



Hen Harrier Action: October 2022 Newsletter

Welcome to our October 2022 newsletter. This month, we're recruiting! If you'd like to join the board of Hen Harrier Action, please get in touch - more information below. The main feature this month is a fascinating insight into the practicalities of monitoring tagged hen harriers by our chair, Dr Cathleen Thomas.



Hen Harrier Action News

Trustee news

Andrea Goddard has stepped down as a Trustee for Hen Harrier Action, and we'd like to say a huge thank you for her commitment. Andrea has contributed an enormous amount over the years, including nest cameras and tagging. She'll be missed by us all!

We have two vacancies for Trustees to join our board. All Trustees are volunteers, so there is no remuneration, but you get to help support hen harriers by raising awareness of their cause. The main role of a Trustee is to ensure we are adhering to our constitution and governance in our work and how we spend our funds. This means ensuring any work we do progresses our aims of helping protect the birds and other animals of the uplands, in particular the hen harrier and other raptors, by raising public awareness of wildlife crime and other issues related to use of the uplands for driven grouse shooting.

We do so mainly by supporting Hen Harrier Day events organised locally, mostly in early August and delivering our own online Skydancer Day in May, with footage of hen harriers in the wild and interviews with people who work in the field. We also run a Young Wild Writer competition, filmmaker competition, have social media channels and produce this newsletter. We distribute this work across the team, but we are looking for someone who has a few hours a

month to help us with it. This might involve creating content (for the website, Skydancer Day, social media, the newsletter and/or Hen Harrier Day organisers). Other activities could include developing links with other organisations, developing campaigns and finding new ways of engaging more people. The Trustees meet online every other month.

If this sounds like something you'd be interested in, please send us a brief statement (maximum one page of A4) telling us a little about yourself and why you'd like to join the Board. There is no particular background or qualification we're looking for, just a willingness to help out with running the charity.

Update on our tagged birds

Charlie was quite active in September around the border between Scotland and England, moving around between Galloway and the Borders. Macha is in Cumbria, while Iris is in Sutherland.

What's involved in tagging a hen harrier?

Last year we raised funds for three satellite tags that were fitted to hen harriers in the UK this summer. We're very grateful to everyone who donated and thought we'd share a little bit of the process. Our Chair, Dr Cathleen Thomas, coordinated the largest tagging programme for hen harriers in Europe whilst she was leading the RSPB's Hen Harrier LIFE project and tells us a little bit about how it all works.

Once the funds are raised to pay for the tags, an order can be placed to have them manufactured. Each tag is custom-made to the correct specification to produce a 9g tag, which can be a lengthy process, depending on how many tags need to be manufactured. They are then shipped to the UK where they are checked by experts to ensure they are fully charged and emitting a signal – the tags that were fitted to Charlie, Iris and Macha broadcast to satellites circling the Earth, so we have to ensure they are functioning correctly before they are fitted to the birds. The order is usually placed in spring so the tags will be received in time for the start of the summer.

During April, raptor workers and upland land owners and managers start to watch out for hen harriers moving to their breeding sites, monitoring locations up and down the country. Displaying (skydancing) birds are observed from a distance and potential nesting locations are recorded. Not all of the birds will breed successfully for a number of reasons, including weather conditions, presence of predators, food availability or sometimes they are deliberately deterred from settling and building a nest. Sadly, despite legal protection, some nests are destroyed by local land managers.

By mid-May we usually have a good idea of where nests with incubating birds are, often when a male is providing food to a female (or sometimes two!) and calls her off the nest. It's quite amazing scanning the horizon with your binoculars waiting for the males to come in with food and then watching the food pass. The female flies up to the male, turns upside down and he must pass the food to her in mid-air - they're such agile birds!

While there are eggs in the nest, the female alone incubates them, depending entirely on the male for food. She will occasionally leave the nest briefly to stretch her wings, but not for too long so the eggs don't get cold or predated. Hen harriers complete their clutch over several days, so the eggs will hatch asynchronously (i.e. they don't all hatch at the same time).

The progress of the breeding attempt can be monitored from a distance once the chicks have hatched. Any check of a nest to establish the age and development of the chicks can only be made by a licensed raptor worker.

Satellite tags are usually fitted to the chicks when they are around 28/29 days old, within a few days of fledging. Quite rightly, this activity is strictly regulated and, since this work can only be carried out by one of a handful of specially trained and licensed taggers, this time of year is very busy for them. You can imagine that it can be quite complicated putting together schedules that allow the right people to visit the nest on the right day with the right-sized tag. Too early and the chicks will be too small to tag, but too late and they may already have fledged. Throughout this process, the bird's welfare is given the highest priority.

Once the tags are fitted they continue to transmit data to the satellites, which can then be downloaded on a computer. The transmissions are checked every day to make sure the tags are still transmitting and the birds are still moving around. This continues every day of their life so it is a long-term commitment! The tags will continue to work for at least five years, but the sad reality is that most hen harriers do not live that long. Some of them die quite soon after leaving the nest because they aren't very good at hunting - stakes are high for young hen harriers out on their own in the world. They need to hunt enough food to survive and get them through the winter. Fortunately, it seems that if they manage to do that and make it through their first winter, they have a good chance of surviving to breeding age.

Any tagged birds that die of natural causes (such as illness, starvation, predation) are usually found due to the location data transmitted by the tag, and the birds are sent to a veterinary pathologist for a post-mortem. The tags that are recovered can be serviced and reused, fitted to chicks the following summer. Unfortunately, however, a significant proportion of hen harriers are illegally killed, usually on land intensively managed for driven grouse shooting. One of the key indicators of this is a sudden, inexplicable cessation in the transmission of data from a bird's tag. Satellite tags are incredibly reliable, so a sudden stop in transmissions from a tag that has been functioning well is highly suspicious. These birds are usually never located, and their tags are lost as well, never to be heard from again.

The tagging process involves lots of different steps and the

coordination of lots of different people, which makes it quite complicated, but tagging hen harrier chicks tells us a lot about the lives of these individuals, where they go, how far they can travel, what time of day they move around, and where they spend their summers and winters. We look forward to following the lives of Iris, Charlie and Macha.

News roundup

New UK Government - new environment policy

Wildlife and environmental groups are extremely alarmed at the implications of the change of prime minister. The new administration announced plans to repeal all EU environmental regulation and to introduce at least 38 'Investment Zones' in which planning restrictions would be scrapped – and these zones could be in national parks, SSSIs and other sensitive habitats. In addition, it's far from clear if the previous administration's plan to bring in a farming policy for which public funding would be linked to environmental benefits will still go ahead.

The RSPB has launched an [e-action](#) for you to contact your MP. They have also produced [guidance on how to respond](#) if your MP replies

People's Plan for Nature

The RSPB is also inviting responses to help put together a [People's Plan for Nature](#). They want to know:

- What you love about nature in the UK and what you'd miss if it disappeared,
- What would be different to the current situation in a UK in which nature is thriving in 2050, and
- What exciting examples you have seen of people working together to restore and protect nature in the UK.

contributions are invited by 30 October.

Progress on grouse moor licensing in Scotland

The Scottish Government has committed to introducing legislation to license grouse shooting in the next parliament, i.e. by June 2023, which is extremely good news. We now await the publication of the draft Bill or a consultation document.

Anti-snare demonstration

The OneKind demo which we told you about last month was postponed due to the death of the Queen. It has now been rescheduled for 29 October at noon; when it will be combined with a League Against Cruel Sports demonstration to urge the Scottish Government to make sure it closes all loopholes on foxhunting in the legislation it published earlier this year.

Derbyshire Wildlife Trust - Fight for Flight

Derbyshire Wildlife Trust are inviting contributions to two artistic endeavours on this theme by the end of October. The first is the third in their successful series of Secret Postcard Art Auctions. The second is a creative writing competition for children aged seven to 17. Details [here](#).

Support us: support hen harriers

Many thanks to all the supporters who have once again been so generous in supporting our work. As ever, the encouragement it gives us is at least equal to

the monetary value of the donation. So we always welcome donations, especially new regular contributions. To make a donation, click [here](#), (if eligible please click the Gift Aid box too).

You can still buy the Stronghill song premiered on Skydancer Day [here](#) – Stronghill have very generously donated all the proceeds to us and we are very grateful.

Hen Harrier Action

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