



Spring/Summer 2008

News

Welcome

Welcome to the spring 2008 issue of the North Pennines Black Grouse Recovery Project newsletter. I am delighted to report that black grouse numbers in northern England continue to increase with our sample surveys in spring 2007 showing an 18% increase from 2006, with the population now estimated to be 1,200 males. This exceeds our Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) objective of 1,000 males by 2010. This good news, however, was dampened by the wet summer weather in 2007 which resulted in an extremely poor breeding year for black grouse (see page 2).

Having already met and surpassed our first BAP objective, we shall now be concentrating efforts on the second target of expanding their range from 43 to 48 occupied 10km grid squares by 2010. This is a challenging target and to achieve this goal our work during this next key phase will focus on targeting key areas for habitat enhancements, the translocation trial and excitingly, the launch of the UK's first landowner and farmer-led black grouse group.

Philip Warren
Project Officer

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Greyhen. © Jez Kalkowski.

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Keeping count

An essential part of our work is monitoring the English black grouse population. This is achieved by surveying the numbers of displaying males in spring at a sample of sites annually, with full coverage every four years. The next full survey is planned for spring 2010. In addition, brood counts are undertaken every summer to assess breeding success.

Monitoring is crucial to the effort in conserving black grouse. Only by having

good information about where the birds are can we know where to target management, and success can only be measured if we know how many birds there are, and whether numbers are increasing.

Black grouse chicks were at the mercy of the weather in 2007.



Lek counts continue to show promising increases!

In spring 2007 we surveyed 70% of the English population, which involved visiting their traditional mating or lek sites each morning at dawn to count the number of males present. The results indicated an 18% increase in the number of males attending these leks since the national survey in 2006! From these latest figures the English population is now estimated to be around 1,200 males, a 55% increase since 1998 when the population was just 773 males. Numbers have increased since last year by 17% in the North Pennines AONB, the black grouse stronghold in England.

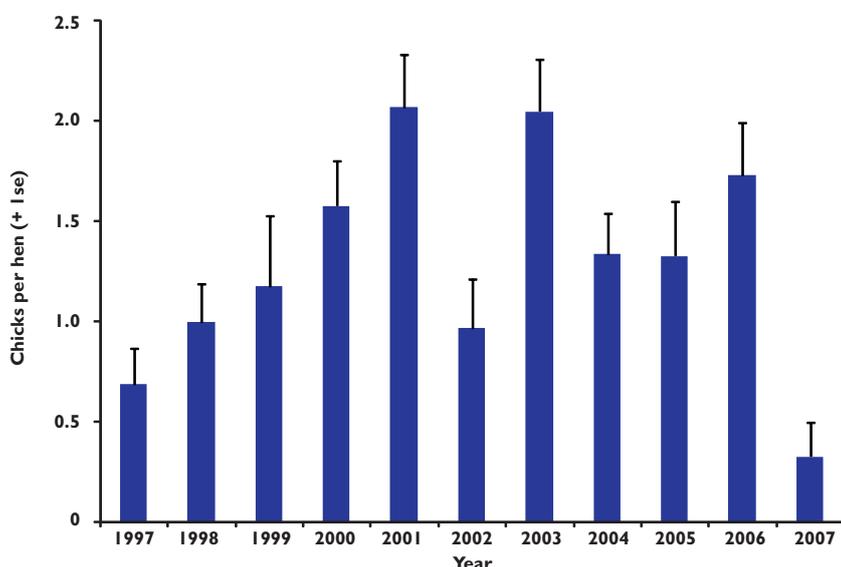
The largest increase was seen on the southern fringe of the range within the Yorkshire Dales, where the population has trebled from 58 males in 1998 to 170 males in 2007. Despite these increases in the North Pennines and the Yorkshire Dales, black grouse in north Northumberland have remained stable.

This remarkable come-back is a huge achievement for those involved in the Black Grouse Recovery Project, including many farmers, gamekeepers and grouse moor managers.

Worst breeding year since 1993!

The breeding success in northern England is monitored every summer by systematically working pointing dogs to find and flush black grouse broods (see Figure 1). Black grouse bred very poorly in 2007, the worst since 1993, with an average of 0.3 chicks per hen recorded, with only one in five hens having a brood. This was largely due to the cold, wet weather in June, which coincided with the chicks peak hatch. The weather is a major factor influencing breeding success, which we cannot control. However, we can improve breeding success by ensuring grazing pressure on the moor fringe, the key breeding habitat, is at a level to promote a sward that is diverse in both structure and composition. This will provide good nesting and brood-rearing cover, as well as an abundance of insects, especially sawfly larvae which are essential for chick survival. Predation by stoats has also been shown to be an important factor affecting breeding success. Therefore, in conjunction with habitat improvements, we encourage targeted predator control in key black grouse breeding habitats.

Figure 1 The breeding success of black grouse (chicks per hen) in August in northern England from 1997 to 2007.



How to help black grouse

The main emphasis of our work is to encourage farmers and landowners to improve the conditions for black grouse on their land. Landowners and managers with estates and farms that lie adjacent to, or within the current range of black grouse, can contact us for a FREE site assessment. Please contact Phil Warren (see page 4 for contact details).

Expanding the range: translocation trial update

Kim Anderton, Project Assistant

The key objective of our work is to expand the range of black grouse. Our research has shown that range expansion may be restricted by the low dispersal rates of male black grouse. Juvenile females disperse on average 9km from their place of birth while juvenile males move on average less than 1km. Therefore, in addition to our work on the fringe of the range enhancing the network of suitable habitats, we have instigated a translocation trial. This trial commenced in winter 2006/07 and was instigated to assess whether we could establish new lekking groups by transferring surplus males from the core population into suitable habitat on the fringe of the range. Funding was received from the Sita Trust to undertake the trial and to assess whether this is a feasible technique to deliver the BAP objective of range expansion in northern England.

Preliminary results

Thirteen males were moved in winter 2006/07 to two release sites, five (three adults and two juveniles) to a site in County Durham and eight (all adults) to the release site in North Yorkshire (see Figure 2).

County Durham release site

Two of the adult males returned back to their capture sites 6km away, one within four days of release and the other after three months in mid-February. Conversely, the two released juveniles were observed lekking together throughout the spring, 2.5km from the release location, and furthermore a female was recorded with a brood within 300 metres of this new lek site.

North Yorkshire release site

One adult returned 14km back to its capture site, while the others remained near the release area (range 1.5-9.7km) and were observed lekking throughout the spring, mostly individually. However, one male was observed lekking with two untagged males, in the presence of two females, 8km from the release site in early May. No mortality was recorded until August and since then four adult males have been recovered, but their cause of death



To help expand the range of black grouse we moved surplus males to two release sites to see if we could establish new lekking groups.

could not be ascertained.

The preliminary results from this trial demonstrate that males need to be moved at least 15km from their capture location otherwise they may return. Furthermore, the initial results suggest that juvenile males may be more likely to establish leks close to the release site.

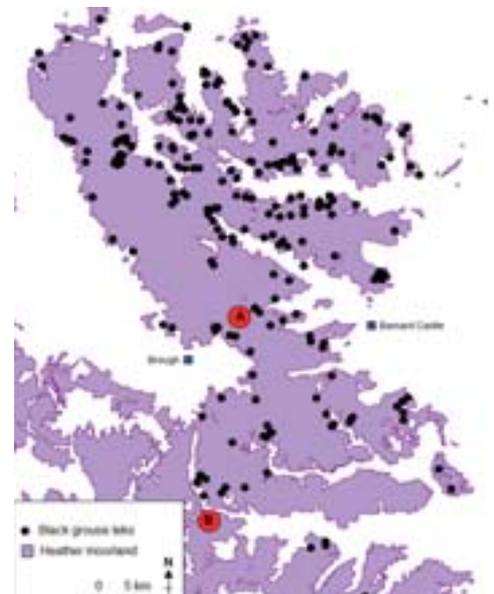
What's next?

The poor breeding success recorded in 2007 will have severely limited natural

recruitment and has subsequently affected the 2007/08 release programme. Originally, it was intended to move similar numbers of juveniles and adults to the release areas, but too few juveniles were available. Consequently, a further nine males have been released in winter 2007 to supplement numbers and it is planned to release 10 juvenile males to each site this coming autumn.

Figure 2

Location of the release sites in County Durham (A) and in North Yorkshire (B).





Our new black grouse group aims to help increase numbers and expand the range of black grouse in the Yorkshire Dales. © Laurie Campbell

National news

Yorkshire Dales Black Grouse Group

Summer 2008 will see the launch of the first UK black grouse group, in the Yorkshire Dales. This new group is to be comprised of farmers and landowners who are interested in conserving black grouse. The group will meet twice a year to discuss best practice and management, to help to increase the numbers and range of black grouse in this region. We have successfully used a similar method to deliver the grey partridge BAP and it is hoped that this group will have similar successes. If anyone is interested in participating in the Yorkshire Dales Black

Grouse Group please do get in touch (contact details can be found adjacent).

UK black grouse endemic to the British Isles

Black grouse in Britain is the sub-species *Tetrao tetrix britannicus*, which is endemic to the British Isles. All BAP targets strictly relate to this sub-species. This has implications for any release programmes, as it is important to conserve our endemic species. Therefore, any stock to be released has to be sourced from British birds or their eggs.

Don't shoot, I'm a black grouse!

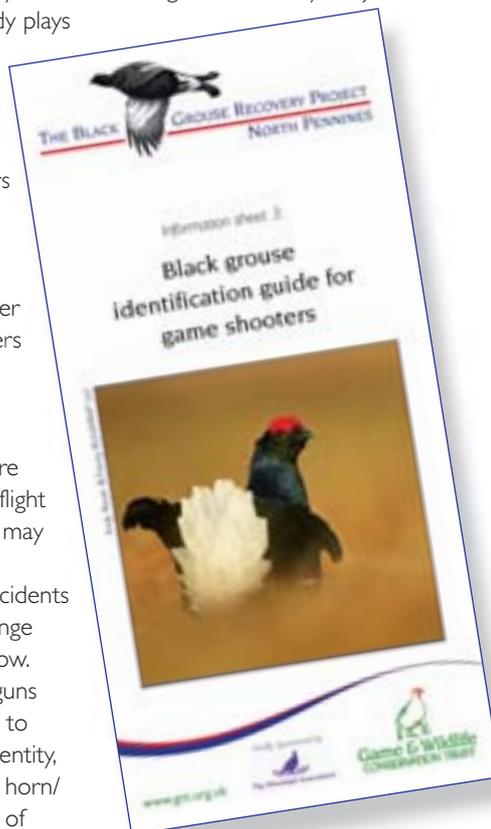
The numbers of black grouse in northern England are increasing, but the population is still severely contracted. To enable range expansion, every black grouse counts.

Game management, as practised by gamekeepers on grouse moors, already plays an important role in safeguarding black grouse in England with approximately 90% of the remaining black grouse population in northern England found on the fringes of moors managed for red grouse shooting. Estates already practise a voluntary moratorium on the shooting of black grouse, however, sportsmen can further play their part by reducing the numbers of accidents which occur through mistaken identity.

It is for this reason that we have produced guidelines to provide a more accurate identification of the birds in flight and to inform guns that black grouse may be present.

It is particularly important that accidents are minimised on the fringe of the range where numbers of black grouse are low. This can be helped by ensuring that guns are briefed adequately on shoot days to reduce accidents through mistaken identity, and through the implementation of a horn/whistle system to signal the presence of

black grouse, which some shoots have successfully adopted. Should black grouse be shot many estates operate a fining system with proceeds going towards the costs of running the Recovery Project.



The Black Grouse Recovery Project is a partnership between the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, Natural England, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Ministry of Defence, Northumbrian Water and the North Pennines AONB Partnership.

The Project Newsletter is sent periodically to supporters of the project.

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Black grouse identification guide for game shooters is kindly sponsored by the Moorland Association. Copies are available free of charge from the Project Officer on 01833 622208.