



Hen Harrier Action: July 2023 Newsletter

Hen Harrier broods should now be well advanced in the nest, jealously guarded by the female, and the first true feathers will be starting to show on the young birds. It is around this time that specially trained and licensed taggers will be fitting satellite tags to chicks, at 28/29 days old.

You can read more about the satellite tagging process in a fascinating article from our Chair, Dr Cathleen Thomas, below and [on the website](#).



Hen Harrier Action News

A huge response to our 2023 Young Wild Writers Competition

This year's Young Wild Writers Competition attracted over 300 entries, and our thanks go to all the parents and teachers who encouraged their children to have a go and to all the young people who entered.

The competition has now closed, and author Gill Lewis is busy co-ordinating the judging of all the entries in the three categories, Young, Junior and Senior.

The standard of the entries was very high, and we're looking forward to publishing the results and the winning submissions on the 12th August.

Keep an eye on [the page on our website](#) for the results of this year's competition.

2023 satellite tagging is under way

Once again Hen Harrier Action is funding a number of satellite tags this year.

We had news earlier this month that the first bird, a young female, has been tagged at an undisclosed site in Scotland. We do not reveal location details, for obvious reasons, until well after the birds have successfully fledged and moved away from the area.

Look out for more details in next month's newsletter when we'll be revealing all the birds we have tagged this year, and how we will be using this invaluable data to support conservation efforts.

We're delighted to have been chosen by ShareGift for a donation

We receive many donations, large and small, from members of the public all around the country who support our work. Every single one is much appreciated and put to good use protecting Hen Harriers and acting to improve upland biodiversity.

We were contacted by independent UK registered charity ShareGift earlier this month with news of a significant donation. To date ShareGift has donated over £45 million to more than 3,500 charities. ShareGift make their grants based upon research and suggestions from donors.

So we were delighted to hear that ShareGift has made an unrestricted grant of £1,000 to Hen Harrier Action.

You can help support Hen Harrier Action's work by donating any size of shareholdings you may have to ShareGift and mentioning that you support us. ShareGift works by collecting together small lots of shares until there are enough to sell and then donating the resulting proceeds to a wide range of charities and charitable causes. For more information on ShareGift go to www.sharegift.org.



What's involved in tagging a Hen Harrier?

Each year Hen Harrier Action funds several satellite tags that are fitted to Hen Harriers in the UK during the summer. Last year, with your generous help we funded three satellite tags that were fitted to a male, Charlie, and two females, Iris and Macha. Sadly, only one of the three birds, Macha, has survived to this year, and continues to transmit.

However, the tracking data provided by these tags is priceless, and helps to inform studies, reports, and future conservation strategies for Hen Harriers. For example, the recent study co-authored by HHA Chair Cathleen Thomas that used data from active and recovered tags to estimate survival rates and causes of mortality.

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 must 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 Summer.

During April, raptor workers and upland landowners 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 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 this year's tagged Hen Harriers.

News roundup

Hen Harrier persecution featured on Springwatch this week

Two investigative films featured on Week Two of Springwatch. In Episode 5, BBC correspondent and President of the BTO Frank Gardner, heads to Cumbria to investigate Hen Harrier persecution.

In Episode 6, Frank is in Norfolk interviewing Mark Thomas, head of the RSPB Investigations Team, who reveals some shocking facts on raptor persecution and the efforts to prosecute those responsible.

You can watch these and other episodes on the [BBC iPlayer](#).

The RSPB Hen Harrier Survey 2023 needs your sightings

The 2023 survey is well under way, with dozens of fieldworkers and volunteers logging sightings and nests. The RSPB is asking for any sightings to be reported, making a note of the date, time, and location. Sightings can be reported to henharriers@rspb.org.uk or you can call on **0845 460 1021**.

Channel 4 News features the new report on illegal killing

The new scientific study published in **Biological Conservation**, co-authored by HHA's Cathleen Thomas, featured in an excellent 4-minute slot on the 10th of May.

Chief Correspondent Alex Thomson reported from Geltsdale in the North Pennines, noting that *"The report adds to already overwhelming data from Government, Police, conservation bodies and video footage, that illegally killing Hen Harriers because they sometimes kill Red Grouse remains the key reason for their rarity, despite 70 years of legal protection."*

You can [watch the report here](#).

Get involved

If you're thinking of holding an event for Hen Harrier Day in early August, whether large or small, please get in touch by emailing info@henharrierdays.uk

We can help you organise and promote the event, and there is plenty of advice on our [website](#).

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).

Hen Harrier Action

Website: henharrierday.uk

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