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December 2020



### Hen Harrier Action: December newsletter



Dear Supporter,

Welcome to our latest newsletter. For some of us, it marks our first year working on this project. In December last year there was no Hen Harrier Action, no Hen Harrier Day website, and we had no events planned. What a year it has been since then. We were registered as a charity in February and launched our website the same month. By March our brilliant local organisers had events planned around the country and we were expecting many more. Then Covid-19 arrived. Fortunately, with the support of many excellent people, we proved up to the challenge. Hen Harrier Day Online probably reached more people than ever before and with some truly inspiring material. A big thank-you, once again, to everyone who helped make it such a success.

We are now starting early planning for next year. We're pretty sure that we will run another online event in August, probably shorter than in 2020 and designed to co-ordinate with local events around the UK. It will be great to welcome 'on-the-ground' events back and we're hoping to encourage a greater number and variety than ever before. We've also got some great ideas for the spring – almost certainly still online but it will be great if a skydancing spring can set us up for renewed freedom and contact with nature. As ever, we are looking for ideas and practical support, on which more below.

Meanwhile, why not add a hen harrier theme to your Christmas? Make, bake or paint a festive hen harrier and put it on your tree, table or Twitter tagged #HHDDayUK. If the last, we'll share it. Season's greetings to all!

### **Hen harriers in winter**

Where do hen harriers go in winter? There's not a simple answer but satellite tags mean that we know more about this now than we used to. (That's true for a number of birds and other animals, and one thing we've learned about many raptor species is that young birds in particular may travel great distances. An example is 'Vigo', the bearded vulture from the Alps who famously visited the Peak District this summer.) Some hen harriers stay on the northern moors but many move south. Though some travel onwards to continental Europe, winter is nevertheless often the best time to see hen harriers in the southern half of the UK. They are best seen towards dusk as they arrive at winter roosts. Thankfully many roost sites are monitored against the threat of interference by people who wish to do the birds harm.



Nigel Bastin, one of our supporters, who took this photograph of a male returning to a roost, has monitored hen harrier and other roosts for many years. Here's his account: "I am 63 years old and have loved raptors since my late grandfather used to take me to the Southport marshes, where we would count pink-footed geese for the local bird club. One very cold February, when I was about eight, a grey male hen harrier started skydancing

right in front of us. I've been hooked ever since. When I first started to monitor roosts I sometimes wondered why I was doing it, spending many cold winter afternoons sat in my car without seeing anything for hours, sometimes in very remote areas of the North Pennines where blizzards could appear from nowhere. But I knew it was very important to record numbers both arriving at and leaving their winter roost sites.

My dismay with the behaviour of many gamekeepers began when I lived in County Durham during the late eighties. I found a pair of hen harriers nesting in a hidden location and monitored them but unfortunately became ill. I feel certain that whilst I was in hospital the gamekeepers found the nest and shot both birds. This sealed my passion for raptor protection. At present I cover two winter roost sites, one in Devon, the other in the north Pennines. The first is well known, and my tasks can include warning off dog walkers: I usually say this is because of the marsh fritillaries for which the site is also known. I normally observe the second site hidden in a plantation to avoid arousing the interest of the local gamekeepers.

My method for counting hen harriers in the roost is fairly simple, starting with arriving in good time: sometimes a hen harrier will come into the roost area early but it tends to be just before dusk. They normally quarter around the site before dropping into the roost area. An immature bird will sometimes fly back out again and re-approach from a different angle or

direction if there is already an adult in the roost – probably something to do with a pecking order in the roost. Sometimes morning counts can differ from the evening count, perhaps because birds have left the roost during the night, for example if disturbed by a predator during the night. My personal view is also that hen harriers may hunt at night as well as by day. Compare the harrier's face structure with an owl's: it's similar and I know their hearing is also very good.

The highest number of harriers I've counted into a roost is 13 but that was exceptional: there was a cold wind from the east that year and we suspect that many were European birds. My count method has changed little over time, though the BTO nowadays asks for more detail such as settling and rising times, human disturbance, observer's distance and more. I also used to record other birds by the roost site, such as waders, geese and gulls. Very occasionally a hen harrier would half-heartedly go after a starling from the very large number that roosted nearby but I only ever witnessed a kill once. Monitoring winter roosts is not for everyone, but a great way of expressing love for, and wish to protect, all raptors."

### **Would you like to join Hen Harrier Action?**

Hen Harrier Action is a charity which supports Hen Harrier Days around the UK, campaigning for our uplands to be places where nature can thrive and persecution of wildlife is a thing of the past. Our online event in 2020 reached a wide audience through schools, the arts, community groups and some powerful advocates for nature. We want to build on this in 2021: could you be part of that?

We are looking for people to join our Board as trustees, people who are passionate about our cause and want to inspire others to support it too. We are looking especially for new trustees who will help make our Board more diverse and inclusive. The main reason Hen Harrier Action exists is to engage a wider public in the need for reform in our uplands and to do that we need people who understand and can help us reach out to diverse communities including those under-represented in the wider environmental movement. We are also especially at this moment looking to recruit young environmental activists willing to devote some of their energies to helping us reach and engage more young people in our activities and campaigns.

Board members have a collective responsibility but also bring their individual skills, experience and networks with them. We are especially looking for people who will help us to get our message across more widely as well as develop longer-term strategy. We are a friendly and informal group and mentoring support will be available. You can read more, including how to let us know of your interest here: [henharrierday.uk/trustee-information](https://henharrierday.uk/trustee-information).

We are also looking for volunteers to help with all the many strands of our work. That includes looking after communications with our community, leading on projects with specific groups or interest areas (for example rambling, or community arts), helping with fundraising, looking after bits of the website (for example developing an online shop, building our educational resources). Whatever your skills and interests, we've probably got something for you. Find out more here: [henharrierday.uk/volunteer](https://henharrierday.uk/volunteer).

## More ways to help in 2021

We are looking to support more local hen harrier days than ever before. These can be events of many different kinds – from street stalls to larger events in city centres or on nature reserves. Some might be mainly music or arts based or involve a walk on the moors. But it needs people to organise these events: we need you and your ideas and energies. To help, we've written a handy guide, which you can find here: [henharrierday.uk/run-HHD](https://henharrierday.uk/run-HHD). This is also the place to find out more about joining or contributing to an event, for example with a stall or activity.

If you don't have the time to organise an event or are not sure it's quite for you right now, a [donation](#) will always help!

## News round-up

The most important news story this month was the Scottish government's announcement that it will start work immediately on a licensing scheme for driven grouse shooting. Cautiously welcomed by environmentalists, it brought screams of outrage from shooting interests, prompting the question why a requirement to adhere to regulatory standards was such a unique problem for this sector. Also in Scotland, new higher penalties for wildlife crime came into force with important consequences also for enforcement. The Scottish government has had its internal difficulties in this area, but the sense of forward momentum is now palpable. By contrast, south of the border the first flickers of change are harder to see, though they are just about there. A Westminster Hall debate on heather burning brought a turnout from the remnants of the parliamentary shooting brigade, but it was great to see the number of strong new advocates for change, and the quality of the debate was (mostly) much higher than at the disgraceful grouse shooting debate four years ago. The Minister also nearly promised to make good on the government's near-promise to ban burning, though the long-awaited Peat Strategy (for England) is apparently still due 'soon'. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister's big green relaunch didn't get as much attention as he probably hoped, perhaps because there's not much to pay for it. More important is the new farm payment scheme, which is probably a good thing but no-one really knows because there's not enough detail. But it's likely to bear on upland 'farming' on, er, grouse moors as well as the lowlands. And possibly even more important, the Government increased the UK emissions reduction target to 68% – though that's just a number, and from a government not noted for meeting targets. Linking all this, there is ever greater pressure from scientists to include soil (and peat) carbon in climate change models and hence in public policy. It would be ironic, would it not, if the government accidentally did the right thing for nature by setting a target that can only be met by changed agricultural and upland management.

Links for more information:

Grouse moor licensing (Guardian) <https://bit.ly/37RwDsP>

Wildlife crime penalties (RPUK) <https://bit.ly/2LrLbYz>

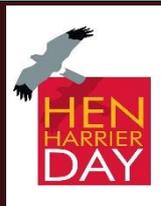
Westminster debate on heather burning (Mark Avery) <https://bit.ly/3ndpgT2>

Farming reform (Mark Avery) <https://bit.ly/2LrBJnZ>

Government's climate change plan (Carbon Brief) <https://bit.ly/341KdbK>

### Keep up to date

To get the latest news of our plans for 2021, follow us – Hen Harrier Day – on social media. Please also share this newsletter with friends and followers – we want to get the message out as widely as possible. To make sure you get the newsletter in your inbox not your spam folder, please add us to your 'Safe Senders List' or similar, depending on your email provider. You can also find a copy of it on our website [here](#) along with earlier editions. For some of you this might be the first of our newsletters you've received since signing up for it. If so, welcome (and sorry - it's a bit of a battle to get any newsletter not treated as spam but we hope we're winning.) Previous newsletters will also be on the website shortly.



Website: [henharrierday.uk](https://henharrierday.uk)

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