



Hen Harrier Action: August 2022 Newsletter

Welcome to our August 2022 newsletter. This is always a bittersweet month, as the start of the driven grouse-shooting season overshadows everything else. But there are good things to report - the Walk for Harriers, our satellite-tagged hen harrier chicks, the success of the second Tarras Valley buyout - and the talents of more young wild writers to celebrate.



Hen Harrier Action News



Hen Harrier Fest

Several of us were at Wild Justice's Hen Harrier Fest. Cathleen Thomas and Indy Greene both spoke - Cathleen on behalf of Hen Harrier Action and Indy as a goshawk enthusiast. Gill Lewis announced the winners of our Young Wild Writers competition. Andrea Hudspeth, Paul Samuels and Gill staffed our stall, next to Ian Cooper, who was there

representing ospreys (and, very importantly given the weather, supplied the gazebo!). This isn't a report of the day, more our personal reflections.

It was a day of celebration and reflection on how far we have come, and a renewal of energy for what still needs to be done to protect the future of the iconic hen harrier – the ultimate symbol of much-needed change. We found it a very uplifting experience – good to see so many braving the weather to make their voices heard in support of threatened wildlife.

It was lovely to be meeting in person again, after being restricted to online gatherings for so long. Around two-thirds of the audience hadn't been to such an event before. And, as well as these many new faces, we greatly enjoyed catching up with friends and stalwart supporters.

Announcing the 2022 Young Wild Writers was Gill's highlight. As she says, words have the power to change hearts and minds; they inform, engage, enrage and empower people. Young voices calling for change need to be heard. The future ecologists, town planners, politicians, scientists, etc., must have the natural world at the core of all their decision making. We were delighted that Emily could join us and read her prose on the stage – to great applause.

Cathleen used her time on the stage to remind us all how much we have achieved over the last three years, despite the difficulties posed by Covid. Afterwards, the number of people who came to chat to us at our stand to offer help, congratulations and just to learn more about us, was so uplifting. We spoke to some lovely people, many of whom we had never met before. It was fantastic to witness just how switched on the public are becoming to the issues in our countryside and testament to how important partnership working is. A great day was had by all, and the rain didn't dampen spirits.

We're also very grateful to all the people who came forward with offers of help for Hen Harrier Action. Thank you all for your patience while we work through contacting everyone.

Were you there? What did you think? Email us at info@henharrierday.uk or let us know on social media.

Photo by Paul Samuels

“Walk for Harriers” by Andrea Goddard



Despite early and determined plans to hold numerous on-the-ground Hen Harrier Day events this summer, sadly, none of real substance came to fruition. It seems an element of post-Covid event wariness pervades the consciousness of many past and present event organisers. We attended the excellent Hen Harrier Fest hosted by Wild Justice, which, except for the rain, would have been hard to top, but, ultimately, after some last-minute emails we were left with just the one event to promote: our very first 'Walk for Harriers' organised by myself and Trudi Clarke up in the Highlands of Scotland on 6 August. An area with plenty of upland estates and a dark history of wildlife crime to boot.

The premise of the walk was to bring Hen Harrier Day up onto the moors and to physically show attendees some of the management practices employed by some upland estates to maximise red grouse for shooting. Rather than discuss upland issues in an enclosed hotel conference suite or featureless field far removed from the uplands, we thought the message would be much more powerful if the issues were right there for people to see for themselves. And so it proved to be.

The morning dawned with persistent rain and we really didn't know how many people would turn up - not a good omen. But as we arrived at the rendezvous car park in Grantown-on-Spey we were delighted to see a large group waiting to be given onward instruction. By 11am approximately 35 people had gathered; we organised who was jumping into whose car and maps were issued for us to drive a little further on to the walk itself. The rain had eased and off we went.

At a nearby grouse moor, we parked up and headed up onto the hill. Max Wiszniewski, campaign manager for the Revive Coalition, spoke about his campaign for upland reform and ending the circle of destruction. After lunch, Ian Thomson, Head of Investigations at RSPB Scotland, spoke about raptor persecution and the environmentally damaging management strategies we were seeing all around us. We stopped periodically to speak about muirburn, crow traps and mammal traps, and saw a few exciting bird species. The star was a glorious young male hen harrier, though we worried for his safety on

this particular moor given its history of raptor persecution.

Overall, although the topics of discussion were serious, we did all have fun and enjoyed meeting one another from our various walks of life. We have since had some great feedback from attendees to say how much they got out of the walk, and other organisers too expressed how they would love to do something similar next year in their own areas. So, keep an eye out for other 'Walk for Harrier' events for Hen Harrier Day next summer if you fancy joining in and seeing first-hand what really goes on in the hills.

Photo by Andrea Hudspeth

Our satellite-tagged birds





Our nest camera plans were tragically cut short, but we now have three satellite-tagged hen harriers exploring England and Scotland! All were tagged by the RSPB alongside licensed taggers.

One tag was fitted to a male bird named Charlie, who was tagged at the newly created Tarras Valley Nature Reserve in the Scottish Borders. The others were fitted to females named Macha, after the Celtic goddess of war, and Iris, after the Greek goddess of the sky. Macha and Iris were tagged in northern England and northern Scotland respectively.

We're incredibly grateful to everyone who made this possible by donating to our Crowdfunder, as well as the raptor workers and taggers who monitored the birds and fitted the tags. And we're looking forward to see where our birds go as they fledge from their nest sites and make their way out into the world. We very much hope that they don't meet the same fate as many of their species, illegally killed near land managed for driven grouse shooting. But at least we'll know where and when they disappear, unlike with most of the hen harrier chicks fledged this year who haven't been tagged.

The next UK-wide hen harrier population survey is due to take place in 2023, which will shed further light on the current welfare of the species.

Young Wild Writers 2022



A huge thank you to all the brilliant young writers who entered Young Wild Writers 2022. The theme this year was Animal Journeys, and we had many wonderful entries, on species from ants to peregrines and snakes to swallows. The standard of writing was very high and it's fantastic to see these writers of the future emerging with such confident voices.

As ever it was hard to judge, but three winners emerged in each category:

The winner of the Young Category (5-8 years old) is Sky Kwok (8) with her poem "Swallow's Journey Above the Earth". The judges loved Sky's acrostic poem. There is the simplicity of observation and wonder within the rhythm of the words. It made the judges want to stop and look up and consider the swallows' journeys.

The winner of the Junior Category (9-12) is Henry Gill (11) - "We Run" The judges really enjoyed Henry's piece of writing about wolves. Henry effectively uses all the wolf's senses to help us imagine what it is to be a wolf and understand the threats they face from humans. The short sentence structure built the tension, as we ran with the wolves, stopping and listening, stopping and watching.

Writing that helps us build empathy with animals helps to change the narrative around animals, especially those, like wolves, that have been demonised in literature.

The winner of the Senior Category and the overall winner of the competition (13-16) is Emily Hunt (15) with her prose piece "To the Roost".

The judges were incredibly impressed with Emily's lyrical piece of

writing about jackdaws. Corvids are often demonised, and many seen as vermin. But Emily's prose helps us to see the world from the jackdaw's perspective – a real bird's-eye view. We feel we are an individual jackdaw as well as part of the flock. The writing achieved a sense of movement, of being swept along on the rollercoaster ride of the swoops and turns and the “rotating mandala” of flight. The writing explores the theme of journey through the life of a jackdaw and also their physical journey: “learn navigation by hawthorn and ash, the slight twists of the brook”.

Emily is certainly a writer to watch for the future. You can find more about her, and her writing here – Twitter @em_nature and on her blog <https://emilyjanehunt.wixsite.com/natureblog>.

You can read all three pieces in the attachment to this newsletter.

News roundup

Avian flu

You're probably already aware of the terrible impact that avian flu has had on wild bird populations this year, with seabird colonies particularly badly hit.

Its presence has been confirmed on Bass Rock, home to the world's largest gannet colony. Over 1,000 great skuas have been confirmed dead in Shetland and Orkney; their breeding colonies, numbering just under 10,000 birds, represent 60% of the world population. It has also reached Coquet Island, off the Northumberland coast, which is home to the UK's only roseate tern colony. Two-thirds of the roseate tern chicks have already been lost, as well as many sandwich, arctic and common terns. And on the Farne Islands, more than 5,000 birds of different species have died, with guillemots and kittiwakes particularly affected.

This is a disease that evolves in intensively-reared poultry which then spreads to wild populations. The current strain is particularly deadly and has led to the worst outbreak ever seen in the UK.

This has had an impact on partridge and pheasant shooting, as most of the chicks reared for shooting are imported from France. A spring outbreak of bird flu in France, combined with new rules resulting from Brexit, has prevented their import in time for this year's shooting season (which starts on 1 October for pheasants and 1 September for partridges and ducks) and led to a number of shoots being cancelled.

Since then, the RSPB has called for Defra to place a moratorium on all releases of pheasants, partridges and ducks to avoid further transmission to wild bird populations after the start of the shooting season. At the time of publication, Defra hadn't done so.

The staggering number of non-native gamebirds released in the UK each year

This links neatly to a recently published [scientific study](#), which estimated the biomass of released non-native common pheasant and red-legged partridge compared to that of the UK's wild birds. This is obviously difficult to do, as populations fluctuate year on year and

within the year. You might think that the number of non-native birds released into the countryside for shooting would be regulated, or at least officially recorded, but it isn't.

In 2016, it was estimated that 39–57 million common pheasants and 8.1–13 million red-legged partridges were released. This number has grown roughly seven-fold since the 1960s, as game shooting became a commercial industry. In parallel, the population of the native grey partridge declined by 88% in the 40 years prior to 2006.

Pheasant numbers peak in August, when most are released. And the paper estimates that, in this month, the combined weights of all those pheasants and red-legged partridges is greater than that of the UK's wild bird population. In fact, pheasants make up 48.8% on their own. This is simply astounding. In terms of competition for food alone, this huge number of non-native birds must have a significant impact on wild bird populations. And all so a few rich folk can enjoy killing them!

Tarras Valley Nature Reserve (TVNR)

In happier news, the TVNR reached their target to buy the second tranche of land from the Buccleuch estate on 5 August. This is excellent news for wildlife and people in that part of the world. We're especially delighted as TVNR is where Charlie was born – one of 13 hen harrier chicks fledged there this year.

A date for your diaries (if you live in Scotland)

OneKind are holding a [demonstration](#) at the Scottish parliament at 11.30am on 17 September, calling for a ban on snares in Scotland.

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 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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