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April 2021



## Hen Harrier Action: April newsletter



Dear Subscriber,

Welcome to our spring newsletter, written as lockdown eases in most parts of the UK and we have more freedom to get out and enjoy nature. Many long-distance migrants are now back, and most of the birds of the uplands are back in their breeding areas too. If you're walking in the hills, look out for wheatears, golden plover, curlew and, if you're lucky, hen harriers. Many hen harriers travel south in winter, or to lower ground, and can be seen at winter roosts across the UK. They are not, in fact, specifically upland birds and across their range are found in many lowland areas. In the UK, unfortunately, habitat loss has restricted their range so in spring you will mostly have to travel to the uplands to experience their wonderful skydancing nuptial displays. If you can't manage that, we're here to help... see the next article.

## Skydancer Day: 9 May 2021

A new date for your diaries! This year for the first time we are organising an event to celebrate spring in the uplands. Leading with some glorious footage skydancing hen harriers, there will be much else besides. The online event will

start at 10.15 on Sunday 9 May, finishing before noon. We're delighted that, following the huge success of Hen Harrier Day Online last August, Chris Packham and Megan McCubbin have again agreed to host. Skydancer Day will include:

- Another beautiful animation by Lauren Cook.
- News from Langholm Moor after their successful community buy-out.
- An introduction to identifying some upland birds.
- Olivia Blake MP on why she has become Hen Harrier Species Champion (see below).
- The RSPB's Mark Thomas interviewed by young naturalist Indy Green on why our birds of prey are still persecuted and what we can do about it.
- Plans for our community activities over the summer, including another Young Wild Writers Competition, a new challenge for younger film-makers, an invitation to make art and more.

The event will be on our [YouTube channel](#), and you can also keep up to date by following us on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#).

## New Hen Harrier Species Champion



In March, Olivia Blake MP became the Hen Harrier Species Champion in the Westminster Parliament. That's great news as she has shown knowledge and passion on upland matters since her election to represent Sheffield Hallam in 2019. We're very grateful to her for this piece:

"When people think of Sheffield they often picture steel and heavy industry. Many are surprised to hear that my seat in Sheffield Hallam is both an urban and a rural

constituency, extending from the busy suburb of Crookes High Street, all the way out to the reservoirs and moorlands of the Peaks.

I know that countryside well and value it not only as a wonderful place to walk my dogs at the weekend, but as a precious and internationally significant landscape. The UK's peatlands make up 10-15% of the world's entire resource, with healthy sphagnum bogs acting as natural carbon stores.

In parliament, I have been campaigning to protect our peatlands – putting pressure on the government to publish its peatlands programme and calling for an end to the damaging practice of moorland burning.

The fires – started by gamekeepers attempting to create an artificial habitat perfect for red grouse by burning heather – release millions of tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere, damaging complex and beautiful peatland ecologies by drying out the peat that sustains them. If we are to tackle the twin climate and nature emergencies, the burns must stop.

It was when campaigning to defend this biodiversity that I first heard of the plight of the hen harrier. The birds are formidable predators, and the male's 'sky dance' is one of the most impressive aerial displays you might see from a bird as he climbs, dives and swoops to attract a mate.

However, hen harriers in the UK have reached critically low levels. Between 2004 and 2016, their population dropped by nearly a quarter. This has not been helped by gamekeepers seeking to protect grouse from birds of prey. Natural England have shown that, in areas of grouse moor, hen harriers are 10 times more likely to die or disappear compared to other areas. Their 2019 study suggests that 72% of tagged hen harriers were either confirmed or extremely likely to have been killed illegally.

We need a sustainable plan for increasing hen harrier numbers – that must include a realistic understanding of the bird's behaviour. Government 'brood management' schemes that involve rearing birds in captivity, away from grouse moors, and releasing them into the wild are unlikely to be successful. Hen harriers range over large areas – even after being released, there is nothing to stop them from returning to a grouse moor.

The persecution of these birds by some gamekeepers to protect artificially created landscapes is morally indefensible. It is vital we do more to protect hen harriers and implement a serious strategy to ensure that those who break the law to harm them – and all other raptors – face prosecution.

The flora and fauna of our natural environment should not be shaped by the interests of grouse shoots, but by the desire to preserve the biodiversity which makes our countryside such a unique and precious asset. I am proud to be the RPSB species champion for the hen harrier and look forward to campaigning to protect these beautiful 'skydancing' birds in the future."

## A day in the uplands

One of our supporters, Nick Wilson-Smith, normally works in a lowland environment but here tells the tale of a volunteer day in the uplands – learning just how important the restoration of peatland is for nature and the planet.



“A team volunteer day to the North Pennines AONB was an eye-opener for me this month, as I saw at first hand the work of the peatland restoration project – [Pennine PeatLIFE](#). For me, this was a hands-on but, more importantly, an educational visit as my regular day job resides in the lowlands of the North East. We were initially tasked with spreading pre-cut, sphagnum-rich heather brash with pitchforks, purposely to cover the black (bare) peat, so that it can act as a mulch to prevent both erosion and carbon emissions.

Next, we looked on as a digger re-profiled the peat hags to reduce the steep gradients – another well-used method here of slowing down peat erosion. Peatlands are incredibly important wetland ecosystems. The low levels of oxygen in these water-logged areas naturally slow the decomposition of vegetation, thus over time creating the unique organic material compression that is peat. Peatlands are a rare entity, covering only 3% of the planet’s land mass. However, they store twice as much terrestrial carbon as all of the world’s forests combined – a staggering concept!

The importance of our brash spreading relied heavily upon the high levels of sphagnum moss within the mix. Ideally suited to waterlogged, acidic conditions, sphagnum can hold a huge amount of water, keeping the area moist but also allowing other plants such as heather to shoot. Sphagnum is an astute peat builder in itself, and by holding back so much water it creates these wonderful bogs. Eleven varieties of sphagnum are found in the North Pennines alone.

The afternoon was spent forming dams in bog gullies, following a recent helicopter drop of stones. The dams slow water flow and trap sediment, ensuring the peatland remains wet. Just one hectare of black peat releases around 20 tons of carbon per year, and this is exactly why it needs to be constantly restored. Work like this not only mitigates climate change, but also minimises flood risk and produces biodiversity at unprecedented levels.

Raising awareness of the vital importance of peatland restoration is paramount to a better environmental future. Without doubt, I myself have a newfound appreciation for the unique world of blanket bogs, heathery hags and mossy marshes.”

For more of Nick’s nature exploits, follow his blog at [The Ranger Diaries](#).

## News round-up

It's spring, and so with "Eyes to the skies for returning hen harriers" the RSPB is reminding us all to keep an eye out for hen harriers as they return to their breeding grounds. Please send details of the date, time, location/grid reference and a description of the bird to [henharriers@rspb.org.uk](mailto:henharriers@rspb.org.uk)



One day soon we might hope to publish a newsletter without having to tell of another 'missing' hen harrier. Sadly, not yet. Tarras (pictured) was tagged as a chick on Langholm Moor in 2020 and 'disappeared' near a grouse moor in Northumberland on 24 February. The known number of dead or missing hen harriers is now 52 since 2018 – and, of course, we cannot know how many untagged hen harriers have met a similar fate.

In [better news](#), mountain hares are now protected in Scotland, with a new licensing scheme in operation since 1 March. Of course, many such schemes are weak, but there is reasonable hope that the mass culls conducted for spurious reasons on grouse moors are now a thing of the past. Meanwhile public concern about the ill-management of our uplands continues to grow. Moorland burning, in particular, has been much in the news, and it's a sign of the times that the mass-readership Daily Mirror carried a couple of leading stories on it by their Environment Editor, award-winning Nada Farhoud, backed by Nick Miles (Emmerdale's Jimmy King). The articles didn't go unnoticed by shooting interests, of course: see [Nada's blog](#) on that.

Sadly, our legislators are falling further behind public opinion and still don't seem to understand that 'too little too late' will not save nature – or the planet. In Scotland, no proposals for the regulation of muirburn have followed the Werritty Report last year. In England, new regulations were widely criticised, including by the 57-member [Wildlife and Countryside Link](#), after it emerged that vast areas – including apparently every grouse moor on the North York Moors – would remain unprotected.

Many readers in Scotland will know of the Revive Coalition for grouse moor reform (sadly, there is no real equivalent south of the border), which draws in expertise across a broad front. Their new report, 'Our land' sets out a vision for land reform in Scotland, crucial to the revitalisation of communities. The huge

areas of rural Scotland devoted to 'sports' shooting are of course central to this discussion.

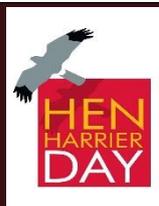
Revive also held a hustings on grouse moor reform on 22 April prior to the Scottish Parliamentary elections. The five main parties were all represented and faced some good questions. Yet another sign of issues affecting the uplands pushing up the political agenda. Not easy to imagine even at the last Scottish elections – and some way to go yet south of the border You should be able to see this on the [Revive YouTube channel](#).

Finally, another petition for you to sign (if you haven't already). This is another initiative of the Wildlife and Countryside Link, asking the UK Prime Minister to strengthen draft Environment legislation by adding a binding target to begin to reverse nature's decline by 2030. You can sign the petition [here](#).

## Support us

Since the last newsletter we've had more generous donations – thank you so much to everyone who has contributed, especially those who responded to our call for donations by direct debit, whatever the amount. These are an especial help, enabling us to plan ahead with confidence. Donations are eligible for Gift Aid; to make a donation, click [here](#).

The last newsletter also 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](#).



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