

News

Black Grouse Stages a Major Comeback with DEFRA's Countryside Stewardship

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One of Britain's most endangered species, the Black Grouse is making a dramatic comeback in the Yorkshire Dales thanks to careful land-management, helped in part by DEFRA's Countryside Stewardship (CSS) and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Schemes.

The remnant of the English population is in an area covering the Northern Pennine area including parts of Cumbria, County Durham, North Yorkshire and Northumberland, stretching from Wensleydale in the south to the Scottish border.

It is covered by a Biodiversity Action Plan, making it a priority species under the Government's strategy for conserving and enhancing Britain's biodiversity.

Black Grouse are a bird of the moor edge and thrive where there is a mosaic of habitats, which include: heather moorland, blanket bog or mire, rough pastures, small native woodlands and hay meadows. Control of predators such as foxes, stoats and crows is fundamental for these ground-nesting birds.

Overgrazing of moorland edges and pasture has resulted in the loss and degradation of this habitat mosaic and it is currently being restored with the support of DEFRA grants.

In 1996 The North Pennines Black Grouse Recovery Project was set up to encourage management which enhances the conditions for Black Grouse, and to monitor the effectiveness of such management to ensure the prescriptions are the right ones and to identify any need for modification. The Project is a collaborative venture between the Game Conservancy Trust, Ministry of Defence, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, English Nature and Northumbrian Water.

A five year study on the effects of reducing grazing on Black Grouse, primarily using the 'Regenerating Suppressed Heather Moor Option' of CSS and the similar, English Nature 'Wildlife Enhancement Scheme', showed increases in the numbers of displaying males of 5% per year where grazing had been reduced and declines of 2% per year where grazing remained unrestricted across the study area.

Foot and Mouth Disease restrictions prevented the English survey, last conducted in 1998 from going ahead in 2001 and this year's figures have been eagerly awaited.

In Arkengarthdale, North Yorkshire where management for Black Grouse has been implemented the numbers of males has increased from 9 in 1998 to 24 in 2002 (number of lekking males over 30 now - 2006+). The success in Arkengarthdale is due to a combination of factors. Sheep numbers on the moorland have been reduced using the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

Under Stewardship and ESA agreements, native woodlands have been fenced by the estate to protect them against livestock, new vegetation and trees planted in the ghylls; while cutting of the hay meadows is delayed until after flowering to provide winter food. Key predators of ground nesting birds are controlled by gamekeepers.

The success is due in part to the work of eight farmers, including the owner of the moor, who as the East Arkengarthdale Common Committee in 1999, placed the entire 2100 hectare common into a Stewardship Agreement in 1999. Sheep are now only allowed to graze for three months on part of the moorland, allowing the heather and other vegetation to grow and provide a protective habitat for the grouse and their young.

Brian James ESA Project Officer for Arkengarthdale is excited about the progress that has been made: “ The Black Grouse is a wonderful bird and it’s fantastic to see numbers increasing. With financial support from the agri-environment schemes, the farmers have put a lot of effort into creating the correct habitat for the Black Grouse and it’s obviously paying dividends. We thought we’d see some increase after a year without a formal count, but a three-fold increase is remarkable.”

Adrian Thornton-Berry, who manages the East Akengarthdale Estate
“The owner of the moor recognises the importance of supporting the Black Grouse habitat and the positive effect this has for other species in the area. One of the important factors behind this success has been the area of land we’ve been able to enter into Stewardship by working with the farmers and actively managing the habitat so that it is favourable to the Black Grouse. It should be remembered that much of the landscape that draws visitors to the Dales each year and provides a living for many communities, is the result of the active management undertaken by farmers and shooting estates in the region.”

Philip Warren North Pennines Black Grouse Project Officer said:

“The site at Arkengarthdale is a fantastic example of how to manage for black grouse, with the sporting estate and local farmers working together to provide the mosaic of habitats required, using ESA and CSS grants in conjunction with the vital predator control. Everyone involved should be very proud; this site is also very important as it is at the southern edge of the birds current range and may provide a springboard for recolonisation of former haunts to the south.

Notes for Editors:

1. . Still (JPEG) and moving footage of Black Grouse is available. Please contact Alison Jarman at GNN Yorkshire & the Humber on 0113 283 6591 for copies.

Media requiring more information on the Black Grouse Recovery Project should contact Phillip Warren at the Game Conservancy Trust on 01833 622208 or Morag Walker at the GCT press office on 01425 651000

2. The Countryside Stewardship Scheme offers payments to farmers and land managers to improve the natural beauty and diversity of the countryside. The scheme operates throughout England outside Environmentally Sensitive Areas. It is operated by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and is one of the ten schemes that make up the England Rural Development Programme. Since its inception as a pilot scheme in 1991, Countryside Stewardship has attracted around 12,000 agreement holders, with around 2,500

applications currently in the pipeline.

3. Farmers enter into a ten-year agreement and payments range from £20 to £555 per hectare depending on the type of land management agreed. Payments are co-financed by the EU.

4. The Countryside Stewardship Scheme celebrated its ten year anniversary in October 2001. Areas already under Stewardship have seen a marked increase in previously declining bird species, including the stone curlew, curlew, bunting, bittern, lapwing, reed bunting, greenfinch, pipit, twite, and wagtail. Over 800 miles of dry stone walls and over 8,000 miles of hedgerow have been restored, and around 13,000 miles of grass margins have been established in intensive arable farming areas. Over the next six years DEFRA has allocated £500m to Countryside Stewardship, with a target of bringing an additional half a million hectares into the scheme.

5. In running the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, DEFRA works closely with partner organisations including the Countryside Agency, English Nature, English Heritage, the Game Conservancy Trust, the National Park Authorities, The Wildlife Trusts, The Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group and the RSPB.

6. For further information about the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, or any other scheme under the England Rural Development Programme, visit the DEFRA website www.defra.gov.uk or contact your local DEFRA office.

7 The Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme was introduced in 1987 to offer incentives to encourage farmers to adopt agricultural practices which would safeguard and enhance parts of the country of particularly high landscape, wildlife or historic value. There are now 22 ESAs in England, covering some 10% of agricultural land. By 2000 there were 10,915 agreements in force, covering 532,000 hectares.

Issued on behalf of DEFRA by GNN Yorkshire & the Humber. For further information please contact Alison Jarman on 0113 283 6591.

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