

Welcome

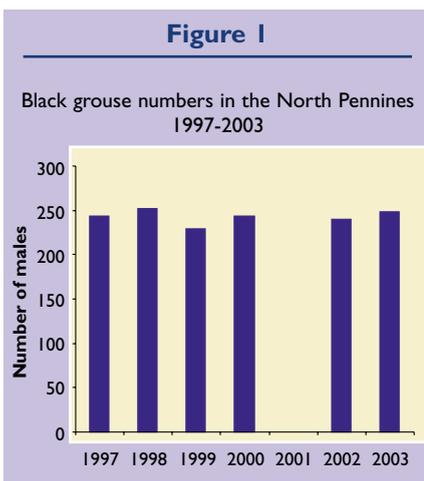
Welcome to the 2003 edition of the Black Grouse newsletter. Inside this issue we describe the work undertaken at Shaw Farm, Arkengarthdale, which has resulted in an increase from eight to 24 black cocks within two years.

We also look at some new research involving cutting trials to increase black grouse breeding success. Plus, we offer some guidelines for shooting black grouse.

Phil Warren
Project Officer



Lek survey shows stable population



During the spring we counted lekking blackcock at 20 sites in the North Pennines, surveyed annually since 1997. Despite poor chick survival last year, numbers were stable (see Figure 1).

That the core population of black grouse in the North Pennines is stable is encouraging news. To increase numbers, however, we need to increase breeding success.

Figure 1: Results from lek counts at 20 sites in the North Pennines monitored each year from 1997 to 2003, with the exception of 2001 (FMD).

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Case Study: Management for black grouse at Shaw Farm, Arkengarthdale

Shaw Farm in North Yorkshire is part of the East Arkengarthdale Sporting Estate. The farm is home to a lekking group of black grouse which are on the southern periphery of the current black grouse range in northern England.

Since selecting Shaw Farm as a project monitoring site, we have counted lekking males and greyhens with broods every year since 1997.

In 1997, there were 12 males and, despite finding 10 greyhens, there were no chicks recorded over three years. Consequently there were only eight males by 2000.

Summary of management

- Grazing reduction (Countryside Stewardship Scheme)
- Pasture/meadow enhancement (ESA)
- Native tree planting (ESA and Woodland Grant Scheme)
- Predator control (Private red grouse enterprise)

In 1999, to enhance the breeding habitats for black grouse, the East Arkengarthdale Common Committee entered the 2,100 acre common into a Countryside Stewardship agreement. As part of this, they fenced off the moorland fringe habitats to restrict sheep grazing to three months during the summer thus allowing the heather, bilberry and cotton grass to recover.

These grazing reductions, combined with the predator control by the East Arkengarthdale gamekeepers, has been associated with better black grouse breeding success here and more hens breeding (see Figure 2). There has also been a substantial increase in the number of displaying males from eight males in 2000 to 23 in 2003 (see Figure 3).

Other habitats have been improved at Shaw Farm for black grouse. This includes planting of new native woodlands (rowan, birch, hawthorn, alder and willow) to provide cover and food sources for black grouse in the winter; and more sympathetic management of in-bye fields through upgrading to Tier 2 of the Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme

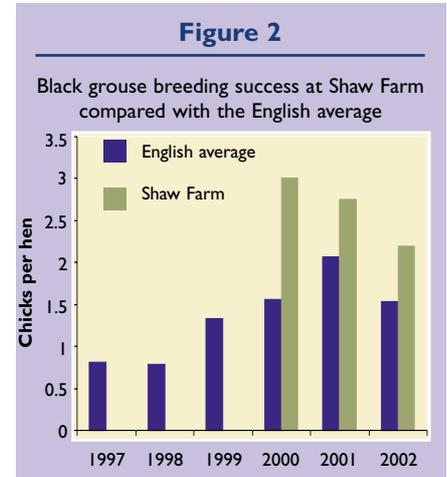


Figure 2. Breeding Success at Shaw Farm in comparison to the average from 20 sites in northern England. Sheep grazing was reduced at the site in the winter of 1999/2000.

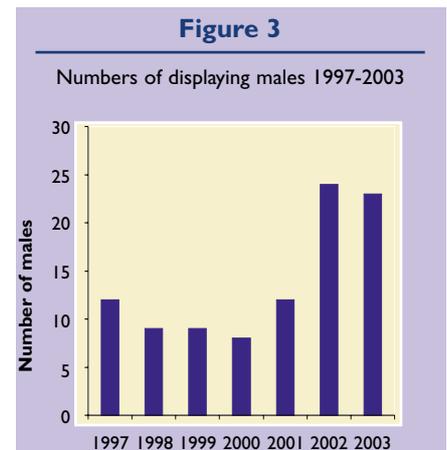


Figure 3. Increases in the numbers of lekking cocks at Shaw Farm

(ESA).

How to help black grouse

If you would like to enhance the conditions for black grouse on your land, please contact:

Phil Warren, the Project Officer, who provides a FREE advisory visit.
Telephone 01833 622208.

Cutting tall grass and rush may help broods

During the first five years of the Black Grouse Recovery Project we have monitored the effects on black grouse of reducing grazing on their favoured moor edge habitats. We have found that black grouse breed 20% better at sites with reduced sheep grazing. This has led to 5% increases annually in the numbers of displaying males where grazing has been reduced compared with continued 2% declines where grazing has remained unrestricted.

However, after five to seven years in a scheme, numbers decline again, especially if the area of tall vegetation is bigger than 100 hectares. We think that too much tall rank grass and rush, which is good nesting and winter feeding habitat, may not be good enough for brood rearing. The rank vegetation may hinder the movement of foraging chicks and make them more likely to die through being wet and cold in heavy rain.

This spring we cut strips 5-10 metres wide at 100 metre intervals within the rank vegetation to provide a short sward where broods can forage and dry off after rainfall. We hope this may improve chick survival rates, and we will report the results of these trials in due course.

A patch of tall rank grass and rush, cut to provide a shorter sward, which is better for foraging chicks.



Shooting sustainably

Although numbers generally in northern England remain low, it is essential that they are not shot. Black grouse have wide habitat requirements and often breed on one person's ground yet winter on another's, so please ensure that your neighbour doesn't shoot your black grouse too.

We offer the following guidelines. Simply do not shoot black grouse unless you can readily satisfy the following criteria.

Do not shoot black grouse unless....

1. Spring lek counts reveal at least 15 displaying cocks and a density of at least two cocks per 250 acres (100 ha) over suitable hill edge and forest habitats across the whole estate.
2. August pointer counts show an average breeding success of at least three chicks per hen (based on a sample of at least 10 hens, including hens without chicks). Unfortunately, taking the nation as a whole, this has only happened in two years since 1989.
3. Extensive surveys of neighbouring ground indicate similarly healthy numbers of birds.
4. You have taken strong steps to conserve black grouse through appropriate habitat management and predator control.

If these conditions are met, a small harvest may be possible, although the following guidelines are recommended.

1. Avoid shooting greyhens and concentrate on cocks only.
2. Do not shoot before September, because walked-up guns can overshoot broods. The poults are still young and tend to get up individually rather than in coveys. It is best to delay shooting until October or November, to allow the cocks to finish moulting.
3. Ensure that the guns can distinguish between greyhens, hen red grouse and hen pheasants. Instigate informal shoot day 'fines' (enough to be a real deterrent), for shooting each greyhen.
4. No more than 15% of cocks (calculated from spring stock) are shot in any one season.
5. Information on numbers of birds shot in relation to those counted in spring and summer are provided to The Game Conservancy Trust.



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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 and Northumbrian Water.

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

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