to be the main reason behind the lack of breeding birds.

Several pairs were recorded displaying early in the season prior to the snow in March; after the cold spell, sporadic sightings of single birds were recorded.

### **2016 Merlin - (*Falco columbarius*)**

The number of occupied territories continues to be stable at around twenty-four pairs. In 2016 there was a larger than usual disparity between the numbers of sites initially occupied and the number of actual nesting attempts when compared to an average to the previous 4 years of the study. There were also several failures to report (see below). Productivity was lower in 2016, which we believe this was principally down to adverse weather at key stages of the breeding cycle.

The number of young per occupied site dropped from a project average of circa 2.3 to 1.6 in 2016. It is worth mentioning that that the number of young per successful site remains good with an average 3.45 young fledging per successful nest.

### **2016 Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)**

Goshawks were recorded at ten sites, eight pairs and two sites with at least a single bird in occupation.

At least seven pairs were known to have laid eggs and behaviour suggested a further pair may have also laid eggs but the nest was not located before the birds disappeared.

Four Pairs were successful fledging nine young.

The remaining four pairs failed in circumstances unexplainable by natural occurrence with evidence of direct persecution at three sites and disappearance of the birds at the fourth.

### **2016 Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*)**

Single birds were recorded on very few occasions during the early part of the season but there was no evidence of any birds pairing up. The number of reported sightings was much lower in 2016 than in previous years.

The picture for the whole of England was of a very poor breeding season with just three successful nests, none of which were on grouse moors.

## **2017 SEASON- OVERVIEW**

<b>Species</b>	<b>Territories checked</b>	<b>Territories occupied by pairs</b>	<b>Territories occupied by single birds</b>	<b>Pairs known to have laid eggs</b>	<b>No. of pairs known to have fledged young</b>	<b>No. young fledged</b>	<b>Agreed Targets (based on figs. at SPA designation)</b>
Peregrine	23	8	1	4	0	0	15 prs by 2015 (+2 SW Peak)
Short-eared Owl			Please see the species summary below				5-yr ave. 25 prs by 2015
Merlin	48	23	2	19	14	50+	27 prs by 2013, 32 by 2015 (+5 SW Peak)
Goshawk	25	13	4	6	3	9	None set
Hen Harrier	Vast areas	0	Few sightings of single birds	ON/A	N/A	N/A	None set

### **2017 Peregrine Falcon**

Eight territories were recorded to be occupied by pairs, a further site had a single bird in occupation.

Repeat visits found most of the territories were vacant or in some cases where pairs had previously consisted of two adult birds one of the pair had been replaced by an immature bird.

Of the eight territories known to be occupied by pairs, four pairs are known to have laid eggs, there were no successful breeding attempts recorded in the BOPI study area in 2017. This is the first year that Peregrines have not nested successfully in the Dark Peak since they first recolonised the area in 1984.

The installation of a nest camera may have contributed to the lack of a successful outcome for the Peregrine nesting attempt at one site, as the camera was seen to be highly conspicuous.

### **2017 Short-eared Owl**

Short-eared Owl activity was very limited in 2017, despite there being an apparent upturn in small mammal abundance (this may have come too late for many pairs). Other species that depend on small mammal prey (Long-eared Owl, Tawny Owl, Barn Owl and Kestrel) responded better to the reported increase in small mammal populations with a good breeding seasons recorded in many areas of the UK. Two pairs of Short-eared Owl were recorded breeding and birds were recorded at two other sites but breeding could not be proven.

### **2017 Merlin**

The number of occupied Merlin territories remains stable.

The number of occupied sites recording a breeding attempt returned to a similar level to the rest of the study period (after a dip in 2016).

Productivity of successful nest sites also returned to the levels in line with the 2012-2015 average in 2017 after suffering in 2016.

The number of young fledging per successful site remains good, with an average 3.57 young per successful nest.

As in 2014, 2015 and 2016 there was no proven breeding for the Eastern Moors area. Various theories for the lack of breeding Merlin in these areas have been discussed and all are worthy of further investigation. However, it is likely that multiple factors have contributed to their failure to breed successfully in recent years. To better understand the issues a funded scientific study may well be required. Perhaps more worrying is that in the last few years pairs of birds do not appear to be returning to this area to enable them to breed.

### **2017 Goshawk**

Goshawk were recorded at seventeen sites, thirteen pairs and four sites where a single bird was in occupation.

Six pairs were known to have laid eggs and three pairs were successful fledging nine young. Three nests failed, two with the apparent loss of one of the adult birds.

### **2017 Hen Harrier**

Given the continued low number of successfully breeding Hen Harrier in England, it is unsurprising that we can only report a handful of Hen Harrier sightings in the study area in 2017 breeding season. Sightings included a late sky-dancing grey male in the north of the study area.

## **RECORDED PERSECUTION AND OTHER INCIDENTS SINCE THE 2015 REVIEW**

### **Reported Incidents**

- **Osprey** found grounded, died before being recovered, injuries consistent with being caught in an illegally set trap.
- **Common Buzzard** found dead with visual damage, sent for x-ray, contained a large amount of lead shot (heavy gauge cartridge used).

- **Goshawk** nest containing eggs failed, a shotgun cartridge wad was discovered under the nest and damaged Goshawk feathers close by (damage indicating that the bird had been shot).
- RSPB reported one failed **Goshawk** nest containing eggs in 2015, with video/audio evidence of persecution at night.
- **Peregrine** found injured in the SW Peak (later died), x-ray by vet proved bird was shot.
- Tarras, a young female **Hen Harrier** tagged as part of the Langholm study in Scotland, recorded her last known fix in the northern part of the study area.
- **Merlin** young missing from nest; no evidence of predation. Nest was OK one week earlier.

### Other Incidents

- **Goshawk** site failed despite a pair of birds seen displaying and male carrying food into a wood indicating a probable breeding attempt, nest not located. Birds disappeared.
- **Goshawk** nest containing eggs failed, extensive camp built nearby.
- **Merlin** eggs/small young disappeared, evidence of nest location being marked by persons unknown for ease of relocating.
- **Merlin** pair (adult birds) failed without explanation after laying eggs, birds no longer in attendance.
- **Merlin** several pairs disappeared from occupied sites pre-laying, despite breeding behaviour being recorded.
- **Peregrine** failed nesting attempt West Yorkshire, scrape empty despite female being observed brooding and turning eggs for over 10 days.
- Complete breeding failure of **Peregrine Falcon** in the Dark Peak in 2017.

In addition a number of other incidents, such as publicly released footage allegedly of a gamekeeper with a decoy raptor on National Trust land, attracted significant media and/or social media attention.

**NB** These are collated from raptor groups' data and publicly available press releases. There may well be ongoing investigations from either/both the RSPB and the Police.