

Hen harrier *Circus cyaneus*

STATUS

Very rare breeding bird of prey in western uplands.
Annex I Birds Directive (EEC 1979),
Appendix II Bern Convention,
BTO high alert list (BTO 1997),
National Red List (RSPB 1996),
Schedule 1 Wildlife & Countryside act 1981



WHAT IS THE HEN HARRIER ?

The hen harrier is a medium to large raptor that breeds on upland moorlands feeding on small birds, mammals and red grouse. Males are grey/white, becoming progressively paler as they age. Females and juveniles are brown with a characteristic white band at the base of their tails giving them their colloquial name of 'ringtail'.

Hen harriers return to areas of heather-dominated moorland in the spring where both males and females perform complicated aerial displays, known as 'sky dancing', to choose a mate and select a nest site. Male hen harriers may feed more than one female during the nesting period. After fledging the juveniles disperse to the coast whilst the adults may remain on or around the moorlands although they may relocate in response to poor weather conditions. Communal winter roosts may be used.

WHERE ARE THEY FOUND IN THE UK?

Hen harriers are found in the north of England, mid and north Wales and Scotland in areas of heather dominated moorland. Estimates suggest a British breeding population of about 600 breeding pairs.

WHY IS THE HEN HARRIER OF CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE?

The hen harrier presently has a severely restricted breeding range outside of Scotland. The national population has recovered to present day figures after the species almost became extinct in mainland Britain during the mid-20th century. Both the range and density of breeding hen harriers are restricted by direct persecution.

THE HEN HARRIER IN THE DURHAM AREA

HOW HEALTHY ARE THE POPULATIONS OF THE HEN HARRIER?

The hen harrier is possibly the rarest breeding bird in Durham. Restricted to the more remote tracts of heather moorland its breeding success is severely curtailed by persecution from shooting interests. In the last 30 years the hen harrier has bred successfully on just six occasions.

Winter numbers are supplemented by influxes from Scotland and Europe from late September to November and remain to March. The location of some small communal roosts is known. Wintering numbers are difficult to estimate but probably number about 15 – 20 individuals at most.

HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE HEN HARRIER IN THE DURHAM AREA ?

Previously used and potential breeding sites are individually assessed each year. Known winter roosts are surveyed systematically.

WHERE HAS IT BEEN FOUND IN THE DURHAM AREA ?

Hen harriers are found on the upland heathland and blanket bogs of the Durham Dales usually below the 500m contour.

HEN HARRIERS ARE AT RISK FROM:

Persecution – hen harriers are perceived as a threat to the success of commercial grouse moors, individual birds are killed and nests are destroyed.

Loss of habitat through over grazing, badly managed burning and afforestation.

Disturbance – hen harriers are vulnerable to high levels of human disturbance in both breeding sites and winter roosts.

HEN HARRIER BENEFITS FROM:

Management of heather moorland for commercial grouse shooting.

The initial stages of degradation of heather moors where overgrazing removes dwarf shrub heath and promotes the growth of rough grasses. This habitat supports large numbers of small mammals and birds and thus high densities of hen harriers. This habitat is transitory and soon becomes unsuitable for hen harriers.

IMPORTANT HABITATS FOR THE HEN HARRIER:

<i>Upland heathland and blanket bog</i>	*
<i>Upland acid grassland</i>	*
<i>Upland hay meadow</i>	*
<i>Upland calcareous grassland</i>	*
<i>Pre-thicket stage forestry plantation and restocked areas</i>	

OTHER SPECIES ACTION PLANS COVERING ISSUES RELAVANT TO THE HEN HARRIER:

<i>Merlin</i>	*
<i>Curlew</i>	*
<i>Lapwing</i>	*

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N.B. ** indicates action plan produced in 1998

* indicates action plan produced in 2000

THE HEN HARRIER AND THE LAW

The hen harrier is protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) as amended. Hen harrier is listed on Annex I of the EC Birds Directive, Appendix II Bern Convention and Appendix II of the Bonn Convention.

TARGETS FOR THE CONSERVATION OF HEN HARRIERS IN THE DURHAM AREA:

DATE

Target 1 Increase the number of successful breeding attempts by hen harriers within the plan area. 2005

Target 2 Extend the range of breeding hen harriers to include 50% of all apparently suitable habitats. 2012

Target 3 Protect all winter roost sites. 2005

Target 4 Raise awareness of the plight of hen harrier populations. ONGOING

HEN HARRIER ACTIONS

ACTION	DATE	POSSIBLE PARTNERS	MEETS TARGET NO.
<u>POLICY AND LEGISLATION</u>			
1. Seek to include hen harriers in designation of moorland SPAs.	2004	EN, RSPB	2, 4
<u>SPECIES MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION</u>			
2. Continue to oppose moves to remove the protected status of hen harriers.	ONGOING	DBAP, DBC, DUBSG, DWT, EN, RSPB	1, 2
<u>SITE MANAGEMENT</u>			
3. Protect all known sites through active cooperation of local field workers, gamekeepers and Police WLOs, and land owners.	ONGOING	RSPB, DUBSG, WLOs, Land owners	1, 2
<u>RESEARCH AND MONITORING</u>			
4. Continue to monitor all breeding attempts.	ONGOING	DBC, DUBSG, RSPB	1, 2
5. Develop monitoring programme of wintering population.	2001	DBC, DUBSG, RSPB	3
<u>ADVISORY</u>			
7. Provide advice to landowners and managers on legal methods to reduce impact of predation on red grouse numbers.	ONGOING	RSPB, EN, DUBSG	1, 2, 4
<u>COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLICITY</u>			
8. Continue to raise awareness of the status of hen harriers and their persecution.	ONGOING	RSPB, DUBSG, DBAP, DBC	4
9. Use educational programmes with local schools to promote hen harriers as part of the upland fauna.	2004	RSPB, WLOs, DUBSG, DWT	1, 2, 4