

February 2021



Hen Harrier Action: February newsletter



Dear Subscriber,

Welcome to our latest newsletter, which marks our first birthday – on 12 February last year we received our charitable status 'Award Letter'. For us, like everyone else, it has been an extraordinary year, very difficult in many ways but with some brilliant successes. Those early months seem such a long time ago, but we are now looking forward confidently to our second year, reaching more people with more events as our capability and networks grow. So another big thank you to everyone who contributed during the last year, and a welcome too to all who have joined our efforts over the weeks since the last newsletter. We're still looking for more people to join us and help us reach wider audiences, so do please [get in touch](#).

Planning for this year is well under way. We can't reveal much detail yet but there will be a spring event, which will be online but with lots of ways of participating. In August, there will be both online and (we are increasingly confident) locally organised events. As ever, we are looking for ideas and practical support, on which more below. But first we have some great feature articles for you. Read on!

High tides and hen harriers in winter

Volunteer Debra Williams provides brilliant support for our website and this newsletter. Here is a great article from her about the delights of a special place for birds including winter raptors.

“The [Dee Estuary](#) is a fantastic place for bird-watching, with a variety of destinations that never fail to provide amazing spectacles. One of the best spots is Parkgate, where over the expanse of saltmarsh various birds of prey can be observed in winter: peregrine, merlin, kestrel, sparrowhawk, buzzard, marsh and hen harrier, as well as two owl species, short-eared and barn – and, of course, it is here that one of the 2018 Hen Harrier Days took place.

Parkgate is an attractive little village which was once an important port on the River Dee, and later a popular seaside resort. However, in the 1950s, silting caused by human activity led to the area turning into saltmarsh. This was bad news for the people who enjoyed the bathing and the beach, but good news for wildlife and wildlife-watchers. A large area of the saltmarsh was bought by the RSPB in 1979 and is now an SSSI and SPA due to its winter wildfowl and wading birds, and a designated SAC because of its plant assemblages.

Today, most bird-watchers park in the Old Baths car park and set up their 'scopes to view the marsh – a couple of hours before high tide is a good time to arrive. However, on a very high tide in late 2020, with the wind gusting in my face, I decided to walk along the old sea front instead, heading for the far end of the Parade and the route towards Neston reedbed. Such high tides provide excellent feeding opportunities for the raptors and owls, as the small mammals are driven out from their usual hiding places on the marsh.



Stopping to rescue a harvest mouse (pictured) – one of many small mammals caught out by this extremely high tide which were swimming for their lives off the marsh and up and over the sea wall – I continued along a little-used footpath, where a short-eared owl, marsh harrier and ringtail hen harrier were hunting at very close quarters.

There were numerous sightings of marsh harriers on this walk – indeed, it is rare to not see them – and it was a pleasure to see the short-eared owls and ringtails too, but sadly no male hen harrier on this occasion, although they are a common sight at Parkgate over the winter. Of course, this new lockdown means that I probably won't have the chance to return 'over the water' this winter, and will have to be content with birding locally on the Mersey, but there's always this autumn!”

Hen harriers from Russia with love

For Hen Harrier Day Online in August last year, we sought widely for good video of hen harriers – a problem with having a rare bird as our symbol! We were privileged to get some excellent help from ornithologists and film-makers overseas. Here, our good friend

Charlie Liggett tells the heart-warming story of a sound recording from Russia which pitted a determined individual against implacable state bureaucracy.

“In June 2020, I was asked if I could help with film of hen harriers and sound recordings from contacts in Russia, since the species has a wide distribution in the Northern Hemisphere. I was put in touch with Olga Dmitrievna Veprintseva, the curator of the Russian sound archives of Animal Voices, part of the Russian Academy of Sciences based south of Moscow. So started a long saga of emails, letters and packages between the UK and Russia.



Olga Veprintseva has boundless energy although she is well into her eighties. She was really taken with how we were organising resistance against the dreadful way that hen harriers can be treated in the UK and worked like a Trojan to try to assist us. She prepared a suitable sound recording (on this [website page](#)) but then matters got complicated.

Since she works for a government department, there were a lot of administrative arrangements to make, including many official documents. Eventually, to make it happen, she herself made a two-day return train trip to Moscow from where she lives south of the capital. She was glad to do this for the sake of these amazing birds, and to help her friends in the United Kingdom.

Sadly, of course, the UK is not unique in birds still being persecuted. But the systematic, barbaric killing of hen harriers and other raptors (and many other creatures) just to support shooting for ‘sport’ is often greeted overseas by puzzled shock as well as horror. I hope Olga’s tale shows that the plight of hen harriers in our islands is well understood by many people around the globe, who readily give us their support in seeking to end these appalling practices. We have many friends internationally.”

Hen harriers return to Mar Lodge

We’re changing our website [News page](#). It will now feature mainly copies of this newsletter and the occasional blog or similar article by others. (To keep up with our news, follow us on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#).) For this month, you’ll find a heartening story from Mar Lodge, a large upland estate in the Cairngorm mountains owned by the National Trust for Scotland. The estate is being managed primarily for conservation and to encourage natural regeneration and expansion of the Caledonian pinewood. It already supports many raptor species, including breeding golden eagle, peregrine falcon, merlin, buzzard, long-eared owl, tawny owl and barn owl, but 2016 brought the return of breeding hen harriers for the first time in living memory. They have since returned to breed each year, and a number of chicks were satellite tagged as part of the RSPB Hen Harrier LIFE project. Sheila Rao, ecologist at Mar Lodge, has written [this evocative account](#) welcoming the hen harriers back.

Spring!

We’re getting on with planning a ‘Skydancing’ event for the spring (probably in early May). Continued lockdown means that we are planning for a mostly online event but we

want to get everyone involved as much as possible with contributions of your own. We will tell you more about that over the coming weeks but here's something to start thinking about: we want to fly some kites! The idea is for everyone to make a bird kite: probably a hen harrier or other raptor, but let's not be too fussy, dragons, pterodactyls and others will also be admissible. We hope to have some actual gatherings for kite-flying for the event but if that proves impossible we'd still love to see your photos and videos of kite-flying in those weeks. Let's see what we can do together: please share your ideas and designs (including for sustainable materials to use) with us so we can share them with others. Send images [here](#) or else use the Facebook and Twitter links at the end of this newsletter.

News round-up

The most important news story this month was the Westminster government's [announcement](#) on heather burning on deep peat. Initially this received a cautious welcome from all, perhaps allowing the Minister, George Eustace, a brief pat on his back for a job well done. However, [further excellent analysis](#) by Guy Shrubsole revealed the extent of the loopholes that make this far from the blanket ban on burning of blanket bog that is needed. So the campaign will go on.

Meanwhile, the Scottish government [announced](#) that the mountain hare will be protected from mass culling from next month, which partially alleviated anxiety that foot dragging would leave the animals exposed to a massacre before legislation comes into force. As with so much else, it will be implementation that matters, with a judicial review pending on the Scottish government's Janus-faced approach to the beaver, first giving it legal protection and then permitting widespread culling.

Sadly, the persecution of hen harriers and other raptors continued unabated. The [Raptor Persecution UK toll](#) of killed and 'missing' hen harriers now stands at 51 since 2018. Particularly concerning is that in September two tagged birds disappeared at roost sites, raising the possibility that other, untagged, birds may have been killed there at the same time. And in October it took a Freedom of Information request to reveal that clearly unlawful activity took place on a grouse moor that is participating in NE's deeply misguided Hen Harrier Action Plan.

Keep in touch

As we cautiously look forward to a less restrictive spring and summer, please make sure that you are keeping in touch with our developing ideas for events. The best way to do that is to like or follow us on our [Facebook](#) page, where we'll post plans and ideas for you to join in. Of course, all the links will be on [Twitter](#) too.

The last newsletter prompted many expressions of interest in volunteering for Hen Harrier Action and offers to run Hen Harrier Days. That's fantastic, and we'd still like to hear from more of you who would like to participate in some way. Get in touch [here](#).

Support us

Since the last newsletter we've had some generous donations – thank you so much to all who have contributed. If you are thinking about donating, please consider a direct debit because, however small the amount, it helps with our own recurring costs, enabling

us to plan ahead with confidence. Donations are eligible for Gift Aid; to make a donation, click [here](#).



And finally, another great way to support us: artist Ruth Weaver is kindly donating 10% of the proceeds from her new signed [limited edition print of a hen harrier](#). What a great first birthday present for Hen Harrier Action!



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