



Hen Harrier Action: May 2022 newsletter



Dear subscriber,

Skydancer Day is nearly upon us! This edition gives you more information on what to expect on Saturday 14 May, an explanation of hen harrier breeding and nesting and another hen harrier moment. Do you have a hen harrier moment to share? Please send it to us at info@henharrierday.uk.

Last month, we changed the method of sending our newsletter. Unfortunately, a technical glitch meant that not all of you received the newsletter sent out on 7/8 April. This is now on the [website](#) if you wish to see what you missed. We're very sorry that this happened and are keeping our fingers crossed that we've solved the problem.

“Birds do it, bees do it” – so how do hen harriers do it? Andrea Hudspeth and Terry Williams give us the lowdown.

Hen harriers will usually be back on their breeding grounds by late March. They prefer to nest on heather moorland 600 to 800 feet above sea level. As they do not have the same partner each year, or use the same nest, they must first establish a territory and attract a mate. This is when the male hen harrier will carry out his spectacular skydance – a roller-coaster flight where the bird flaps tern-like, and at the top of each climb will flip on his back or roll completely before flying down to near ground level and pulling up vertically to repeat the move maybe dozens of times, whilst calling throughout.

Once the male and female have paired up and selected a nest site, the male will begin to supply his mate with food in an aerial transfer – the food pass. The male flies above the nest area and is met by the female. He drops the food (maybe a pipit or vole) and the female turns on her side or back and stretches out her long legs to catch it in her razor-sharp talons. This demonstrates to the female that he can find food to feed her and the chicks for the next six weeks, and by collecting food from him away from the nest she avoids giving its location away to potential predators.

Hen harrier males, especially older ones, sometimes have two or more females that they breed and raise young with, although if food is in short supply a male may show a preference for one mate over the other, leading to the neglected female's nest failing.

While both birds collect nesting material, it is the female that actually builds the nest; this is usually a flat pad of vegetation with a shallow cup in a small, clear space amongst rank heather or rush, on a gentle slope often above or in a gully.

Clutches on average consist of 4-5 eggs which the female alone incubates. She will sit tight and heat the eggs before all of them have been laid, which means they will hatch asynchronously (at different times) and the chicks will be of different ages, and therefore sizes, in the nest. The female is fed by the male away from the nest throughout incubation and for a further two weeks after the eggs have hatched. As soon as the young are able to regulate their body temperature, the female will start hunting for food in addition to the male as the demands of the growing chicks increase. Around this time, the young may start to move a few feet away from the nest, therefore making the brood less susceptible to mass predation. It will be another two or three weeks until they start to take short flights and fully fledge. Once fledged, they will be fed by their parents, particularly the female, for another two or three weeks, before they are completely independent and ready to face their first and most dangerous winter.

Hen Harrier Action news

We're very excited about bringing you another online Skydancer Day, from 10.30am on Saturday 14 May.

Presented by Megan McCubbin and Hen Harrier Action trustee Indy Greene, it will include:

- Hen harrier art from Iolo Williams
- All you ever wanted to know about satellite tags
- The latest news on our nest camera plans
- The launch of the search for this year's best Young Wild Writers
- Scottish Government minister Mairi McAllan in conversation with Max Wiszniewski of Revive
- A lovely new song, "Persecution of the Skydancers", by Stronghill
- A short video celebrating the return of raptors to Poole Harbour

- An opportunity to put your questions to Megan and Indy.

News roundup

Protected areas don't necessarily protect wildlife

The Kunming Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (at which it is expected that countries will sign a commitment to protect 30% of land and seas by 2030) has been delayed again, this time until autumn 2022. Two recent scientific reports— one focusing on [international wetlands](#) (behind Nature paywall), one by the [British Ecological Survey](#) on the UK – have demonstrated that this commitment will not be enough. They both concluded that protected areas are not necessarily good for wildlife. Of course, we know this is true for our upland national parks – protected but containing large areas intensively managed for driven grouse shooting which tend to create a wildlife desert. Agriculture within our national parks can also be incompatible with rich biodiversity.

And to compound these warnings, a [review of the state of the world's birds](#) concluded that 48% of species are known or are suspected to be in decline, 39% on a level trend and 6% increasing. This is largely due to human impact, mainly habitat loss and degradation, although climate change is expected to be an increasing influence in the future, especially for migratory species and those at the limit of their range.

My hen harrier moment

Jamie Normington grew up outdoors in the northern moorlands of Bronte Country. He has worked in nature conservation and outdoor education for the best part of his life. He believes that, for an open mind, every day is an incredible school day, though he is sad to see there are still bullies around. The conviction of a local gamekeeper caught killing owls inspired him to begin actively campaigning for wildlife. He now lives between the limestone and volcanic rocks of Cumbria and hasn't decided which he prefers just yet. But he knows which are slippery when wet.

Here is his hen harrier moment:

“I'd invited the BBC to join a group of budding young conservationists to look for wildlife and talk about their new jobs and apprenticeships, as we sheltered in a bird hide overlooking mosses, slowly eating our packed lunches.

We saw and heard no birds that lunchtime, which struck us all as the typical bad luck of 'scheduled wildlife watching'. The BBC waited as long as they could, then bumped off along the track in a Mini.

Signs of winter wildlife seemed scarce that day but, as well as deer slots (hoof prints) in the peat, we saw the charred stubs and torn drink cans of another recent, quietly illicit party.

Two local volunteers arrived for the cans and ashes. (They'd seen the((m earlier and gone back home for bin bags.) They told us about a recent illegal trespass by fox hunters, the police being called. A depressingly familiar winter's tale.

This cloudy mood was lifted by the 20-somethings' combined enthusiasm, fresh knowledge and hawk eyes, which found tiny lives of wild interest among the cold, low winter vegetation whilst native-breed ponies grazed on thorn, keeping their eyes on us.

One of the group, Michael (whose mind is always elsewhere), was looking the other way. He raised a hushed alarm: "Hen Harrier!", and from our various positions, balancing on boardwalk, kneeling in mosses, the rest of us slowly span in half-circles.

A silver ghost flew languidly and low above the dark ground, taking all the time in its world, passing right in front of the window of the now-empty bird hide. It was a male hen harrier (the one I'd always really wanted to see, as even I couldn't mistake those ink-dipped wingtips or doubt what had happened).

Everyone was captivated for those slow-motion minutes. I've tried to see this bird in so many locations and never been able to. A bird everyone should be allowed to enjoy but no one dare talk about, in case the 'others' hear.

Michael's moved on to work further north now. I'll always be grateful he gave me my first hen harrier. Hope he finds what he was looking for."

Get involved

We're still looking for someone with Joomla expertise to help with our website. Could you be that person? If so, please get in touch by emailing info@henharrierday.uk.

Support us: support hen harriers

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