

Welcome

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The year started well. This spring's survey of displaying male black grouse at traditional sites or leks at our study areas in northern England recorded an 8% per year increase in numbers since 1998. These results are very encouraging and mean that we are on course to meet the Government's specific Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) target for black grouse in England, which is to restore the black grouse population to 1996 levels by 2006, a target of 800 lekking males. We hope to exceed this target as in 1998 the population of displaying males in northern England was estimated at 773 males, increasing to 895 in 2002 and from our latest count figures we estimate that the population may now be closer to 1,000 males.

A good breeding season this year would have built on this population growth, but unfortunately the mid-June peak hatch period for black grouse coincided with the end of our summer! Black grouse breeding success is dependent on good weather in June and this year breeding success in northern England has been moderate at 1.3 chicks per hen, compared with 2.0 chicks per hen in 2003.

Phil Warren
Project Officer

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Conservancy Trust



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Heritage Lottery bid for Northumberland black grouse recovery

This year we have been developing an application for submission to the Heritage Lottery Funding for a specific Northumberland Black Grouse Recovery Project to work under the wing of the North Pennines Black Grouse Recovery Project. This has been possible thanks to a project planning grant awarded to us by the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2003.

Our bid is for a five-year project, which will include funding for habitat

improvements, including the restructuring of 135 hectares of forest edge and the employment of five new predator controllers, all things that our black grouse work has shown are needed.

The project has moved into a second phase to expand the range of black grouse into former haunts on the fringe of the range in northern England. We have identified two key areas with the potential for range expansion. These are to the

south of the range in the Yorkshire Dales and to the north in Northumberland (see Figure 1). On the southern fringe of the current range we are confident that range expansion will occur on the back of existing grouse moor management and the landscape scale habitat enhancements presently underway using agri-environment schemes.

In north Northumberland, the remaining black grouse (estimated as only

Figure 1

Key expansion zones for black grouse to the north in Northumberland and to the south of the current range in the Yorkshire Dales

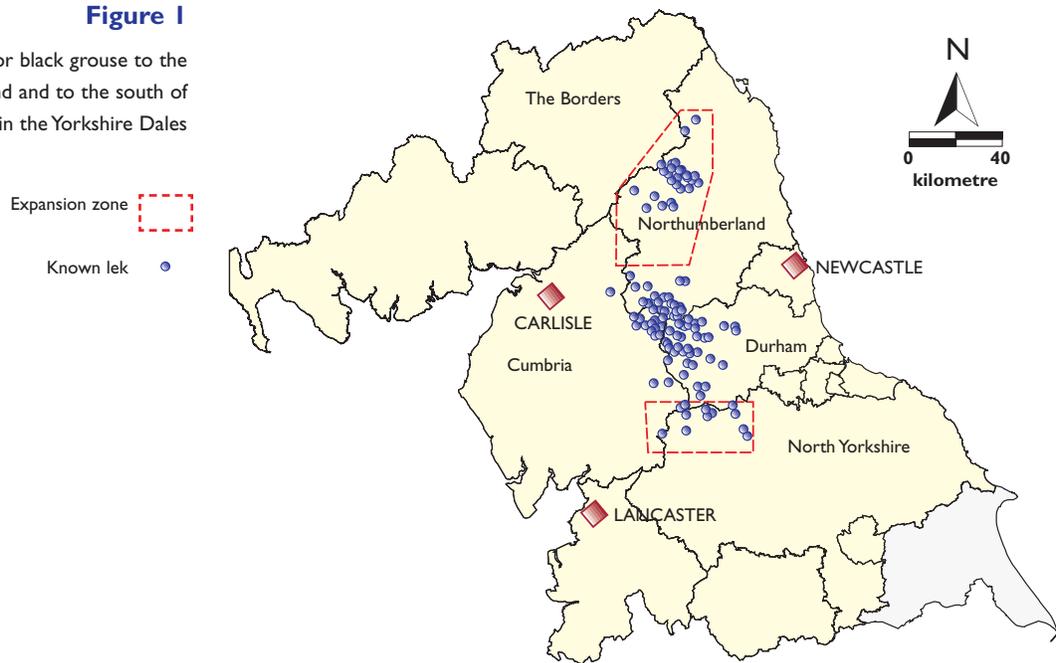


Figure 2

Typical woodland edge





Figure 3

Restructured woodland edge to provide habitats for black grouse

105 males in 2002) have become isolated from black grouse in the North Pennines and this group has become severely contracted and fragmented, with 75% of the remaining population found on the Otterburn Training Area, and low numbers found in the Cheviots and Kielder Forest. In the region, a number of large mature coniferous plantations (see Figure 2) which provide little habitat for black

grouse and also support predatory species have been identified as possibly limiting range expansion. We hope that the bid for Heritage Lottery Funding will be successful and will provide the necessary funds to improve the conditions here for black grouse through forest edge restructuring (see Figure 3) and targeted predator control.

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

Black grouse are showing encouraging signs of recovery in northern England, but the population is still small and threatened. 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 grouse shooting. However, sportsmen can further play their part by not shooting black grouse. Although no shoots in northern England deliberately shoot black grouse, occasional accidents 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 small. This can be helped by briefing guns adequately on shoot days to reduce accidents through mistaken identity.

Black grouse identification guide for game shooters is kindly sponsored by the Moorland Association. Copies are available free of charge from the project officer (see page 4 for contact details).



Upland arable



Left: oats being grown in the upland fringe.
(Dave O'Hara, RSPB)

The project has been keen to establish and monitor the benefits of arable crops to black grouse in the uplands. Small plots of arable were formerly a feature of the cultural landscape but, in the main, arable crops are now absent in northern England. In the past, black grouse were often seen foraging on stubbles in the autumn and winter. Over the last couple of years, we have been monitoring the use of arable crops at RSPB Geltsdale and at the Otterburn Training Area. Early results have shown that black grouse are

attracted to these stubbles where they are located within easy travelling distance of known lekking groups. We are keen to expand this trial and are looking for suitable areas for arable plots within the core black grouse range to monitor the potential benefits of upland arable. The crops we are looking to establish are varieties of oats adapted to sites at high altitude and with poor soil conditions. If you are interested in being involved please contact the project officer (see box right for contact details).



Registered Charity No. 279968

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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