

Hen Harrier Action: February 2022 newsletter



Dear supporter,

Welcome to our February 2022 newsletter. There's something of a theme this month – we're simply not doing enough to halt the decline in biodiversity, never mind reverse the damage we've already done.

Making Northern Ireland a great place for hen harriers



In our December 2021 newsletter, we included an uplands version of the “Twelve Days of Christmas”, hoping that people would sing it. We were thrilled when an intrepid group of rhododendron clearers from Newry did exactly that, slightly adapted to reflect the absence of black grouse in that part of the world. Marc Ruddock of the Golden Eagle Trust tells us about their ambitious project.

Photos & haiku: Abby McSherry

“The hen harrier is one of the most enigmatic species that inhabit the mountains and moors across Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland. The Collaborative Action for Natura Network (CANN) project is working across all three jurisdictions to understand and manage some of the interconnected issues that face this and other species across peatland and moorland. The hen harrier is a barometer of a healthy upland ecosystem but it faces numerous threats and pressures. There were fewer than 50 pairs of hen harriers in Northern Ireland in 2016, and fewer than 200 pairs across the island of Ireland. The population has declined in each survey over the last decades,

and is declining at a rapid rate including within the Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated as strongholds. We are also losing the cry of the curlew and the drumming of snipe in many parts of their former range. We should, we must, be able to do better.

The threats to hen harriers include over-grazing, wildfires, wind farms, disturbance at nest or roost sites, habitat loss and fragmentation, nest predation, turf cutting, food availability, off-road vehicles, dogs off lead, livestock trampling of nests – and, of course, illegal persecution.

There may be a link between the declines in Ireland and illegal killing across the Irish Sea as they move so freely between the nations. While known persecution incidents are few on the Emerald Isle compared to Britain, they are not unknown. Shot hen harriers have been posted to newspaper offices, satellite-tagged hen harriers have been shot and left to rot on the ground, and nestling hen harriers have been clubbed to death.

Cumulatively, this may be just too much for the skydancer. Death by a thousand cuts....

CANN is a cross-border environment project which aims to improve the condition of protected habitats and support priority species within Northern Ireland, the Border Region of Ireland and Scotland. It is funded by the EU INTERREG VA programme with match funding from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in Ireland, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland and Scottish Natural Heritage (NatureScot).

The CANN team (government departments, local authorities, research institutions and charities from across the three jurisdictions) work with local communities and stakeholders towards a common goal of improving the environmental condition of these SACs. This includes delivering educational and outreach programmes and raising awareness of the significance of the habitats and species found on the sites. We aim to safeguard their conservation and ensure their sustainability beyond the life of the project.

The team have been working to understand the complex requirements of hen harriers at a range of sites. We have studied the behaviours of hen harriers on lowland raised bogs across Northern Ireland and border counties of Ireland and on upland regions of Cuilcagh Mountain, Sliabh Beagh and on Islay.



We see extensive loss of natural moorland, with no remaining deep heather, obliterated by successive fires. This habitat degradation means poor-quality nesting and foraging not just for hen harriers, but also red grouse, curlew, golden plover, meadow pipit, snipe, skylark, many of which are in similar perilous decline.

Our seasonal hen harrier surveys have revealed previously unknown roost and

nest sites. We have examined the foraging range of individual pairs of harriers and shown that they extend far beyond site boundaries. Harriers have been tracked from Scotland to roost at lowland raised bogs in the border counties of Ireland. We are all connected.

We have restored damaged bogs, benefiting snipe, meadow pipit and skylark feeding on the increasingly abundant invertebrates in the pools and dams thus created. In turn, this provides more prey for the quartering hen harrier, the ghost of the moor.

We have worked on fire planning and building resilience in tackling the destructive effects of fires. We have carefully deployed firebreaks to recreate a varied mosaic of habitats optimised for the red-listed red grouse and its “go-back, go-back” calls, edge habitats for nesting meadow pipits and the linear features much favoured by hunting harriers.

We are protecting nests to improve the chances of fledging young in an ecosystem unbalanced by generations of landscape change. Afforestation by non-native conifers means management of foxes is necessary to help hen harriers fledge more young.

We have rid the bogs and moors of a plague of self-seeded conifers from adjacent plantations and the brightly coloured but deadly invasive rhododendron. Their removal recreates the open habitat favoured by the hen harrier.

We have only begun this restoration; there is much still to do. Creating connectivity between and within habitats is key. Connectivity across Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland – all interlinked. There is recent cause for optimism with a change in some attitudes and pressures locally reducing conflict between wildlife and people. The emergent biodiversity funding routes and Results Based Agri-Environment Payment Schemes (RBAPS) increasingly

operating in Ireland, and beyond, are building an inherent cultural and financial value to biodiversity including the hen harrier.

The hen harrier has not been doing well and will remain vulnerable without ongoing, long-term support. We all need to do our part: we need to celebrate it, support its habitats, and find ways to support the landowners, land managers and farmers who work and live within its landscape. Agri-environmental schemes which link payments to improved ecosystem services and biodiversity can benefit us all: farmers, land managers, citizens and wildlife. Imagine a world where we all value the hen harrier as an integral part of the landscape. For now we remain optimistic that the current realities can be improved.”

Art is an integral part of CANN’s outreach; one of their artistic initiatives is a [booklet of science-based haiku](#) on the wonder of peat, which they published for COP26.



This inspired us to try our hand at hen harrier haiku. Here’s one by HHA trustee Gill Lewis:

“Lead Hills lindy hop?
Peak District paso doble?
Strictly Skydancer!”

We’ll be sharing our efforts on social media in the weeks to come. Why not join in? The more, the merrier!

A record breaking harrier

The last two years of restrictions and lockdowns has meant that travelling abroad has only been a dream for many of us. Birds, however, have the

freedom to take flight, and that's exactly what Syrcas – a young hen harrier from Snowdonia – did last autumn.

While some hen harriers spend all of their time in Wales, others will migrate south for the winter, leaving from late September onwards for southern Europe, before returning to Wales in March. One hen harrier that caught the RSPB's attention last year was Syrcas. He hatched in May 2021 on the National Trust's Ysbyty Ifan estate and was fitted with a satellite tag in order to track and follow his movements. Syrcas is Welsh for circus – a link to the bird's Latin name.

After spending a few months growing up and gathering his strength, Syrcas left his natal territory at the beginning of August. He started to explore the upland areas around north and mid-Wales, roosting with other satellite-tagged hen harriers.

The second leg of his journey started between 5 and 6 October as he made a long flight southwards from North Wales to the Brecon Beacons, then to Cornwall, stopping near Penzance. After a few days of resting, he then undertook a remarkable journey down Europe's Atlantic coast.

Between 9 and 12 October, he travelled almost 900 miles in one go, touching down at a nature reserve on the west coast of Portugal, about 90 miles south of Lisbon. He finally settled down for a well-earned rest in the district of Beja, in the south-west of Portugal.

Syrcas travelled a total distance of 1,097 miles from his nest to the farthest point south, making it the furthest recorded journey south travelled by any British hen harrier. The previous record had stood since 1993, when another young male – this time from the Berwyn Mountains in North Wales – was recorded as ending his migration east of Lisbon.

The hope now is that Syrcas will return to Wales for the 2022 breeding season. If you spot a hen harrier, please make a note of the date, time and location of the sighting with a description of the bird. This information will help us keep track of this beautiful and threatened species. Email: henharriers@rspb.org.uk.

Hen Harrier Action news



We're delighted to announce that Paul Samuels has joined the board of Hen Harrier Action. We've been working with Paul for a while – he produced Skydancer Day and Hen Harrier Day Online for us last year and has contributed several videos to our YouTube channel. He'll make a valuable contribution to the wider mission of Hen Harrier Action. Paul is a wildlife and documentary filmmaker who lives in N.E. London. His early career was as a professional violinist but now he works exclusively in the world of filmmaking and his output includes social documentaries on housing and support for the homeless, as well as events like the Great River Race, London. Recording the

natural world has been a lifelong interest, beginning with stills photography in his teens and developing into video in the last 10 years.

Hen Harrier Action recently passed a significant milestone – our second birthday since being founded on 3 February 2020. A lot has happened in that time – we certainly didn't envisage running online HHDO events when we launched!

As the world opens up again, you may be considering running an in-person Hen Harrier Day in August. We have some funds available to help support face-to-face activities, which could include supporting venue hire, providing Hen Harrier Day materials, promotion or other support you may require. The funds are open to all, whether you're a past, present or potential organiser. It needn't be in August and it needn't be a stand-alone event with speakers; new ideas are very welcome. We're just working on the details, and we'll let you know as soon as we can how to apply. If you're thinking of starting a new Hen Harrier Day, or you've never organised anything like it before, we're also working on some planning materials to help make sure you've thought of everything. We also have several Board members with expertise in event management, so we're here if you want to talk to us.

News roundup

It's a sad thing when a lack of raptor persecution counts as good news but we're pleased that there have been no new mysterious disappearances since our last newsletter. And there has been action on the punishment of wildlife crime: NatureScot has imposed a three-year General Licence restriction on

Lochan Estate, a shooting estate in Perthshire, after evidence of alleged raptor persecution was uncovered. And a gamekeeper was successfully prosecuted for killing two buzzards caught in a trap, using video evidence from the RSPB.

Red squirrel conservation

We've known for some time that increasing numbers of pine martens are good for red squirrels. Pine martens prey on grey squirrels, who are heavier and less agile than their red cousins and seem to lack awareness of the danger posed by pine martens. [Recent research](#) has shown that, to maximise this effect and increase the population of both red squirrel and pine marten, native woodland is far more effective than non-native conifer plantations. The work was funded by the British Ecological Society and undertaken jointly by Queen's University Belfast, the University of St Andrew's, Ulster Wildlife and citizen scientists. This is important because the UK is one of the least forested countries in Europe; only 13.2% of our land surface is woodland (10% in England, 15% in Wales, 19% in Scotland and 9% in Northern Ireland), of which half is non-native conifer plantation (78% in Scotland, the red squirrel's stronghold). This compares with 41% for the EU as a whole in 2018 (which included the UK at that point). Just by way of comparison, driven grouse moors cover up to 13% of Scotland's land. If we wish to preserve our native red squirrel, we need to expand native broadleaf woodland – which means less commercial forestry, less driven grouse shooting, more rewilding.

Biodiversity COP15 Kunming

The world of environmental diplomacy is gearing up for another crucial summit, this time the 15th Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, taking place in Kunming, China, in April. It is expected to agree targets for reversing the decline in biodiversity by 2050, although, as ever, agreeing targets is the easy bit; for example, – none of the 20 targets set in Aichi, Japan, in 2010 have been met. A draft convention was published in January 2021. This has now been [reviewed](#) by more than 50 scientists, who have concluded that the draft target of protecting 30% of our land and seas by 2050 is not enough. They say that expanding national parks and other protected areas may slow the decline in biodiversity but will not stop it, never mind reverse it. They call for transformative action across every area of life, including a “massive” reduction in harmful agricultural and fishing subsidies, holding global heating to 1.5°C and tackling human overconsumption, including of meat.

This is particularly relevant to the UK, as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. In March 2019, the UK self-assessed that it was on track to achieve only five of the 20 Aichi targets; for example, we are not on track to achieve those on pollution, vulnerable ecosystems, the conservation status of species or restoring degraded ecosystems. Our national parks, far from being managed to restore biodiversity, are given over in large part to

agriculture and driven grouse shooting. In England's national parks, three-quarters of Sites of Special Scientific Interest are in a poor condition. Our rivers and seas are polluted by agricultural chemicals and raw sewage. The area of crops treated with pesticides increased by 53% between 1990 and 2010; the Birds of Conservation Concern Red List increased from 36 to 70 species between 1996 and 2021. All eyes will be on governments to see what promises they make in Kunming – but we must maintain the pressure afterwards, so that they actually take the steps necessary to meet their targets. And, of course, do our bit too.

Get involved

Would you like to contribute to the newsletter? Maybe you have a favourite hen harrier moment you'd like to share or you work in conservation in the uplands? Also, we're currently planning Skydancer Day 2022. Did you watch the 2021 event? If not, why not catch up with it now on our [YouTube channel](#)? If you did – thank you. What did you think of it? We'd love to know – please email us at info@henharrierday.uk.

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).