

# Peak District Wader Recovery Project

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## Farmer and gamekeeper wader surveys

If you are a farmer in or near the Peak District and think you may have breeding waders on your land, we would love you to become involved with our project! During the breeding season we would like to invite you to count waders on your land and submit the results to us so that we have a more in-depth picture of how birds are distributed right across the National Park.

The aim of the Peak District farmers' wader count is to gauge a picture of the number of breeding waders on your farms, and to raise awareness of the important role that farmers play in the survival of these birds. Taking part in the survey will provide an opportunity to demonstrate what your work delivers on the ground.

Full details on how to count waders and a recording sheet are available on our [Wader Recovery Project webpage](#). Alternatively, recording forms will be distributed with this newsletter or if you would like one posted directly to you, please call 01629 816270 and ask for a wader survey pack.

The Wader Recovery Project also works with gamekeepers throughout the National Park. They too are concerned that numbers of waders are declining in key areas. This season we would like to invite all grouse moor gamekeepers in the Peak District to report on the presence of wading birds on their moors. The results will help build a detailed map of breeding waders on Peak District moors, and will offer a baseline for similar counts in future years. We hope the data can inform how habitat management and legal predator control for waders on moorland can be delivered in areas that are failing.

Details of how and when surveys can be done will be distributed to all gamekeepers throughout the National Park in the coming weeks.

## Breeding waders such as lapwing, curlew and snipe have been an integral part of the farmed landscape of the Peak District for generations

In response to concerns about declining wader populations, a Peak Birds Project has been in place since 2001 to help farmers and landowners to continue managing habitats favourably to protect the suite of special birds on hill farms. However, over the last few years, repeat bird surveys have revealed very worrying trends for farmland waders. For example, surveys of some parts of the Peak District have shown declines of more than 75% since the mid-1980s.

For this reason the Peak District Wader Recovery Project was initiated in 2012 as a partnership between Natural England (NE) and the Peak District National Park Authority (PDNPA). This project represents a new phase in bird conservation in the Peak District, looking at all the issues affecting farmland waders including habitat management, awareness raising, monitoring and research work, and predator control. In addition to individual farm visits by NE and PDNPA conservation advisers, the project manager Tara Challoner helps coordinate all necessary actions and activities, including facilitating the work of the conservation advisers to promote best practices for breeding waders.

The Wader Recovery Project operates throughout the National Park and the wider

Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) area, but there are two core regions of traditionally good wader habitat that we focus on. In the Dark Peak region, we have a breeding population of approximately 400 pairs of lapwing, 120 pairs of snipe and more than 400 pairs of curlew. In the smaller South West Peak (SWP) region, the approximate population is 120 pairs of lapwing, 100 pairs of snipe and 250 pairs of curlew.

Progress is being made in both regions thanks to the great work by all involved in the project, including farmers and land managers who, through land management, rush cutting, wader scrapes and predator control, have contributed to positive results for birds.

For example, in the Dark Peak there has been an increase of 26% of breeding lapwing pairs recorded since 2011, and in the SWP the number of breeding pairs of curlew increased 33% over the period 2009-2013. Also, encouragingly, our research has shown that the rate of lapwing chicks fledged per pair is now thought to be sufficient to maintain or expand the population here.

We'd really like your help with our project, whether you are a farmer or gamekeeper, or simply wish to help us to monitor breeding birds. See the next article to find out more.



## Doggie dos and don'ts

Spring and early summer are critical times for birds like lapwing and curlew - they need to be undisturbed to give them the best chance of laying a good number of eggs and raising as many chicks as they can. Also, sheep with lambs and wildlife such as hares are easily scared by dogs running free or on extended leads.

Dog owners have a responsibility under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act to keep their dogs on leads around wildlife between 1 March and 31 July and at any time near farm animals. Legally you do not have to use a lead on public paths on farmland but, as a general rule, keep your dog on a lead if you cannot rely on its obedience.

On open access moorland, under the CROW Act (2000), all dogs must be kept on a short lead between 1 March and 31 July. To protect sensitive wildlife and farm animals, on some moors there are official restrictions which ban dogs. This doesn't restrict your access along any nearby public paths. You can carry out a map search on Natural England's website [www.openaccess.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.openaccess.naturalengland.org.uk) for dog restrictions, or other restrictions. The maps are updated daily. Alternatively, you can call Natural England's Open Access helpline on 0845 100 3298.



## Keeping predators at bay

In the South West Peak, nest camera monitoring on one of the largest colonies of lapwing there showed that fox and badger predation was significantly affecting the breeding success of birds. It was decided to erect an anti-predator fence to protect this important group and give them a much better chance of successfully raising chicks.

Our hardy fencing team started work in January, and persevered during Arctic conditions to get the 2km-long fence in place before the birds returned from their wintering grounds in March. The design used horse netting, which is folded out at the bottom to prevent animals climbing underneath. High tensile electric wires at the top and bottom of the fence stop digging and climbing animals. Sections of the fence were difficult to construct, sloping down deep gullies and back up the other side, while in other sections the fence needed to overhang to stop foxes from jumping over. On top of the difficulties with ground conditions, the fencers endured inclement weather conditions which at one point in March saw the fence buried beneath seven feet of snow!



Gates are weak points in any anti-predator fence and here we needed to install nine, so we needed to come up with a robust, safe, secure and predator-proof design. In addition, two footpaths cross the farm and at the access points for these we decided to use self-closing kissing gates to keep predators out but keep livestock in. These were covered with galvanised sheeting on the exterior to prevent animals from climbing over them.

The fence proved very successful in year one. Nest success increased from an average of 38% (2010-2012) to around 67% in 2013, and very importantly the number of chicks fledged per pair rose from an average of 0.73 (2010-2012) to 1.33 in 2013 - of the 15 pairs of lapwing that nested within the fence perimeter, 14 pairs successfully raised at least one chick.

## Moors matter

Local gamekeeper Will Morris manages a 3,500 acre grouse moor in the Peak District National Park.

We spoke to him recently to find out more about the work he does and how it benefits waders.

I asked Will why he wanted to become a gamekeeper. He said: "I have always had a passion for the countryside and wildlife and the work is varied and interesting. I could never imagine myself working in an office. As we are managing wild ground nesting birds, predator control is important, but I also spend a lot of time undertaking habitat management. For example, we burn heather across the moor to create a mosaic of habitats; bracken spraying is undertaken, both on the ground and by helicopter. We have also undertaken a 200 acre forestry restoration project on the estate to return the ground back to native vegetation."

So how does this work benefit waders? Will explained: "Grouse moor management creates a by-product, which is a thriving wader population. The predator control that is done keeps the birds alive and increases nesting success tenfold. Heather burning creates bare patches that the birds nest on, dew ponds have been created on the drier areas of the moor and these are alive with insect life. The waders are seen feeding around these areas on a regular basis."

I asked what other wildlife is associated with the moor.

"We have the meadow pipits, skylarks and stonechats, short ear owls, mountain hares, and seasonal visitors such as nightjar, cuckoo, merlin and hobby. I even saw a pair of dotterel last year. The job can be very rewarding; I enjoy heather burning and shoot days, but the thing that gives me the most pleasure is seeing the new life in May and June when the grouse and wader chicks are hatching off. Seeing this result of a year's hard work is what I find most rewarding."

## Wader research in the South West Peak

Wader populations have been surveyed in the South West Peak since 1985 when birds were widespread and numerous. Unfortunately declines have been severe - between 1985 and 2013 lapwing declined by approximately 80%, snipe by almost 90% and curlew 75%. However, there is some good news - please see the next article.

To better understand the factors affecting breeding waders, for the past three years we have been closely monitoring the breeding success of lapwing colonies across this area to assess nest and chick survival. This has also involved the use of nest cameras and temperature loggers (thermocrons) to provide information about the causes of nest losses to predation.

Nest temperature loggers are placed in lapwing nests. These are coin-sized electronic devices which continuously record temperature, and when a nest is abandoned or predated the temperature drops. The timing of this event is indicative of the likely predator. Hence predation at night is most likely to be by mammals whereas during the day it is more likely to be associated with avian predators.

Remote cameras are placed on metal spikes a short distance from individual nests, with the primary objective of identifying the species responsible for nest

predation. Images are recorded at 1-second intervals for 20 seconds once triggered by motion. Infrared lights enable night-time images to be captured.

### RESULTS:

The nest monitoring has shown that over the last 4 years, on average, just over one chick per pair of lapwing has successfully fledged. This should be sufficient for the population to remain stable - research shows that 0.7 fledged chicks per pair will maintain population numbers - and the figure for the South West Peak is notably higher than this. So why are numbers of lapwing continuing to decline? We need to do more work to understand what is happening. It remains our aim to try and increase the breeding success of lapwings across the South West Peak.

The nest cam and temperature logger work has shown that 70-90% of nest loss occurs at night time. The nest cams have recorded fox and badger predating nests. Monitoring has shown that nest survival in 2013 was the highest recorded in the last 4 years, with 61% of nests being successful.



This is good news, and if chick survival can be increased as well this should result in an increase in the number of breeding pairs.

This breeding season we would like to expand the number of lapwing colonies studied so that we can pool information from a greater number of sites, and understand the different factors affecting birds at different locations. We also hope, through a joint project with the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, to learn more about factors affecting chick survival. This exciting research will give us a real insight into chick movements, habitat preferences and survival, and predation. This will help us determine how best to protect chicks and increase numbers of waders on your farms. We hope to report the progress of this project to you in our next newsletter.

## How are waders faring in the South West Peak?

A survey of waders was done in 2013 that focussed on "hotspot" areas within the South West Peak. The aim was to see how snipe, lapwing and curlew populations have been doing since the last survey in 2009. The "hotspots" are where snipe, lapwing and curlew are concentrated - a total of 77 one kilometre squares were surveyed. This approach was taken as a survey of the whole 360 one kilometre squares in the South West Peak would be very time-consuming and costly.

The North Staffordshire Moorlands area (Axe Edge down to Warslow) has been surveyed regularly since 1985 and this has shown worrying declines in the three wader species. The most severe declines were between 1985 and 1992 - an approximately 50% drop in numbers between those dates. Numbers have continued to fall but the comparison of data from 2009 with the 2013 survey shows the rate of loss is slowing. And the good news is that the figures for curlew showed an increase of nearly 25%, from 160 pairs to 200 pairs just in the

"hotspots" - the total population for the South West Peak may now exceed the 270 pairs recorded in 2009 over the total 360km<sup>2</sup>!

Overall, lapwing and snipe show declines in the region of 25% compared with 2009. However, looking at the survey results in more detail shows some interesting trends. Snipe have significantly increased in the Swallow Moss-Reapsmoor area with numbers now higher than those recorded in 2004. The moors to the east of Shining Tor show a large increase in the number of pairs of curlew. Lapwing in the Combs-Goyt Valley area have held their numbers, with a small increase in the number of pairs. The number of chicks fledged per pair of lapwing averages out at just over one chick per pair - this should be sufficiently high to maintain and even increase the population. But so far this is not what we are seeing across the South West Peak - further investigation is needed to better understand this.

Farmers and keepers are crucial to the success of these wading birds. The 2013

survey does suggest some positive moves in population numbers, particularly for curlew. We look forward to continuing to work with farmers and keepers - it is hoped that we will undertake a repeat survey in a couple of years to see how numbers are faring.



## Farming tips to help waders this spring

The breeding season is now here and we hope that you will be lucky enough to see lots of waders and their chicks on your farm in the next few months! Please be aware that during this crucial time we ask you not to do any chain harrowing, rolling, or any other machine operated work in fields where birds breed to prevent disturbing the nests and crushing any eggs. Take care with livestock in fields where birds may be nesting to ensure that sheep or cattle are not disturbing birds and causing them to make alarm flights over the nest, rather than sitting tight to keep eggs warm. Maintaining

boggy areas and wet flushes is also great for the birds! Remember to record on your soil risk map where you have left these important areas for birds so that if you have an inspection under Cross Compliance you will be fully covered.

Rush cutting is an important part of habitat management, but please do not do any work of this kind until late August to prevent any harm to snipe which may still be breeding at this late stage.

Here's hoping for good weather this spring for farming and birds!



## Farmer's voice

Mr John Cooper is the tenant of United Utilities farm Townhead Farm at Tintwistle in the High Peak. His family first came to the farm in 1811, but the farm is noted as being established on a map in the 16th century when it also served as a stage-coach relay station.

John set out as a cattle farmer with an Aberdeen Angus suckler herd, and later diversified into a mixed enterprise of cattle and sheep. This continued until 2012 when, sadly, he said goodbye to the cattle and is now a full time sheep farmer with a flock of home bred Texel Cross, of which the majority are mules.

The farm was in an ESA scheme until 2013, when this was replaced by a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme, awarded due to the numbers of breeding waders on the in-bye sheep grazed fields here.

John said he has "noticed a decline in all birds, not just waders, in the last thirty years" but that there has been a "marked difference in the number of lapwings" during this period. Coincidental with the decline in lapwing, John remarked on an increase in badgers in the landscape. Although this is not proven to be linked to the declining wader population, it

may be an influencing factor.

He said: "the main problem today seems to be that there are more predators, so even

when the birds do nest the eggs and chicks do not always survive." He has always had a keen interest in maintaining breeding waders on the farm, so the extra habitat management work for which he receives a grant payment through HLS is not a great deal different from what he has been doing on the farm all of his farming life, and he said that "it is important to give something back and the scheme payments provide an added incentive to continue to help the birds."

John has been carrying out habitat management to aid the birds for the past 20 years. The careful management of his land is reflected in the number of waders that return to the farm to breed each spring, with over 20 pairs of lapwing, five pairs of curlew and four pairs of snipe. The farm even held the last pair of breeding redshank in the Peak District, but of course one pair is not sufficient to maintain a population and sadly these have now gone. It was John's idea to chain harrow small areas of lapwing breeding fields just prior to the nesting season in February, to provide rough ground and vital camouflage for nesting birds. He also spreads farmyard manure at this time to encourage lapwings to nest here. The farmer applied for derogation from Natural England to do this. John said: "in comparison to cattle, the sheep produce a lot of muck but don't tread it in so much or rough up the ground for the birds so that's why we

did the chain harrowing and muck spreading." After having a soil test conducted, John put lime on his fields to neutralise acidity and increase the fertility of the soil. This is great for livestock

grazing as well as for birds, as it increases the amount of earthworms in the soil and keeps the soil structure open so that birds can have easy access to worms when feeding.

Additional work has been done through the Wader Recovery Project in order to encourage waders. Shallow scrapes have been put in to provide feeding areas for lapwing and snipe chicks, as the muddy edges harbour lots of invertebrate food and soft ground so that the grubs are more accessible. Rush cutting has been carried out so the ground is more open, as lapwings need a good all round view from the nest to identify any approaching predators, and trees overlooking the site have been removed to reduce predator perches.

The main danger that nesting wader birds face in areas of good habitat is predators, but this is something that has not fazed John; he has carried out regular predator control of crows, magpies, foxes and stoats, which is necessary for the pheasant shoot that he holds at the farm as well as for helping the success rate of the nesting waders. Through the daily use of cage traps for crows and fox control methods, the waders stand a much better chance of succession and increasing the population as a whole. The feeders for the pheasants also increase the amount of small birds in the area, such as finches, robins and blue tits, particularly through the long winter; the farm management therefore benefits many bird species, not just waders.

John said that "farming and helping the birds go hand in glove with one another. It's all about enhancing the landscape, as it would be a sad place without them, especially in the spring."

John is confident that it is possible to run a successful farm business and provide safe breeding conditions for ground nesting birds too; the abundance of birds here is testament to this.

