

December 2021



## Hen Harrier Action: December newsletter



Dear supporter,

Welcome to our December newsletter, written as the British Trust for Ornithology published their fifth assessment of birds of conservation concern for the UK. Unfortunately, the red list is longer than ever with the ptarmigan moving straight from green to red. In more positive news, our satellite tag fundraiser achieved more than twice our initial ask, so we're developing exciting plans for next year.

## The tale of Judith, Dru and Frank



Dru at time of ringing, 2017

When we launched our fundraiser for satellite tags in 2022, Judith Smith, leader of the Manchester Raptor Group, got in touch. She has previously funded satellite tags for two hen harriers in northern England – here she tells us why.

“Back in the ‘70s, I attended a talk by a well-known local bird photographer, Gordon Yates. I remember Gordon showing photos of hen harriers, and being amazed that this rare bird could occur in the urban county of Greater Manchester. When I started

birdwatching seriously in 1981, and became acquainted with Chat Moss,

Manchester’s green lung, it became the highlight of the winter to watch these incredible birds quartering above the farmland, with my mentors Frank Horrocks and Dru Knowles. Though never common, sightings then were fairly dependable, with one to two birds wintering. So began my fascination with this bird.

Frank Horrocks (1912-2003) was a self-taught naturalist and a legend in his local community of Leigh, and in particular Pennington Flash, which he was instrumental in saving in the 1960s, when councils were looking for open spaces to use as rubbish tips. With others he founded the Leigh Ornithological Society in 1971. Dru Knowles’ (1923-2008) primary interest was botany, again self-taught, but she was also a good birder. Together, they informally taught many new birders the elements of the craft on a one-to-one basis, and, although I only knew them in their later years, I am proud to have been one of their pupils.

Fast-forward to 2016. Stephen Murphy, Natural England’s lead ornithologist on hen harriers, gave an inspiring talk to the NERF Annual Conference on the satellite tagging of hen harrier chicks and I and two friends decided to sponsor two birds each. My friends spend a lot of time in Scotland so arranged their tags through Scottish Natural Heritage (now NatureScot), but mine were via Natural England. One of the privileges of sponsoring a hen harrier satellite tag is that you can choose their names; the first chick to receive ‘my’ tag was a female, born 2017, so Dru was the obvious choice. A male wasn’t available in that year, but in 2018 Frank came along. Both were born in northeast England.

Dru has been the unluckier of the two. She set up home in the Borders/Kielder area and in four breeding attempts, has had one success, fledging three of four chicks in 2020. In 2018 and 2019, she lost her brood to natural causes, and in 2021 to heavy rain.

Frank, in the Yorkshire Dales, has been very successful, fledging five chicks in 2019, eight in 2020 (with two females) and nine in 2021 (again with two females). Two of his 2019 chicks, Jimmy and Jasper, were satellite tagged.



Frank (on right) with brother Barney at ringing, 2019

Frank lives on an estate where the keeper knows him and is sympathetic to the species, but on 17 March 2021 he was attacked by a peregrine looking for a breeding site in his home range. By 19 March he was tracked to Dumfries & Galloway, by far the furthest he has ever ventured in his life, about 152km from his year-round home. Before this the furthest Frank had ventured from his home range was 52km – his normal range is only

6x4km. It's known that some peregrines consider hen harriers as prey and this attack almost certainly prompted his flight. On the way north-west he was tracked in the Lake District at a site where there are other sat-tagged hen harriers but chose to carry on to forestry land west of the Nith Estuary, a place where hen harriers once bred. This shows not only the value of satellite tracking, but also the importance of follow-up fieldwork. Without the observations, Frank's desertion of the breeding site would have been inexplicable. But he came back to the Yorkshire Dales to breed again!

In recent years we have learned that females who lose a nest to predation may vacate the breeding site, not just to relocate within the general breeding area, but also to travel many kilometres away. Dru, for example, lost her nest in Northumberland in 2019 and by the following day was 92km north, and did not return to her breeding area until the following spring.

I've been extremely lucky in that both birds I sponsored have survived to the present day. Stephen says they have learned more from these two than from any other birds. Dru's tag is on borrowed time as they only last three to four years and there were a few blips this year, so I suppose next year Frank's might fail too.

Stephen has been great in regularly updating me with their movements and breeding history and, although I've never had the joy of seeing them, I feel a real bond with them and am pleased to have helped this incredible species in a practical way."

Photos: Stephen Murphy and Gavin Craggs

[Hen Harrier Action news](#)

## Satellite tag appeal

Hen Harrier Action's satellite tag fundraiser has now closed, at a fantastic £11,035. This is incredible – we're so moved by how many of you have chipped in, thank you so much. It really shows how much people care about hen harriers.

We'll keep you posted on project progress via Twitter (@HHDAYUK), Facebook (HHDUK), Instagram (@hhdruk) and our website (<https://henharrierday.uk/>). If you'd like to donate to Hen Harrier Action outwith the appeal, you can do so via our website (<https://henharrierday.uk/donate>).

## Board changes

We're sad that Alan Cranston and Carol Rawlings have left the board of Hen Harrier Action. Alan founded the charity in February 2020, was its chair and most active volunteer, and worked tirelessly to promote its aims and spread its message far and wide. He will be much missed, as will Carol who was helping us focus on our longer term strategy.

## News roundup

**REVIVE** is a coalition of five like-minded partner organisations which campaigns for a holistic approach to land reform of Scottish grouse moors. Around 400 people attended its **second national conference** at Perth Concert Hall on 14 November, including Hen Harrier Action trustees Andrea Goddard and Andrea Hudspeth. This is their take on the event:

"There was a wide range of topics and expert speakers and it was excellently hosted by Chris Packham throughout the day. We found the content engaging, enlightening and inspirational; it strengthened our resolve to help support the push for political change.

The audience were predominantly supporters of upland reform, yet there were also several grouse shooting proponents who took their chance to question the speakers. Their concerns about job losses and local rural economies were answered by REVIVE's analysis showing that well-managed reform should create new job opportunities within diversified local rural economies. In addition, such reform should ensure a healthier upland ecology and an increase in carbon sequestration: vital given the climate emergency we currently face.

The day was very enjoyable, not only professionally interesting but also giving an opportunity to catch up with other friends and campaigners, who we haven't seen socially for some time because of Covid-19 restrictions."

On 25 November, **Wildlife and Countryside Link** launched a new [report on the scale of wildlife crime](#) in England and Wales during 2020. Their press release highlighted shocking key figures:

- Reports of wildlife crimes against many species rose between 35 and 90% in 2020,
- At the same time convictions on key types of wildlife crime fell by 50%+.

The number of confirmed crimes committed against birds of prey almost doubled, from 54 in 2019 to 104 in 2020. The RSPB say that it was the worst year for bird crime ever. This clearly shows that wildlife crime is still a huge problem in the UK, with birds of prey regularly being targeted. We can all play a part in helping to reduce bird crime by recognising what to look out for and reporting signs of bird of prey persecution. North Yorkshire Police's Operation Owl website gives handy tips of what to look for and who to call or you can contact the RSPB, which enables you to [report online](#).

In England, the Westminster parliament passed the **Environment Act 2021**. This sets up a new environmental watchdog (for England & NI) and sets a legally binding target to halt declines in species abundance in England by 2030. Of course, setting a target is the easy bit, rather harder are the concrete actions to achieve that target, so the jury is still out. And 2030 is quite soon, so ambitious action is urgently required.

The BTO's 5th edition of the **Birds of Conservation Concern** report described a continued declining trend for Britain's birds, with familiar species such as swift and house martin being moved from amber to red – both species long closely associated with people, choosing nesting sites under the eaves of houses. Do you have room for a swift or house martin box on your home? Also moving was the ptarmigan, this time from green to red. Ptarmigan numbers are assessed using game bag data, which shows that the numbers shot have declined by 80% since the 1960s. You might hope that this would stop people shooting them but this doesn't seem to have worked for the already red-listed woodcock. Montagu's harrier also moved from amber to red.

## Tis the season to be jolly ...

... so here are a couple of festive upland items for you. Should any of you feel inspired to sing the 12 upland days of Christmas, please please share it with us! Answers to the cryptic clues will appear in the next newsletter.

12 upland days of Christmas

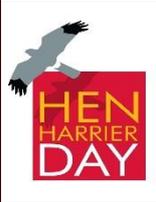
- A hen harrier skydancing
- 2 ring ouzels
- 3 black grouse lekking
- 4 dippers dipping
- 5 red squirrels
- 6 eagles soaring

- 7 curlew calling
- 8 ravens croaking
- 9 golden plovers
- 10 hares a-leaping
- 11 redshank piping
- 12 snipe drumming

#### Cryptic upland birds

1. Eats dragonflies in spare time? (5)
2. Crow found in four avengers' gatherings. (5)
3. Led back round semi-aquatic mammal found high on mountain. (8)
4. Fool gets point eventually. (5)
5. Consumed in summer, linnets beware. (6)
6. A weather puzzle for migrant. (8)
7. Communist's complaint. (3, 6)
8. Like a rolling conversation. (9)
9. Chicken takes off vertically. (3, 7)
10. A tramping error on mountain top. (9)

Everyone at Hen Harrier Action wishes you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. 2022 should be exciting: nestcams, Skydancer Day, the return of on the ground events and Scottish DGS licensing plans. See in you January!



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