

Help the Hen Harrier

One of our finest birds of prey has long been suppressed by the hunting industry. It's time for that to stop

WORDS: BEN MACDONALD



SPECIES FACTFILE

HEN HARRIER

Scientific name:

Circus cyaneus

Length: 43-50cm

Wingspan: 100-120cm

UK numbers: 662 breeding pairs (2010)

Habitat: Open country in winter. Breeds on moors and heathland in flat country or hills, as well as lowland grassland on the Continent

Diet: Rodents, small birds and reptiles, including Meadow Pipits and voles

↑ BEAUTIFUL PREDATOR

Hen Harriers thrive in grassland or moorland, where there is plentiful animal food, especially voles, but also small birds



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BACK IN 1079AD, some rather good accidental conservation took place. William the Conqueror wanted land on which to hunt. A Boar-rich agricultural desert north of Southampton looked promising. William struck a bargain with the locals – in exchange for the right to graze livestock, the locals accepted that William had the right to hunt.

And so the New Forest was born. A thousand years later, it remains one of England's most unchanged landscapes – a connected maze of heathland and woodland: the last stronghold of many vanishing birds. The power of hunting to own and dictate the fortunes of British landscapes has changed little to this day.

A 'forest' has only recently borne any relation to trees. As anyone who has visited Bowland will attest, trees were optional back in the day. A 'forest' simply referred to the hunting grounds of a king. Both the New Forest and Bowland share an ancient heritage. They are not the product of modern conservation by many, but a very undemocratic decision made hundreds of years ago by one or two. These decisions isolated vast swathes of land for hunting. It seems odd that the Dartford Warbler probably owes its survival to the whim of an invading king.

When first named, the wild moors of the Forest of Bowland held Wolves, Wild Cats and Boar. Today, it is synonymous with wild moorland birds – contentious Eagle Owls, Merlins, evocative Ring Ouzels and, hanging by a thread, sky-dancing Hen Harriers. Bowland is the last refuge of the English Hen Harrier, and a vulnerable one at that.

It's ironic that a landscape created for hunting should now harbour a species hunted to extinction in its English range. But perhaps this is rather fitting. Hunting

↑ **THE NEW FOREST**

Our ancient 'forests' are among our most 'unchanged' habitats

↓ **WILD BOAR**

Though extinct in the UK, Wild Boar are making a comeback in several areas, after releases

← **RING OUZEL**

The Forest of Bowland holds good numbers of breeding Ring Ouzels



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has a complex and contradictory history when it comes to British conservation.

My articles to date have focused on rebuilding the birds of the wider countryside – replacing their food and habitat on a massive scale. This will take lots of time and money, and several generations to accomplish. The matter of the Hen Harrier is easier to resolve. Hen Harriers have ample food and habitat in connected landscapes for them to thrive. Theirs is the easiest predicament to solve. Do nothing – and let them breed.

The battle to restore Hen Harriers is very much alive and well in the conservation world. But it makes little sense, especially to those new to ornithology, if we don't understand the nature of hunting in Britain – its evolution, its pros and cons, and what makes it such a strange and unique part of our nation's heritage.

The earliest daggers found at Happisburgh, Norfolk, reveal that even 800,000 years ago the ancestor of the Neanderthals – *Homo antecessor* – was gearing up to take down big game on our shores. Well before 10,000 years ago, we drove Mammoths and Woolly Rhinoceroses off cliffs as a means of killing them. Two thousand years ago, our ancestors hunted Boar and deer with Agassaei hounds. The Romans, on their arrival, brought Castorian and Fulpine breeds. Whatever the

culture, whatever the time, hunting has been central to the character of the British landscape.

Hunting for food was the activity of the hungry many. We know from William's time, however, that hunting was also the sport of kings. He and others, famously Henry VIII, did so for the thrill of the chase. To this day, hunting has remained a royal pastime.

A new industry

By 1534, the first documented Fox hunt took place. Farmers in Norfolk began chasing down Foxes with hounds as a means of pest control. Most lived in the kind of poverty we cannot imagine today, so perhaps we can forgive them for something that would one day evolve from a poor man's necessity to a rich person's choice.

By the 1600s, packs like those in Bilsdale, Yorkshire, were trained to hunt Foxes: by 1869, this had become an institution. More than half the hunting packs in England and Wales were registered before this date. In 2005, 13,000 Foxes were caught by a total body-mass of 1.28 million people. Wherever a hunt has started, aspects of British society have followed eagerly, embellishing a basic activity with layers of social meaning and convention. Shooting came long after the invention of the gun. Before the 18th Century, most guns

WHERE TO WATCH?

One of the UK's larger birds of prey, the Hen Harrier is typically found on high ground and can be seen gliding low on raised wings while searching for food. Populations are mainly confined to the high moorlands of Wales, the Scottish Highlands and the Isles – chiefly due to intensive grazing, land drainage and conflict with the grouse hunting industry. Excluding their white rumps, the sexes are entirely different in colour and were frequently thought to be of different species by early ornithologists.

were so unreliable that many on the battlefield resorted to swords. By the 1700s, however, shotguns evolved, becoming works of art and precision. By 1674, we have an account of our first 'modern' shoot. Sir John McGill, in County Down, invited 64 'guns', from each of Ireland's 32 counties, to a hunt. They bagged 300 Pheasants in just one day.

Having declined in the 1700s with reductions in woodland, the 1800s saw the Pheasant bounce back. With the Enclosures Act, squires acquired local woods and stocked them with game. The now familiar ring-necked variety of Pheasant was imported from China in 1768. By the 1790s, Lord McCarthy had pioneered artificial incubation. By the 1850s, the one-time sport of kings was fast becoming a profitable industry.

By the third quarter of the 19th Century, the 'driven' aspects of Pheasant shooting really kicked off. The Prince Consort at the time, and his trendy son, Edward Albert, were the first to popularise the idea of beaters and dogs. Beaters are teams of men who flush birds towards 'guns', or concealed shooters. Birds are flushed, and retrieved, using spaniels or similar breeds. By 1900, Pheasants were released in their millions. Today, they are released in tens of millions. By late summer, many calculate that the Pheasant, a non-native species, is the commonest bird in the English countryside.

At the same time as Pheasant hunts were evolving, a variety of other shooting forms were changing, too. As the Industrial Revolution took hold, so did the wealth of individuals. With the railways came the increased ability to travel north. In 1852, Queen Victoria, gave deer-stalking the royal seal of approval.

This sport, which had evolved, like Pheasant shooting, with the evolution of the gun, rocketed in popularity. It became fashionable to buy Highland estates – and build lodges. Affluent Englishmen, captivated by the Romanticism of the Scottish Highlands, travelled north to hunt stags.

This legacy can be seen across Scotland today. A visit to the Cairngorm Hotel, in Aviemore, with its paintings and trophies, will draw you into that era.

← **HEN HARRIER**

The male Hen Harrier is arguably our most beautiful bird of prey

↓ **FOX & PHEASANT**

Foxes are still killed (legally) for their impact on released/introduced Pheasants, as well as 'wild' Red Grouse



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This was a world of antlers and whisky, sweeping moors and long days in the field. There's no question deer stalking has a certain Romanticism, even if the idea of killing deer for sport is repugnant to many. Today, deer-stalking remains a massive industry in Scotland. But Golden Eagles and Hen Harriers, and many other birds, can do rather well on deer estates, and do. The problem is not deer – it's grouse.

The great grouse hunt

Red Grouse are a striking native species – a wonderful and hardy bird. I was thrilled on seeing my first in North Yorkshire, and struck by its pose; exactly like the one on the whisky bottle. Grouse had been wandering around Britain and munching heather for millions of years. In a fairly short period of time, however, they were drawn into the Victorian passion for expressing carnal instincts in the hills. As Victorians looked north, it seems they saw potential in the massive acreage of the uplands to apply the principles of driving Pheasants to a new quarry: grouse.

Long before this time, 'walk-in' grouse shooting had existed, with one or two men stalking quietly across a moor, dogs at their feet, guns at the ready.

But this was the Industrial Revolution: grouse were an industry, too. Now beaters drove grouse towards waiting 'guns'. Without the skill or slog of having to work the moors all day, this kind of shooting appealed to many people with cash to spare. Mark Avery, in *The Independent*, recounts how six men in Yorkshire once shot as many as 2,000 grouse in a single day's shooting.

Lord Walsingham personally shot more than 1,000 grouse in a day, including 94 in just 21 minutes. This was and remains shooting on an industrial scale. For such killing to be sustained, year after year, you need vast numbers of grouse, and an intensively managed and predator-free landscape to support them. This is where the Hen Harrier – an able predator of grouse chicks – comes in. It has remained, for 200 years, the fragile enemy of a massive and powerful industry.

For anyone new to our wonderful hobby, Hen Harriers are an evocative and graceful

ground-nesting bird of prey. They have a wide distribution across Eurasia and North America. Their habitat is characterised by open ground, on which they hunt and feed, quartering low for voles, small or nestling birds and reptiles. Forested areas and grassland monocultures, like crops, deny them nesting or feeding sites, so they need varied grasslands with heather, primarily for cover, and grassland, because this contains higher densities of prey, specifically voles.

Hen Harriers in Britain are associated with moorland. Now that most of our lowland rough grassland has vanished, this provides the right combination of sheltered heather nesting sites and areas of rough grasses to pick out prey.

Harriers lay four to five eggs in late spring and raise chicks for up to 42 days. Nesting on the ground, they are, naturally, vulnerable to Foxes, and, less naturally, human predation. In Britain, our birds remain here year-round, moving from upland breeding sites to lowland saltmarshes or heathlands to winter.

Harriers have declined across Europe – in countries from Finland to France – and degradation of vole-rich grasslands is the key cause. Outside of Britain, persecution is rarely a major issue. Starvation, as for most birds, is driving the continental decline.

In the early years of the 19th Century, Hen Harriers had a patchy and localised distribution across southern England. By 1900, however, a startling change had taken place. The lowland population was largely wiped from Britain by habitat change, especially drainage, and harriers retreated to the uplands.

But from the 1830s, written accounts detail the killing of harriers on a massive scale. From 1850 to 1854, as many as 351 harriers were killed in Ayrshire – giving some example of the onetime abundance of this moorland raptor, and, of course, the industrial scale of its removal.

Where grouse hunters went, harriers vanished. This was ironic. Many observers, including the impartial BTO, make the point that the abundance of prime habitat, and Fox removal, on grouse moors can lead to excellent food supplies and nesting success for harriers. It would have taken so little for this to happen – but it didn't. The harrier was clinically removed from Ayrshire – then from Britain.

By 1900, harriers were effectively wiped out on the British mainland, persisting only on the Outer Hebrides, Orkney and Arran – outposts that would eventually recolonise Britain. Two World Wars later, the same abandonment of intensive land practices that led Snipe to surge back into southern England allowed harriers a reversal of fortunes. Between 1939 and 1970, Hen Harriers returned to recolonise large areas of Scotland, some areas of Wales and very small areas of the English uplands.

An unsteady return

The first National Survey, in 1989, estimated between 578 and 700 breeding pairs in Britain and the Isle of Man. In 1998, there were 570 territorial pairs. By 2004, there was a 41% increase to 806 pairs – the highest numbers of harriers in Britain for over a century. By 2010, the latest survey uncovered an 18% decline, to our current population, give or take, of 662 breeding pairs. Right now, there are more harriers in Britain than the late 19th Century and more than 20 years ago, but fewer than 10 years ago.

According to the BTO's review 'Hen Harrier population information', "Hen Harrier distribution appears to have been broadly stable during the past 20 years; overall, breeding occupancy at the 10km scale has increased by 29% over the past 40 years". At the same time, relative abundance has declined across most of Scotland and England. Harriers do not face British extinction – but they are not recolonising much of Britain. In many cases, numbers are also suppressed where birds do still nest.

To see what's happening, we need to look first at range. In the latest survey, 76%, or 505 pairs, were in Scotland and Isle of Man. There were 59 pairs in Northern Ireland, 57 pairs in Wales, 29 on the Isle of Man but just 12 in England.

This last number has fallen since, with zero breeding pairs in 2014. Key refuges for harriers remain those last outposts – Orkney, the Uists, Inner Hebrides and Arran – and expansion has occurred in areas of true wilderness or deer estates, such as north and west Highland and Argyll, with decreases in south and east Scotland.

Between 2004 and 2010, the last survey shows a 49% drop in the Isle of Man population, a drop of between 24% and 49% across mainland Scotland, and a 33% increase in Wales. We'll get to grouse moors in a minute, but let's look first at what's limited harriers on the fringes of their range – the refuges that grouse shooting can't reach.

Starving on the fringes

Driven grouse shooting exists largely across northern England and southern and eastern Scotland. It does not occur on Shetland, Orkney, the Hebrides, much of Argyll and northern Highland or the Isle of Man, and is a much smaller concern in Wales. So harrier declines in these areas have other causes. Understanding this is not only useful for these populations. History has

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← FEMALE HEN HARRIER

Streaked in brown, female Hen Harriers look very different from pale grey males

↓ EGGS & CHICKS

Ground nesting Hen Harriers are always vulnerable



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“Hen Harriers in Britain are associated with moorland. Now that most of our lowland rough grassland has vanished, this provides the right combination of sheltered heather nesting sites and areas of rough grasses to pick out prey”

BRITISH HUNTING IN NUMBERS

800,000
Estimated number of years that hunting in any form has been practised on the British landmass

1079
The year that William the Conqueror established the first Royal hunting forest

13,000
Number of Foxes caught by hunting packs in 2005

1534
Year of the first documented Fox hunt

1.28 million –
The number of people involved in hunting them



300
Pheasants shot by Sir John McGill's hunting party in 1674, recognised as the first 'modern' shoot...

1768
Year that the ring-necked Pheasant is imported to Britain from China



...64
Number of guns McGill's party used

351
Hen Harriers killed in Ayrshire alone from 1850-1854, purely as pests

0
Breeding pairs of Hen Harriers in England

330
Pairs of Hen Harriers that should be supported in England, according to the RSPB

94
The number of grouse personally killed by Lord Walsingham on 28 August, 1888... in just 21 minutes...

...1070
Walsingham's total by the end of the day

33,655
Number of signatures on Dr Mark Avery's petition to Ban Driven Grouse Shooting

£1-20 million
Price range of a single grouse moor



THE HEN HARRIER IN BRITAIN

Pre-1830s

The Hen Harrier is successfully established across the rough grasslands of southern England from the Cotswolds to East Anglia, and is abundant across the uplands of Wales, northern England and Scotland.



1830-1900

Drainage and habitat change effectively removes the species from lowland Britain. Killing on an extensive scale removes them from any area in which grouse hunters operate.



1900

The Hen Harrier is effectively absent from the British mainland, surviving only on the Outer Hebrides, Orkney and Arran.



1939-1970

Intensive land practices are increasingly abandoned, allowing the Harrier to return large areas of Scotland, and small parcels of Welsh and English uplands.



1989

The first national survey estimates between 578 and 700 breeding pairs in Britain.



2004

Population rises 41% to 806 pairs.



2010

The latest survey estimates a total of 662 breeding pairs across Britain, implying that recolonisation has slowed.

Adult male Hen Harrier



66 76% of harriers, 505 pairs, were in Scotland and Isle of Man. There were 59 pairs in Northern Ireland, 57 pairs in Wales, 29 on the Isle of Man but just 12 in England 99

proven that satellite refuges helped repopulate the mainland nearly a century ago.

On Orkney, Hen Harriers had a pretty bad time from 1980 to the late 1990s. The population crashed without a gun in sight. As far back as 2002, Amar et al recommended "conservation management for this species should be directed towards increasing the harriers' food supply".

The RSPB quickly realised that a decline was related to intensive grazing by sheep, which degraded rough grasslands rich in prey. A simple 20% reduction in this was enough. By 2012, a striking 100 breeding females, one-fifth of the British population, nested on Orkney. What an extraordinary success.

This reveals one of the common misconceptions about harriers – they are not a 'heather' bird. Heather is excellent for concealing nests, but it's the grassland rich in voles they need to hunt. It must be noted there are no harriers in vast areas of the uplands where there is no grouse hunting.

The 49% decline on the Isle of Man is an example of 'natural' causes limiting populations. As conservationists, we need to remember that on offshore islands, in Wales, even the Lake District, there should be many more harriers.

This is within our power to change by applying the RSPB's science and rebuilding viable food supplies. There is also nothing to prevent conservationists reintroducing birds to Dartmoor or Exmoor, vast landscape-level refuges with no shooting interests. Except, I sometimes worry, a fear that because our 'enemies' have suggested it makes this a bad idea. It's an excellent idea – it doesn't mean we've 'lost' either. I can't imagine my grandchildren being too concerned about whether Dartmoor harriers were a last resort or not. I just hope they get to see one there.

If starvation is the problem in the fringes, killing is the problem in the heartland. Where are the 330 pairs of Hen Harrier capable of nesting in

England? Some people believe that large numbers of harriers are shot and killed each year. The truth is different and probably more tragic. Since Victorian times, and in all recent surveys, there is very little evidence that Hen Harriers have ever been allowed back into the English uplands.

The need to preserve high densities of grouse, leading to legal killing of Foxes and corvids, and the illegal killing of harriers, has been documented in many reports. In national surveys, there have never been more than 18 breeding pairs in England. Various expert commentators, such as Brian Etheridge, point to a further rise in levels of persecution from around 2010. This has coincided with the driven grouse shooting industry becoming ever more efficient, money-driven and therefore grouse-driven – and harrier-averse.

It's easy to see from the 100 nesting females on Orkney that the right to 330 pairs of harrier in England is not RSPB propaganda. Birds can breed at high densities given ample heather, grassland, voles and a lack of bullets. Look at the BTO Atlas Map of Short-eared Owls for an accurate idea of where harriers should be nesting in England.

The red dots on the map are simple: they represent heather and grassland mosaics with furry food. But Short-eared Owls, like Merlins, are tolerated by many keepers. Harriers are not.

What Hen Harrier Day, Dr Mark Avery, Chris Packham and so many others are attacking today is the odd preservation of now illegal Victorian practices of raptor removal in the 21st Century. From this specific issue, many, especially Mark, have carried out wider analyses of the damages done by grouse moors to the wider environment.

Across swathes of northern England and Scotland, an iconic raptor is being illegally prevented from returning and bringing joy to millions of people.

The wider movement to ban driven grouse shooting and scrutiny of the industry is gathering

momentum across the media, in protest, and online. I am a signatory for a few reasons: the illegality of grouse moor practice, wider environmental impacts such as burning, the lack of harriers and the creation of a heather monoculture in place of varied upland habitat. I don't agree that moors are fundamentally 'bad' for wildlife. Unfashionable as it may be to say, they have an excellent track record with Merlins, are generally amenable to Short-eared Owls and encourage high wader productivity – they form landscape level refuges for red-list species; and I have no objection to Fox removal. Ironically, this would benefit harriers too: we must always prioritise vanishing populations, such as upland waders or raptors, over common generalists we can find in most city or town gardens. So, would the birding landscape be better if we banned driven shooting?

Dr Mark Avery argues convincingly that driven grouse shooting will be banned in 10 years' time. Let's assume he's right. With driven grouse shooting banned, will the harrier – and its wider ecosystem – be better off?

On the day driven grouse shooting is banned, grouse moor owners find themselves considerably poorer – and more hateful of harriers than ever before. For more than two decades, harriers have become the symbol of a Green Movement that has just divested grouse moor owners of millions in revenue.

The financial incentive to kill harriers has been removed, that's all. The ideology of hatred remains. The gamekeepers remain. The 200-year contempt of harriers remains. Almost everything remains the same. The landowners now face two options – keep the land, or sell.

The 'current ownership' option is unlikely to benefit harriers for the reasons above. Slightly poorer but still wealthy, large landowners retain

↑ GRASSLAND FEEDER

Hen Harriers favour rough grassland over heather moors

↓ INNOCENT 'CULPRIT'

The native Red Grouse is nurtured to be shot for profit

enough keepers to snuff out these graceful symbols of the conservation movement with more hate than ever before.

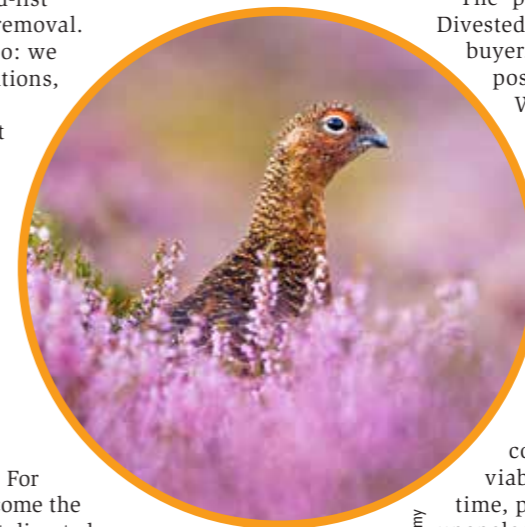
Life goes on unchanged. 'Walk-in' shooting becomes monetised and more of an intensive industry. More people walk across the moor, more grouse are shot on foot, more grouse are needed: harriers lose. As long as harriers remain the hostage of those who despise them, they stand no viable chance of survival.

The 'panic and sell' option is the alternative. Divested of millions, landowners look for a rich buyer. Step forward a range of unexciting possibilities – big agriculture or big energy.

What happens to the grouse moor? It disappears! If the grouse moor owners keep the land, the harrier has lost. But if they sell to most parties – the overall quality of the land degrades, not just for harriers but 70% of our nesting Merlins, many waders, some Black Grouse and moorland passerines. There is only one buyer that will redeem this situation: us.

Crowd-funding and larger scale philanthropy are the obvious solutions. If this can buy enough land to prove that conservation of the uplands is financially viable, government and business may, in time, provide the rest. For now, we must become unapologetically rich and make sure our approach to the harrier is not ideological but pragmatic.

One thought to finish on. At a fundamental psychological level, hunting is hard-wired into the modern human genome. We hunt with cameras and binoculars, others with guns and dogs. However we dress it up, however destructive or curious, we all go hunting. The only solution is to own enough land to redress the odds. In 50 years' time, we must ensure that in the Hunt for the Harrier, it's worth more alive than dead.



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i MORE INFO

Hen Harrier Day takes place on 7 August 2016. Visit henharrierday.org