



for birds
for people
for ever



Peak Malpractice

What's happening to wildlife in the
Peak District National Park





Populations of some protected birds are declining from the woods and moors of the Dark Peak. If this part of the Peak District National Park is a no-go zone for some of Britain's most cherished wildlife, it reinforces the **urgent need** for statutory agencies, voluntary groups and landowners to protect wild birds and **tackle any criminal activity** against wildlife with renewed vigour and determination.

What's happening to wildlife in the Peak District National Park?

A walk across the moorlands and through the valleys of the Dark Peak in spring and summer is enriched by the sight and sound of nesting birds: the evocative, bubbling call of curlews, the drumming display of snipe, the aerobatics of ravens and the brief dash of the spectacular goshawk.

Much of the Dark Peak is privately-owned moorland managed for driven grouse-shooting. In part, this has shaped the landscape of the Dark Peak. The heather moors have been maintained by management for grouse-shooting, whereas many other moors were heavily grazed or planted with trees. These open heather moors are now valuable for ground-nesting birds.

But some species are absent. Others are much rarer than they should be. The suite of wildlife is incomplete and so is a visit to the Dark Peak. **Peak Malpractice** is published by the RSPB in the belief that this is unacceptable in 2006.

After more than a century of population crash and near-extinction, the recovery of birds of prey (often known collectively as raptors) in the UK in the last three decades is a welcome sign of a more tolerant attitude towards these magnificent birds, combined with enhanced legal protection and a ban on organochlorine pesticides.

Ospreys are now breeding in England and Wales, buzzards are spreading back into lowland farmland in eastern Britain, and the reintroduction of red kites to England and Scotland has been a great success.

However, the recovery has not been uniform, and there are still parts of Britain, particularly the uplands, from which many of these raptors are absent. Even worse, detailed monitoring has revealed that in some parts of the country, birds of prey are declining once again.

The northern moorland area of the Peak District National Park is known as the Dark Peak. Sadly for birds of prey, it's very dark indeed.

During the last decade, some species have declined dramatically, in marked contrast to other parts of the country. There appears to be a 'postcode lottery', with birds nesting in certain areas faring far worse than others. In the north-eastern part of the Dark Peak, breeding goshawks have disappeared, and the breeding success of several other species is poor.

The continued declines of some species and a series of incidents in recent years has led to our call for urgent action.

Studies across the UK show many examples where birds of prey, particularly peregrines, golden eagles and hen harriers, fare much worse when they nest on moors managed for driven grouse-shooting.^{1,2,3,4}

Concerns about the decline of raptors in the Dark Peak prompted the development of the Peak Nestwatch Partnership in 2000 (see box).

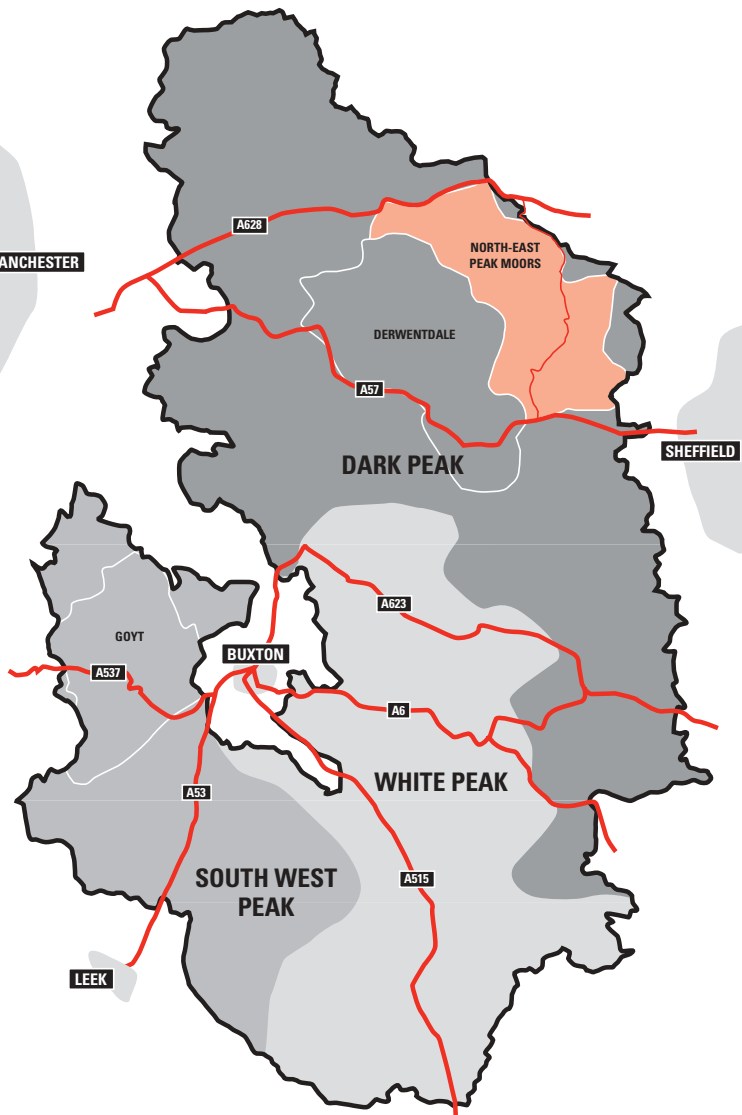
The Peak Nestwatch Partnership

Derwentdale in the Derbyshire Peak District has held a small but stable population of goshawks for more than 30 years. Following evidence that the success of nesting goshawks had declined from the mid-1990s, the Peak Nestwatch Partnership was formed in 2000.

This partnership comprises Severn Trent Water, National Trust, the RSPB, Peak District National Park Authority, Forestry Commission, English Nature, South Yorkshire and Derbyshire Police and the South Peak Raptor Study Group. The partnership employs a variety of intelligence and surveillance techniques on vulnerable nests, and has enabled thousands of people to watch peregrines, goshawks and other upland birds in the valley, through guided walks, observation points and a CCTV nestwatch.



Species of conservation concern in the Dark Peak



In spring 2004, the Moors for the Future project* undertook a major survey of moorland birds across 500 km² in the Peak District National Park, a follow-up to one in the same area in 1990.⁵ The survey found that numbers of curlews, lapwings, snipe, red grouse and several songbirds associated with the moorland edge and watercourses had increased since 1990. By contrast, numbers of twites, redshanks, meadow pipits and ring ouzels had declined.

The increases in many of these special upland birds is very welcome and illustrates the importance of heather, blanket bog and grassland habitats. It also indicates that, across the Peak moorlands as a whole, there is no reason why good habitat management cannot lead to increases in populations of raptors and their prey, including ground-nesting waders and songbirds.

Across all the moors of the Peak District, the survey found that peregrines, merlins, short-eared owls and ravens were more abundant, but that goshawk sightings had fallen by over 30%. More detailed studies by Peak raptor fieldworkers, licensed by English Nature, reveal a more accurate picture. Although not covering precisely the same land as Moors for the Future, their data provide a more accurate trend in populations and breeding success of some of the rarest birds in Derwentdale and the north-east moors.

Licensed field workers have monitored all the raptor and raven nesting areas every year; the disappearance is real and not a reflection of reduced effort or of their visits.

The nesting habitat for all these species is still suitable and there is abundant prey. Illegal theft of chicks and eggs for falconry or by egg-collectors could account for some of the poor productivity, but these crimes have reduced dramatically across the UK in the last decade. We believe this has been helped by the increased use of birds' DNA in investigations and the introduction of custodial sentences for wildlife offences.

*Moors for the Future is a partnership of English Nature, National Trust, the Peak District National Park Authority, United Utilities, Severn Trent Water, Yorkshire Water, Sheffield City Council, Peak Park Moorland Owners and Tenants Association, Defra, Country Land and Business Association and the National Farmers' Union, supported by the National Heritage Lottery Fund.



Curlew numbers have increased in the Peak Park since 1990



The Peak District is one of the most highly-protected areas in Europe

Illegal killing of wildlife in the north-east Peak

The RSPB's Species Protection Database is a unique collation of incidents and crimes committed against protected wild birds. These include the destruction of birds, their eggs and nests. It is the only database of its kind in the UK and is registered with the Home Office under the Data Protection Act 1998.

The database cannot fully measure the number of incidents against birds in the UK – those recorded represent only the tip of the iceberg.

We present just three illustrative examples of incidents from the Dark Peak that we believe indicate birds of prey were deliberately targeted.

Gamekeeper convicted for goshawk nest destruction

In January 2004, Reg Cripps, a gamekeeper from Derwentdale, was convicted of recklessly disturbing a goshawk and destroying its eggs. He was sentenced to a three-month imprisonment, suspended.

The conviction followed an incident in April 2002 when members of the South Peak Raptor Group heard a goshawk alarm-calling and saw Mr Cripps and another gamekeeper emerging from Forestry Commission woodland close to an active nest. With the RSPB, the nest was checked under a licence from English Nature and the female found to be incubating. However, when the nest was checked again a few days later, the tree had been climbed and the nest and eggs had been destroyed.

Derbyshire Police searched the addresses of both gamekeepers and found climbing irons and a game-keeping diary at the home of Mr Cripps. The diary contained coded entries that the District Judge at

Buxton Magistrates' Court was satisfied related to the illegal persecution of nine peregrines, two goshawks, two ravens and a sparrowhawk in a four month period in Derwentdale in early 2002. However, since the precise method of destruction could not be established, he concluded that any conviction would be unsafe.

The District Judge found Mr Cripps guilty of recklessly disturbing the goshawk and destroying its eggs. On appeal at Derby Crown Court the judge upheld the original verdict, concluding that even if Mr Cripps had not climbed the tree himself, he was certainly present at the time, that it was under his orchestration and using his climbing spikes.

Moorland pigeon lure

In January 2005, a pigeon lure was found in use on open moorland in the north-east Peak, with a Land Rover parked nearby. Arable farmers use these lures (model pigeons on a rotating frame) to entice pigeons so they can be shot under a Defra General Licence that permits authorised persons to destroy woodpigeons and feral pigeons to prevent serious damage to crops or for public health and safety reasons. However, there is no reason why pigeons should be lured for shooting on a heather moor, where they would not cause serious agricultural damage nor pose a health and safety risk.

However, responding to the moving model pigeons, goshawks and peregrines are attracted to such lures, where they can be vulnerable to shooting.

Incidents confirmed in the north-east Peak during 1998-2005.

Date	Species	Incident
May 1998	Goshawk	Entire clutch of eggs went missing from nest
March 2000	Raven	Nest containing eggs completely removed
April 2002	Goshawk	Active nest destroyed; gamekeeper convicted
April 2004	Peregrine	Man with rifle approached nest, but ran off when challenged. Nest later failed
April 2004	Buzzard	Bird found with both legs broken, consistent with trapping
May 2004	Non-specific	Illegal poison bait found containing mevinphos
January 2005	Non-specific	Pigeon lure found in use on moorland
May 2005	Peregrine	Chicks found dead with signs of human disturbance
May 2005	Buzzard	Poisoned with strychnine





After going extinct in Britain at the end of the 19th century, goshawks started to breed again in the Peak District in the 1960s, but have declined rapidly here in recent years



Woodland tape lure

At the end of 2002, a member of the public heard the loud noise of a screeching bird of prey coming from woodland late one evening. The witness subsequently watched two men – dressed in camouflage gear, carrying shotguns and a sound amplification system – emerge from the wood. Tapes of calls can be used to attract birds of prey. There is no legitimate reason why anyone armed with a shotgun would play bird of prey calls near a known goshawk roost site.

Unexplained nest failures

In addition to these confirmed incidents there are many examples of goshawk, peregrine and raven nests that failed inexplicably, when eggs, chicks or whole nests went missing.

Volunteer fieldworkers monitor closely the fortunes of many territories, and in many instances the adults are present at the beginning of the breeding season, but then vanish mysteriously.

We can only speculate as to what happens to these birds, but scientific evidence and experience from investigations and convictions across the UK suggests that human interference at the nest or the killing of one or both of the adults is a frequent cause of failure.

Moorland managers sometimes contend that raptor monitoring is responsible for such nest failures. In fact, there is no evidence that these surveys have any effect on the nesting success of birds. The fieldworkers have years of experience, operate under a licence from English Nature (for Schedule 1 species) and monitoring is carefully co-ordinated to ensure that nests are not visited more than necessary.

Trends in protected species in the north-east Peak

Goshawk

Goshawks were once widespread in woodland, but, in 1883, became the first raptor to be persecuted to extinction in Britain. Following unofficial releases by falconers, goshawks regained a foothold in the Peak District in 1966 and a small population has developed since. Goshawks are uncommon and elusive, but the moors and woodlands between Sheffield and Holmfirth were well known by birdwatchers as the place to see them in the 1970s and '80s. Recent years have, however, seen a dramatic downturn in their fortunes.

The fortunes of goshawks in the north-east Peak took a serious downturn in 1999, when several nests failed for no obvious reason. From a well-established population of 7–11 nesting pairs in the 1990s, the species has been lost as a breeding bird from woodland around the north-east moors since 2002. This was preceded by a dramatic decline in the number of chicks successfully fledged at each nest (see figure 3 on page 8).

No young have been raised on the north-east moors since 2000, when just one chick was reared from four occupied territories.

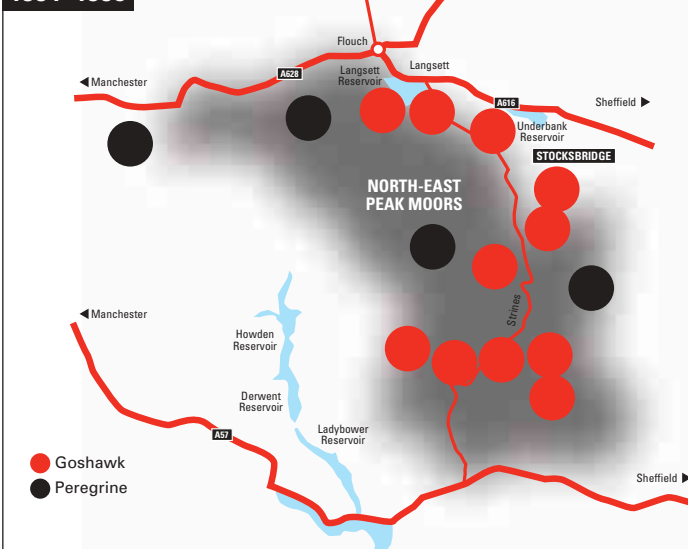
To the south-west, in Derwentdale, the mean number of occupied goshawk territories has dropped, from seven each year in 1997–2001, to under five a year in 2002–05. In 1999 and 2000, the 14 territories (seven in each year) fledged just three young. None fledged at all from three nests in 2002.

Adult goshawks remain on their territory throughout the year, but despite being a popular area with birdwatchers and raptor fieldworkers, sightings over the north-east moors have been very infrequent since 2000.

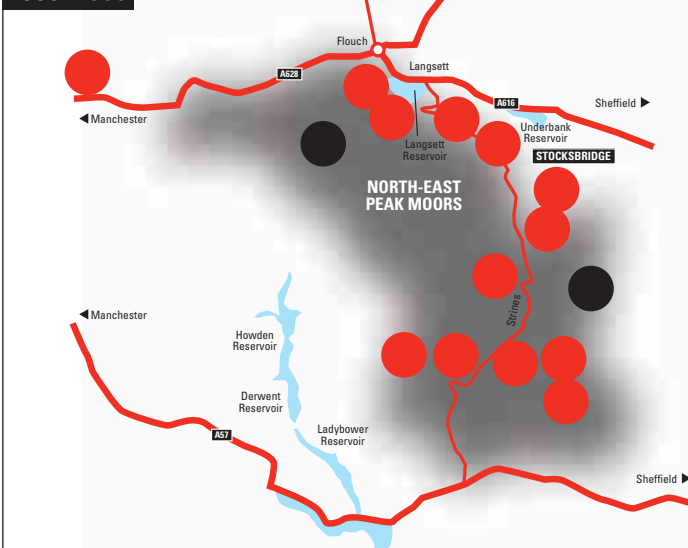
Studies show that vacant territories are usually occupied by two-year-old birds.⁶ The absence of both adult and immature birds suggests that adults are disappearing from this area, and are not being replaced by immature birds because none have been produced in the locality for several years. Goshawks are sedentary, usually breeding in the area they hatched; studies show an average distance of only 21 km between a goshawk fledging and where it subsequently nests.⁸

When a population is becoming established, the number of young raised is usually high, but it reduces when the population has stabilised. In South Wales,

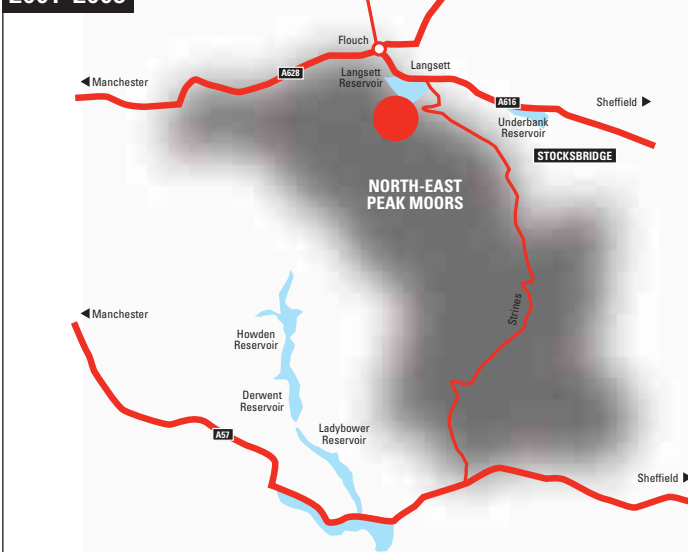
1991–1995



1996–2000



2001–2005



Territories occupied by goshawks and peregrines on the north-east Peak Moors, 1991–2005. **Stable populations have crashed in the last five years.** Not all territories were occupied every year.

Figure 1 The decline of goshawks as a breeding species from the north-east Peak District.

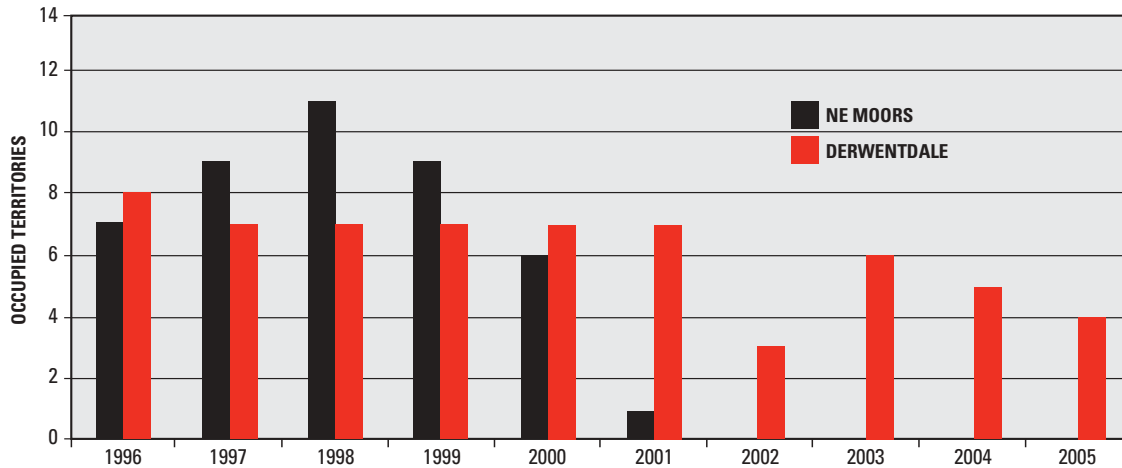


Figure 2 Mean goshawk productivity (average no. of chicks per nest) from several UK populations. Goshawks in the north-east Peak consistently produce fewer young than elsewhere.

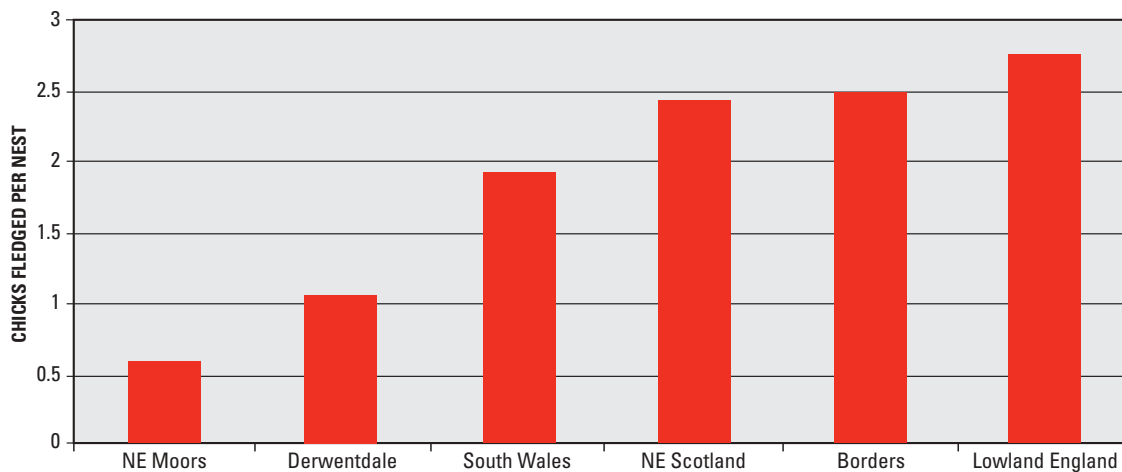
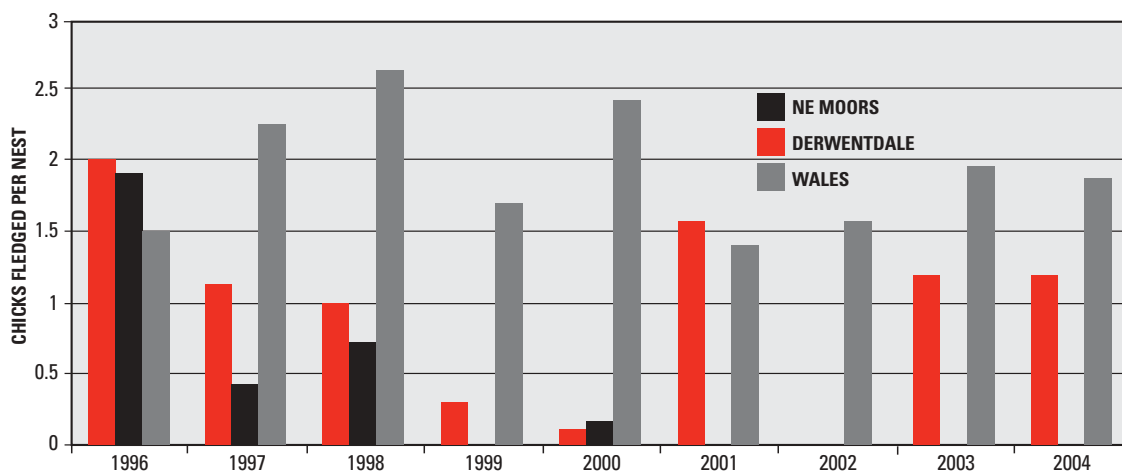


Figure 3 Mean goshawk productivity (average no. of chicks per nest) in the north-east Peak and a population in South Wales.



Data sources: North-east Peak (43 nests, 10 years) and Derwentdale (61 nests, 10 years): Peak Raptor Study Groups; South Wales (306 nests, 9 years): Jerry Lewis; North-east Scotland (127 nests, 25 years): Borders (522 nests, 25 years): Marquiss *et al.* 2003; Lowland England study area (45 nests, 8 years): Anon, 1990⁹.

for example, goshawk productivity fell from 2.75 young per nest in 1979–90 to 1.5–2 young per nest during the last decade as the population has settled at around 35 pairs (Jerry Lewis, unpubl.).

In the north-east Peak, where the density of goshawks is lower than other areas, one would expect the breeding success to be higher. However, the number of chicks fledged is less than half that of other areas of Britain (figure 2). Over the last nine years, a stable population in South Wales has produced more than twice as many young goshawks from each nest than in the north-east Peak.

Ringed recoveries show that 42% of the known deaths of ringed goshawks in Britain were 'deliberately taken by man' – a remarkable finding given that killing goshawks has been a criminal offence since 1954.⁸

The criminal killing of goshawks is considered to be the primary constraint on the increase in goshawk numbers across parts of Britain.⁸ There is no indication that suitable nest sites have become less available in the north-east Peak, nor that the food available has declined. Goshawks' diet in the UK comprises mainly rabbits, squirrels, pigeons, crows and gamebirds.⁷ Most of these prey are readily available in the north-east Peak, and prey, such as waders, red grouse and songbirds, has increased on the adjacent moorland.⁵ So why have goshawks disappeared?

Peregrine

Peregrines suffered a global population crash during the 1950s and '60s following the effects of organochlorine pesticides such as DDT which weakens their eggshells, causing them to crush during incubation. Numbers gradually recovered following a ban on the agricultural use of these chemicals, and peregrines started breeding again in the Peak District in 1981. Peregrines usually nest on vegetated cliff ledges and tend to be very traditional in their use of nest sites.

Although nests sites are limited, in Derwentdale two to four peregrine territories have been occupied every year since 1996. Around the north-east moors, however, where there were three pairs as recently as 1996, they have not even appeared at the breeding sites since 2000. This was preceded by two years of total breeding failure. If left unmolested, peregrines will normally return to the same nest site every year.

In the Dark Peak, there are several traditional peregrine eyries.

- At eyrie A, close to the north-east moors, a pair successfully reared chicks each year from 1996 to 1998, then failed in 1999 and 2000, with no sign of any birds since. This failure pattern mirrors the loss of goshawks in the same area.



Peregrines usually thrive on moorlands with suitable nesting crags and an abundance of food



- At eyrie B, on the west side of Derwentdale, nesting peregrines were successful every year from 1984 to 1998. Then they suffered complete breeding failure from 1999 to 2004. In 2005, a public viewing hide was set up by the National Trust overlooking the nest – and the pair successfully raised four chicks.
- At eyrie C, on the eastern side of Derwentdale, the nest has suffered complete failure every year from 1999 to 2005. In 2004, South Yorkshire and Derbyshire Police observed a man in camouflage gear with a rifle above the nest, more than 2 km from the nearest road. He ran away when challenged. An adult peregrine went missing soon afterwards and the nest failed. In 2005, fieldworkers discovered the chicks dead in the nest, with fresh human footprints close by.

As with the goshawks, there is no indication that there is less food or fewer nest sites available that would prevent the peregrines being more successful.

Statements disclosed during court proceedings in 2004 revealed that a local gamekeeper, Reg Cripps, had stated that one pair of nesting peregrines was enough, and of goshawks, that something would need to be done as there were too many. It is not an offence to express an opinion, of course, but it emphasised his attitude towards the birds.

Ravens

Ravens are charismatic members of the crow family and familiar to many people as the birds that live in the Tower of London. Like all birds in Britain, ravens are fully protected by law but their habit of feeding on dead animals makes them susceptible to illegal poisoning. They also feed on birds' eggs and chicks, which makes them unpopular with some game shooting estates. Like peregrines, they have traditional nests on cliff faces and will add sticks to their nests each year. Some nests are enormous and will be used for decades.

Ravens returned to nest in Derbyshire in 1992 after nearly 100 years without regular breeding. Intensive gamekeeping is considered to have removed ravens from large tracts of the British countryside during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In recent decades, ravens have started to recover, taking advantage of plentiful food and nesting sites, often using quarries. The north-east moors are evidently attractive to ravens, holding at least one-third of the 18 pairs confirmed in the 2004 Moors for the Future survey.⁵

However, detailed studies show that nesting success is poor in Derwentdale, where ravens fledged only 1.4 young per nest each year during 1996–2005.

Ravens in the north-east Peak produce fewer chicks than elsewhere in Britain

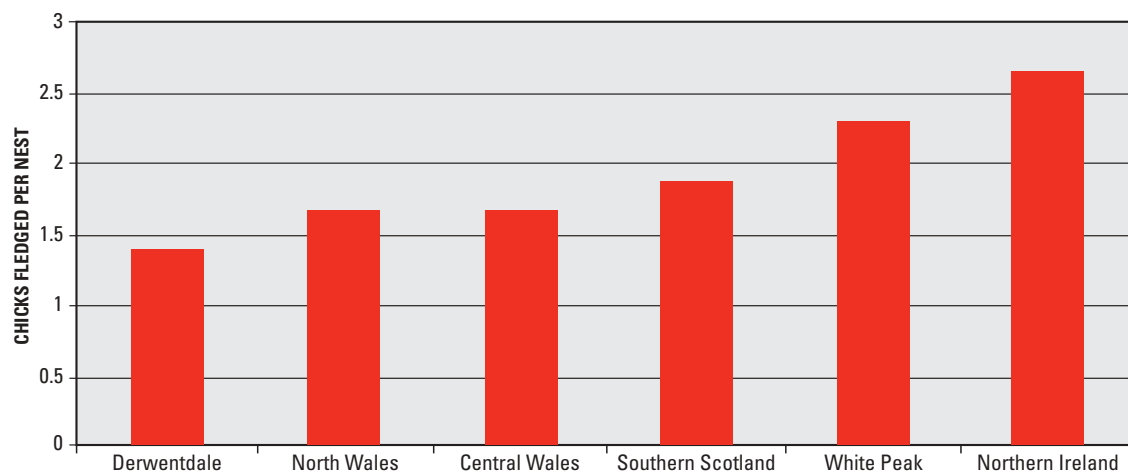


This is lower than any published long-term study in Britain and paltry compared to 2.3 young per nest in the White Peak, where there is no driven grouse-shooting.

Why have ravens not enjoyed the same breeding success in Derwentdale as in the White Peak and elsewhere in the UK?

In 2000, a raven's nest containing eggs was entirely removed from a cliff site shared with peregrines in eastern Derwentdale and the chicks were removed from a second nest before they had fledged. Birds such as ravens go to considerable effort to build up nest sites, often re-using the same nest every year.

Figure 4 Mean raven productivity (average number of chicks per nest) from several UK populations.¹⁰ Ravens in Derwentdale consistently produce fewer young than elsewhere.



Data sources: Derwentdale (18 pairs, 9 years): Peak Raptor Study Groups; North Wales (53 pairs, 29 years): D. A. Ratcliffe; Central Wales (304 pairs, 5 years): P. E. Davis and J. E. Davis; Southern Scotland (108 pairs, 6 years): C. Rollie and C. Roxburgh; White Peak (119 pairs, 8 years): Peak Raptor Study Groups; Northern Ireland (670 pairs, 13 years): J. H. Wells.

Breath-taking scenery attracts visitors from all over the world to the Peak District





Buzzards are curiously absent from certain parts of the Peak District



Buzzard

The recovery of buzzards, particularly into eastern Britain, is a welcome indication of a reduction in historic persecution, particularly on lowland farms and estates. The bird is an increasingly common resident in the Peak District, but its recovery is patchy. Although there is plenty of suitable habitat in the wooded valleys, they only nest sporadically in the north-east Peak. In contrast some estates elsewhere in the Peak hold more than a dozen pairs.

In April 2004, a buzzard was found dead in woodland near Strines Reservoir. Both legs were broken, an injury consistent with illegal pole trapping.

In February 2005, a buzzard was found dead in Derwentdale. It had been illegally poisoned with strychnine, and a post-mortem examination showed its right leg had been cut off after death. It is considered likely that the leg was removed after death because it had been fitted with a unique leg ring that could have helped to trace its origin.

Merlin

Merlins are small falcons that nest in long heather and feed mainly on small birds and large flying insects. They rarely eat gamebirds and most gamekeepers are usually content to allow them to breed. Even so, merlins can suffer as a result of moorland management because long heather is targeted for burning by gamekeepers and sheep farmers. In 2003, a merlin territory in Derwentdale failed following a controlled heather burn in April. Another pair disappeared from the Dark Peak in April 2004 following a similar burn. English Nature, the RSPB and the National Trust all support a ban on heather burning after 31 March in order to protect nesting upland birds.

Merlin nests sometimes fail following heather-burning, which is permitted until 15 April when several species are already nesting



The sickening sight of a poisoned buzzard. A legal loophole allows anyone to possess highly-toxic pesticides capable of killing birds of prey



Badgers

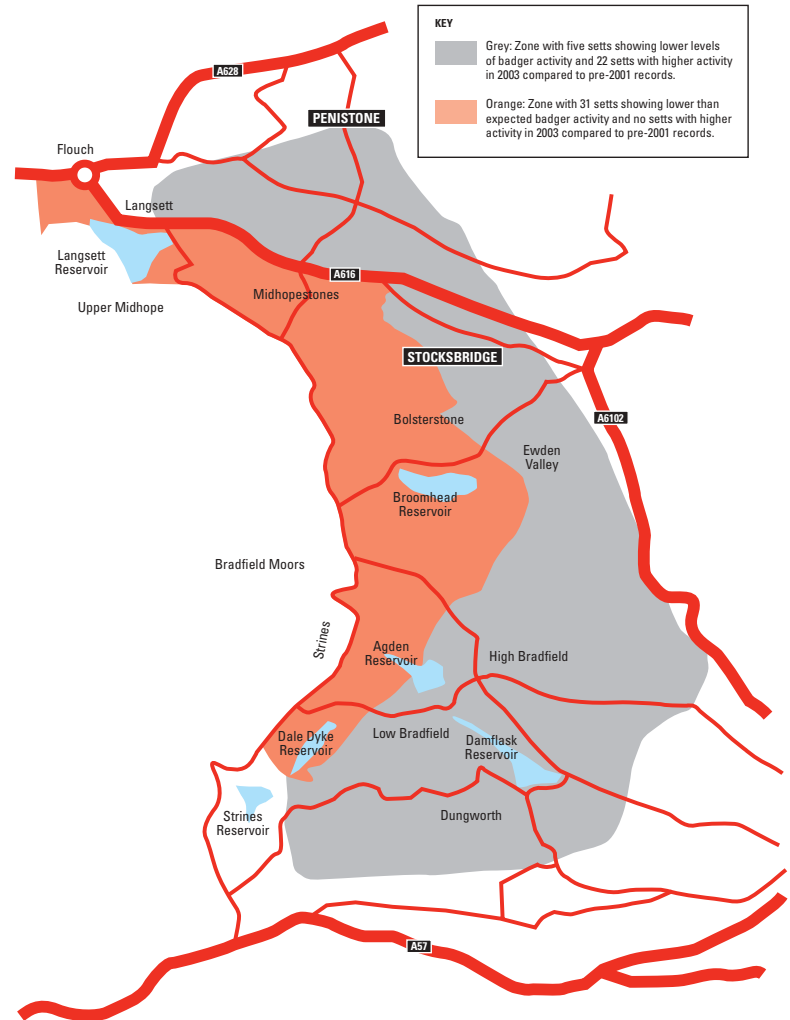
The South Yorkshire Badger Group (SYBG) regularly monitors badger activity in the north-east Peak; their members have considerable experience of the evidence of activity expected around occupied setts. A SYBG survey in 2003 compared the levels of activity at setts with those prior to 2001, when the woods and moors had been effectively closed to the public during the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak.

The group had been refused access to survey setts on the grouse moors, so they could only survey those on land away from the moors.

Many of the setts in the study area had been occupied for decades, yet adjacent to the moor a significant number (29%) of setts showed low or very low badger activity compared to pre-2001, whereas this was the case at few setts (<2%) in the area further away from the moor.

The SYBG found no evidence of digging at the setts and so concluded that their disappearance was not a result of illegal badger-baiting. Their report speculates whether badgers from these setts had been illegally snared or poisoned.

During the survey, an injured badger was found trapped by a snare around its middle close to the Strines Road. Veterinary examination showed that it had been wounded for two or three days, and that it had been scarred by a snare previously. The people who found it reported three more dead badgers in snares in the same area.



Regular monitoring of setts has raised concerns about badgers disappearing from some of their traditional territories



Other birds in the Peak District



The hen harrier is the bird most affected by illegal killing and human interference in England

One species notable by its complete absence from the National Park is the hen harrier, while two red kites – almost certainly from the reintroduction schemes elsewhere in England – have been found dead here.

Hen harrier

The hen harrier, relative to its population size, is England's most persecuted bird of prey.⁹ From the late 19th century until the 1930s, this species was confined to the Orkney Islands and the Outer Hebrides, eliminated from mainland Britain by persecution from game-shooting interests.¹ Hen harriers are rarely targeted by egg collectors and are not used for falconry. They usually nest on heather moors, but a large-scale study in Scotland showed that their survival and nesting success on moors with driven grouse-shoots was far lower than those nesting away from grouse moors.¹ It is a very similar story in England, with very few successful nests on driven grouse moors.⁹ Hen harriers are occasionally seen on the moors of the north-east Peak, but rarely do they settle, even though the habitat is suitable.

In 1997, a pair of hen harriers successfully raised four young in the Goyt Valley, west of Buxton, the first in Derbyshire for 127 years. They were protected day and night with the full co-operation of the landowner, United Utilities, and a public viewing scheme was established by the RSPB. Thousands

of people visited the viewing point, bringing additional money into the local economy. However, the window of the wardens' car was blasted out with a shotgun.

Hen harriers were seen in the Goyt in subsequent seasons but did not settle to nest again until 2003. Two eggs were laid but both the male and female disappeared suspiciously. When the nest was checked, the eggs had disappeared and a fresh shotgun cartridge was found next to the empty nest.

A pair of hen harriers reappeared in the Goyt Valley in 2004, with a second pair in the north-east moors. Perhaps they would breed once again? They displayed tirelessly at both sites, indicating that a nest site had been chosen.

In the Goyt Valley, a man spent several hours driving randomly across the prospective nesting area in an all-terrain vehicle (ATV), while a helicopter flew very low over the same area in an apparently co-ordinated action with the ATV. A helicopter operated in the same way at the site in the north-east Peak, more than 15 miles away, where hen harriers had been displaying. Police enquiries were unable to determine who was involved in either incident. Hen harriers subsequently disappeared from both sites.

Both sites are Sites of Special Scientific Interest and consent by English Nature was required to undertake disturbance of this nature. No consent was requested on either moor.

Red kite

Red kites were once common and widespread in Britain, but persecution forced them to retrench to a few remote valleys in central Wales in the early 20th century. Intense protection by landowners, the RSPB and other kite enthusiasts prevented their extinction. Since the late 1980s, a scheme involving the RSPB and English Nature has reintroduced red kites to four areas in England, with birds released at a further three sites in Scotland by the RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage.

The kites attract thousands of visitors, contribute to the rural economy and have helped to foster good relations between landowners, gamekeepers and conservationists.¹²

The number of red kite sightings in the Peak District has increased during the last decade but, sadly, at least two birds have died in the area. In March 2003, a dead red kite was found next to a half-eaten grouse on the same moor in the Goyt Valley where a hen harrier breeding attempt failed later that spring. Analysis showed that the dead grouse had been laced with deadly carbofuran, and the kite had been poisoned by eating this bait.

Loopholes in the law

Removing the nests of ravens and other birds outside the breeding season is entirely legal in England and Wales, whereas in Scotland, legislation is in place to protect the nests of certain vulnerable species throughout the year. Yet, the removal of traditional nests may make breeding less likely in future seasons.

Highly toxic pesticides are a real risk to wildlife, farm animals, pets and children. Remarkably, there is no legal requirement for an individual to account for why they hold a particular pesticide – for which they may have no legitimate use – providing it is appropriately stored. Carbofuran – abused to kill the red kite in the Goyt Valley (see page 14) – is a pesticide previously licensed for use against nematodes on root crops, such as carrots, that was banned in the UK in 2001. Even when it was legal, there was no legitimate reason for its use on a heather moor, but over the last 10 years it has become the most regularly abused pesticide for the killing of birds of prey and it is clear that illegal stockpiles have been maintained.

The Government proposes to tackle these loopholes in the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill currently before Parliament. It would provide year-round protection of the nests of certain species, though the raven is not currently included on the proposed schedule. It would also make it an offence to possess certain pesticides where the holder had no legitimate use for it.

Disturbance of the kind suffered by the hen harriers in 2004 is illegal under the European Union Birds Directive, which protects birds from disturbance during the 'period of breeding and rearing'.

Displaying at and defending their territory and building their nest are all integral parts of breeding and rearing for birds. However, the law in England and Wales does not fully reflect European law, so it is difficult for the Crown Prosecution Service to bring a case to court until eggs have been laid in the nest. In Scotland, by contrast, the laws protecting birds are stronger, with legislation that prevents the intentional or reckless harassment of certain birds at any time of year.



The red kite re-introduction programme has been one of the conservation success stories of recent times



Merlins feed mainly on meadow pipits so pose little threat to grouse-shooting interests



Protected for wildlife?

The moorlands of the north-east Peak are a national and local asset. They provide a stunning backdrop and are an integral part of the experience for the second most visited national park in the world. They have all the protective labels: designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds; a Special Area for Conservation (SAC) for special habitats; and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified for its breeding merlins, short-eared owls, golden plovers and curlews. The Government target is for 95% of SSSIs in England to be in favourable condition

or recovering by 2010. Only 32% of the primary habitats in the study area is identified by English Nature as being in favourable condition. The primary reasons for failure are inappropriate heather burning (72% of all units in unfavourable condition) and overgrazing (33%).

With most of the moorland failing to meet the minimum standards, time is running out to demonstrate that the current land management is good for wildlife.

Biological condition of SSSI in Derwentdale and the north-east moors, classified according to English Nature's site condition assessment (at 1 January 2006)

	Favourable	Unfavourable (recovering)	Unfavourable (no change)	Unfavourable (declining)
Derwentdale	580 ha	1425 ha	1785 ha	2865 ha
North-east moors	1014 ha	1000 ha	2304 ha	1705 ha
TOTAL	1594 ha	2425 ha	4089 ha	4570 ha

Hen harriers have nested successfully in the Peak District just once in 130 years, with several attempts failing in recent years





Today's visitors to the Peak District would be very lucky to see a goshawk



Peregrines are one of the many birds that make the Peak District such a special place for wildlife



Conclusions

The area from which protected species featured in this report have declined and disappeared is land that is dominated by driven grouse-shooting. During the 20th century, management to produce a shootable surplus of red grouse has been a significant buttress against the alternative uses of the land: sheep farming or forestry plantations.

The habitat management and/or legal control of crows, foxes, stoats and weasels has helped to maintain populations of ground-nesting waders.¹³ There are exciting initiatives underway to restore blanket bog and moorland in the Peak, and the Moors for the Future survey provides encouraging evidence that several bird species, declining nationally, have increased in the Peak District during the last 15 years.

However, in the area that has been monitored in more detail, raptor fieldworkers and the South Yorkshire Badger Group show that the wildlife jigsaw of the Dark Peak is missing some vital pieces:

- **Goshawks have much lower nesting success than elsewhere in Britain and have now been extinguished as a breeding species from the north-east moors.**
- **Successful breeding by peregrines is now intermittent, with a history of repeated nest failures and unexplained losses during the breeding season.**
- **Ravens nest less successfully in Derwentdale than other areas of Britain, including the nearby White Peak.**
- **An inexplicably large proportion of badger setts in woods adjacent to grouse moors showed unexpectedly low levels of activity.**

In the Dark Peak, 1999-2001 was a watershed, when goshawks, peregrines and ravens started to decline and badgers disappeared from strongholds on the edge of these moors.

There are numerous examples of deliberate destruction of birds of prey on grouse-shooting estates across England and Scotland.^{1,2,3,4} Sadly, we fear, this may be another entry in that sorrowful catalogue, but in few places have the fortunes of these birds deteriorated so much and so rapidly. The scale of the decline is shocking and to raptor experts there is no logical explanation other than illegal killing and interference.

The casual visitor might ask how this can be allowed to happen on land with some of the strongest legal protection in Europe, where estates receive thousands of pounds of public money from agri-environment payments.

Local people and visitors to Derwentdale and the north-east moors are being denied the full, rich experience of the uplands. For some birds of prey, ravens and badgers, this really is a matter of life or death.

This report does not lay the blame at any particular door. But, if this part of the Dark Peak is becoming a no-go zone for some of Britain's most cherished wildlife, it reinforces the urgent need for statutory agencies, voluntary groups and landowners to protect wild birds and tackle any criminal activity against wildlife with renewed vigour and determination.



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Photographs

Cover	Goshawk (Peter Cairns, rspb-images.com)
p2	Goshawk (Roy Mangersnes, www.wildphoto.no)
p4	Curlew (Mark Hamblin) Langsett Moors (RSPB)
p6	Goshawk at nest (Carlos Sanchez, rspb-images.com) Goshawk in flight (Mark Hamblin, rspb-images.com) Goshawk (Niall Benvie)
p9	Peregrine falcon (Mark Hamblin, rspb-images.com) Peregrine at nest site (RSPB) Peregrine in rain (Mark Hamblin, rspb-images.com)
p10	Raven (John Lawton Roberts, rspb-images.com) Raven in flight (Chris Gomersall, rspb-images.com)
p11	Ladybower Reservoir (RSPB)
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p17	Goshawk (Mark Hamblin, rspb-images.com) Birdwatchers (RSPB) Peregrine (Mark Hamblin)





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The RSPB is the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all.

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