

THE
BLACK



GROUSE RECOVERY PROJECT
NORTH PENNINES

NEWS

Spring 2007

Welcome



An example of new native woodland established in the Yorkshire Dales with the needs of black grouse incorporated.

Project extension, new partners and a new assistant

In 2006 the Black Grouse Recovery Project celebrated both the completion of 10 years and secured funding for a five year extension. Through this period, with the help and support of land managers, farmers, gamekeepers and Government agencies, the decline of black grouse in northern England has been stemmed. Numbers of black grouse are now on the increase, but their range is still severely contracted. The next phase of the project is to meet the key objective of range expansion. Funding for the next five years of the project has been secured from the existing partners; The Game Conservancy Trust, Natural England, Ministry of Defence, the RSPB and Northumbrian Water and two new funders, the North Pennines AONB Partnership and the Sita Trust. This funding has been sufficient both to secure my position and to employ an assistant, Kim Anderton. Kim graduated from Stirling University with a BSc in Conservation Management and worked as a field assistant for The Game Conservancy Trust on the Upland Predation Experiment at Otterburn before joining.

Phil Warren
Project Officer

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Ministry of
Defence



NORTH PENNINES AONB PARTNERSHIP
Working together for the North Pennines



THE GAME
CONSERVANCY
TRUST



The number of males has increased to over 1,000!

An essential component of the project's work is monitoring the black grouse population. This is achieved by counting males at display sites in spring known as 'leks' and counting females with chicks using pointing dogs in the summer.

Lek counts - English national survey

Every four years the project monitors the English population of black grouse by counting males. Results from these surveys show that the English population has increased from 773 males in 1998 to 1,029 males in 2006, which equates to an annual increase of 4% per year; with their range increasing from 74 occupied 5-km grid squares in 1998 to 93 in 2006. Black grouse in England are now found in three main areas, the North Pennines AONB,

Yorkshire Dales and north-west Northumberland (see Figure 1):

North Pennines AONB

The North Pennines AONB is the stronghold for black grouse in England with 82% of the remaining black grouse found here in 2006. The population here is robust in both range and numbers, with annual increases in numbers of 3% since 1998 and an increase in range from 50 occupied 5-km grid squares in 1998 to 66 in 2006.

Yorkshire Dales

This population is responding to improvements to moor fringe habitats through reduced grazing and predator control undertaken by moorland

gamekeepers. Numbers have increased from 58 males in 1998 to 138 in 2006, a 15% per annum increase in numbers with a small increase in range from 12 to 15 occupied 5-km squares between 1998 and 2006.

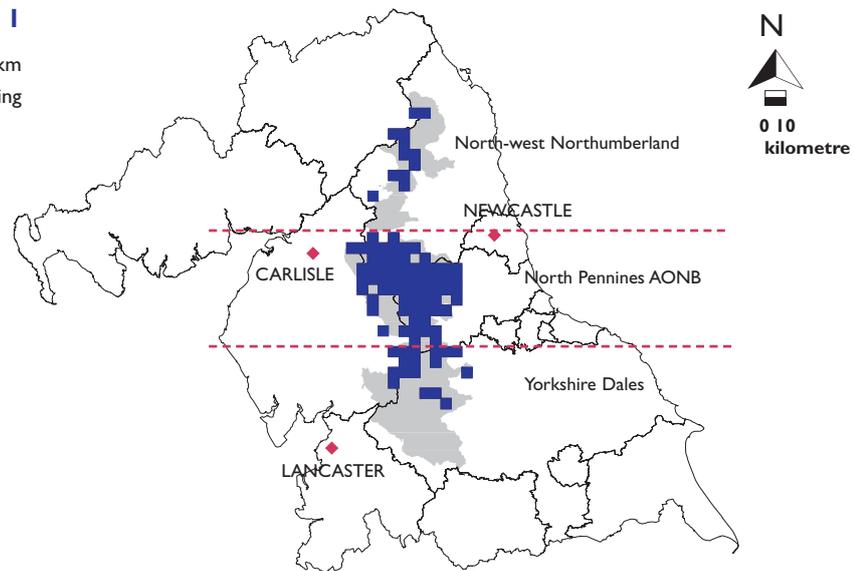
North-west Northumberland

Black grouse in this region are seriously threatened, with numbers declining from 101 males in 2002 to 50 males in 2006, with the population becoming increasingly isolated from the core North Pennines population. On a brighter note, work instigated through moorland managers comprising the North Cheviot Black Grouse Group has seen an increase in numbers, with 10 males recorded in 2006.

Figure 1
The distribution of black grouse within 5-km grid squares in spring

Presence of black grouse leks ■

Lines dividing the three main areas - - -



UK survey results and new Biodiversity Action Plan targets

As reported above, the decline of black grouse in England has been stemmed, with numbers now increasing. Despite these encouraging increases in England, black grouse at a UK level are still severely threatened. Results from a UK survey of black grouse in 2005 reported a continuing overall decline in numbers. In Scotland, currently home to 75% of the remaining UK population, a 29% overall

decline in numbers since 1995/6 has been recorded, with the decline being most severe in south-east Scotland (69%) and south-west Scotland (49%).

In 2006 the UK Biodiversity Action Plan targets for black grouse were revised. In Scotland and Wales the targets were set to stem the decline and prevent further range contraction. In England meanwhile, the targets were set to

increase the numbers to 1,000 males and the range from 42 occupied 10-km grid squares to 48 occupied by 2010. This is a challenging target and we have developed the next five years of the recovery project to facilitate this through a targeted advisory programme and the translocation trial.

Brood counts

Breeding success is monitored every summer by systematically working pointing dogs to find and flush black grouse broods. Our research has shown that in northern England black grouse breed relatively poorly compared with other parts of their UK range, with hens producing on average only 1.5 chicks

each (see Figure 2). After hatching, hens take their broods to feed among the tall grasses, rushes and heathland shrubs that are found on the moor fringe. Therefore, to improve breeding success, management advice is targeted at enhancing this moor fringe habitat by ensuring that grazing is at a level to

promote a sward that is diverse in both structure and composition. Predation pressure has also been shown to be an important factor affecting breeding success, particularly by stoats and weasels. Thus, in conjunction with habitat improvements, we encourage predator control.

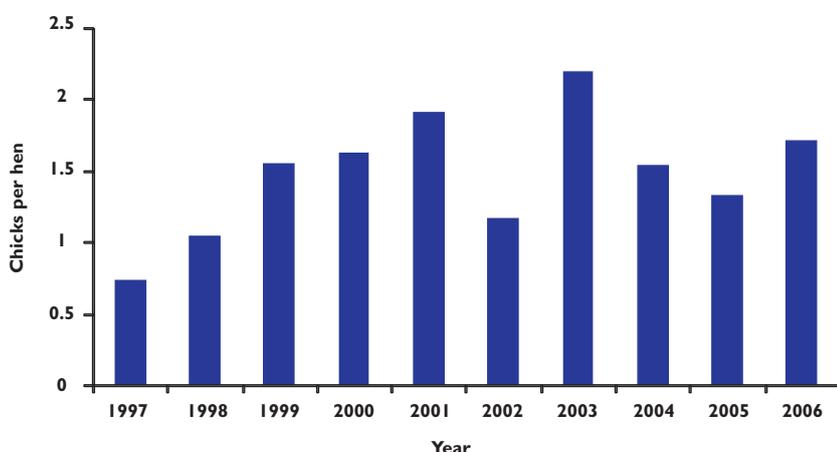


Figure 2

The breeding success of black grouse (chicks per hen) in northern England from 1997 to 2006

Translocation trial

The Black Grouse Recovery Project has delivered its primary objective: to stem the decline of black grouse in England. However, the range is still small with 63% of the English population confined to just three North Pennine Dales; Teesdale, Weardale and South Tynedale.

Our next objective is to expand the range of black grouse. Our research has found that range expansion may be restricted by the dispersal patterns of black grouse. Juvenile females disperse on average 9 km from their natal site compared with less than 1 km recorded in males. Thus on the fringe of the black grouse range, females are seen in new areas where there are no males present. Therefore, to promote range expansion, we have started a translocation trial, funded by Sita Trust, which involves establishing leks by moving males. We are

moving males from donor sites in the core of the range to establish two new leks on the southern fringe of their range. We chose the release sites carefully according to whether they:

- Contain a mosaic of suitable habitats.
- Have full-time gamekeepers operating.
- Are close (<10 km) to known black grouse populations, ie. females likely to colonise naturally.

This is only a trial and we look forward to updating you on its progress in forthcoming issues before we can recommend it as a management technique. To date, we have moved 11 males and equipped them with radio transmitters so that we can monitor their movements, behaviour and survival.

Free advisory visits

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. We then provide advice on how to manage the land for black grouse and who to approach for grant aid. Please contact Phil Warren on 01833 622208.

Mature sitka spruce plantations

Many upland estates have mature conifer woodlands on their moor or moor fringe. Some are timber resources or habitats for red squirrels. However, many are planted on sites that are difficult or uneconomic to harvest, have limited

biodiversity value and are at a considerable threat from wind blow. These woodlands may be a potential management/financial headache for the landowner, but they have the potential to create excellent conditions for black grouse.

Case study at Wellhope Forest, Cowhill, Upper Weardale

Wellhope Forest was planted with sitka spruce in the 1960s on 150 ha of upland grassland and moorland used as extensive sheep grazing. When established it was a haven for black grouse, but with canopy closure they disappeared. In 1998 no birds were found in either the forest or adjoining moor.

In 2000, the Weardale Estate embarked on an ambitious plan to remove the conifer woodland and restore the area to its original mix of upland grassland and moorland, with additional areas of new native broad

leaved woodland planted. In total, 102 ha have been restored to heather moorland and 48 ha to new native broadleaved woodland. The native woodland component has been designed to incorporate the needs of black grouse, with abundant open space, wide spacing and planting of favoured tree species such as rowan, birch, hawthorn, alder and willow. Black grouse have already responded to the improved habitat conditions. We have recorded 11 males displaying within 1 km of the site in spring 2006, and we predict that black grouse will thrive here in the future.



Playing your part

We can all play our part in the conservation of black grouse. If you are walking in the North Pennines please observe access restrictions, some of which have been set up to protect black grouse, and please keep dogs on leads during the breeding season.

If you are watching black grouse:

- Black grouse lek for much of the year, the key period being April and May.
- Watch leks from a vehicle parked over 100 metres away.
- Remain in your vehicle. If equipment is in the boot please get these ready before you arrive on site. Greyhens, like bird watchers, are also observing the lek (albeit for differing reasons!). If you get out of your vehicle **you will disturb** the birds, spoiling the event for yourselves and others.
- Never approach displaying birds on foot as this also disturbs them.



Registered Charity No. 1112023

The Black Grouse Recovery Project is a partnership between The Game Conservancy Trust, English Nature, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Ministry of Defence, Northumbrian Water, the North Pennines AONB Partnership and the Sita Trust.

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

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Above left: This area on the Weardale Estate, has been restored to native woodland and heather moorland from conifer plantation, providing excellent conditions for black grouse.