

Birds of Bowland

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Snowy Bowland fells from Longrigg Fell
© Gavin Thomas RSPB

2011 breeding season on the United Utilities Estate

Sitting here writing this on a hot and sunny August afternoon, cold, wet, March seems like a long time ago. So much anticipation back then about what the season would bring! It certainly brought a mixture of weather, March being cold and miserable, April a scorcher with the moorlands across the country being closed due to wildfire risk and with May returning to heavy rain, low cloud and general misery – all of which the birds up on the moors had to contend with.

Unfortunately, the hen harriers didn't fare very well. Despite an encouraging number of pairs being present throughout March, many of these did not result in the birds nesting. Out of the seven nesting attempts that were made, only four nests were successful, and these fledged twelve young. Although this continues the disappointing trend of the last couple of years, the figures remain only just short of the average number for the last 20 years which stands at 4.8 successful nests and 13.1 fledglings.

Harriers really are hanging on by a thread as a breeding bird in England – less than ten nesting attempts but suitable habitat for over 300 pairs! The fact that this species is successfully breeding in England at all is a tribute to the work of United Utilities and their farming and shooting tenants, dedicated volunteer raptor fieldworkers, the police, the RSPB and Natural England.

Peregrines also had a bad year, fledging just four young from only two nests. However, things were a lot more positive for the merlins who managed to fledge seventeen from four nests.

The number of ring ouzel territories was also slightly up on last year with ten confirmed territories as were the numbers of cuckoos, with birds being heard and seen in nine locations across the estate. Mick Proctor, the seasonal assistant warden, was even lucky enough to see two juveniles on his travels, one being fed by a meadow pipit!

Then in mid July, just when the monitoring work was starting to quieten down a little, we had a very exciting report of two black grouse seen on the estate. Despite numerous attempts to gain a second sighting of the male and female birds nothing else has been seen of them, but we'll certainly keep looking!

I wouldn't be able to report on any of these figures without acknowledging the team of staff and volunteers who have put so much effort into gathering all this information. Thank you to all of you for your unwavering dedication and enthusiasm.

Jude Lane, RSPB

Blogging in Bowland

For those of you with an interest in the AONB's flagship raptor species, try checking out the RSPB's Skydancer blog. Blogs are posted by members of the RSPB's northern England team allowing you to follow the trials and tribulations of the hen harrier year. Winter is obviously a quiet time for harriers in the uplands but we'll ensure that we post about hen harrier related issues and keep you updated on the progress of some of this year's fledglings who were satellite tagged as part of Natural England's Hen Harrier Recovery project. Find the blog at www.rspb.org.uk/community click the 'our work' tab and then 'blogs' – happy reading!

Staff changes

We've had a change of staff in the RSPB since the last newsletter was produced. Jude Lane has taken over the role of Bowland Project Officer from Pete Wilson, monitoring the breeding hen harriers on the United Utilities Estate. Pete hasn't gone far though, he now works for United Utilities as their Biodiversity Officer in Bowland so is still on hand for help and advice when needed! Jude worked in the uplands of mid-Wales for the RSPB for two and a half years before moving up to Bowland and has thoroughly enjoyed her first seven months working on England's most important estate for breeding hen harriers. Jean Roberts who co-ordinated the Lapwing Trial Management Project left at the end of her contract in 2010. Jean continues to do sterling work with us as a volunteer undertaking breeding wader surveys on a number of Bowland farms.

30 years in Bowland

2011 marks the 30th anniversary of the RSPB working in partnership with United Utilities in the Forest of Bowland. The RSPB began working with UU in 1981 after hen harriers were found to have nested on the company's 24,000 acre Bowland estate. Over the last 30 years UU have funded a considerable amount of RSPB's work on the estate including employment of fieldworkers and provision of accommodation.

Initially the relationship consisted of seasonal staff being employed to help monitor and protect the nesting attempts but it was then decided that it would be advantageous to provide some continuity between staff and tenants. So in 1999, a more formal partnership was entered in to and became known as the Birds of Bowland Project. A full time member of staff was employed to monitor the harriers over the breeding season and to work with members of the estate and tenants through the rest of the

Skydancer Project

October 2011 saw the launch of the RSPB's Skydancer Project. Skydancer is a four year project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund with additional support from United Utilities, SITA trust and the Forestry Commission. The aim of the project is to protect and promote the conservation of hen harriers across their breeding areas in northern England.

Skydancer will focus on nest protection and community engagement and has appointed Blánaid Denman as the Skydancer Engagement Officer. Blánaid will be leading on the community engagement work, so hopefully you will come across her and be hearing a lot more about Skydancer and hen harriers over the next four years!

Blánaid and other RSPB colleagues will be working with local schools and community groups in the Forest of Bowland, delivering a comprehensive and inspiring programme of events and activities to raise the profile of this remarkable upland bird and demonstrate how valuable they are as part of the Forest of Bowland's natural heritage.

There will also be opportunities for students, landowners and managers to learn new land management skills which will conserve upland habitat for harriers. As hen harriers predate red grouse, the project will involve listening to the concerns of upland driven grouse moor managers to gain a greater understanding of the issue and identify potential opportunities.

The project hopes that by carrying out these activities, harrier numbers will be able to increase from their currently perilously low level to more sustainable numbers, and co-exist in the uplands with other rural businesses. So look out for Skydancer over the coming months and for opportunities to get involved, hopefully helping to secure a more sustainable future for hen harriers in our English uplands.

year, providing land management advice.

The project was also expanded, employing additional members of staff, to include working with farmers to encourage breeding waders such as lapwings, redshanks and snipe and a schools education project. Between 2005 and 2010 the role included advising and carrying out survey work for SCAAMP, the Sustainable Catchment Management project developed by UU and RSPB. The project was developed in order to improve raw water quality, deliver government targets for SSSI's, enhance biodiversity and ensure a sustainable future for the farming tenants.

The United Utilities estate is undoubtedly the single most important breeding site in England for hen harriers, averaging 71% of successful nesting attempts in England over the last 5 years.



Lapwing Trial Management Project

Spring 2010 was the final season of survey work for this five year project investigating how lapwing breeding success is affected by different levels of habitat management being delivered through farm agri-environment schemes.

Initial analysis of the data has thrown up some worrying findings, principal among these is that lapwings have continued to decline across Bowland. Lapwings have to fledge 0.7 chicks per pair for populations to remain stable and in each of the five years, productivity was below this figure.

Despite this, there is some good news; lapwings nesting on Bowland farms in agri-environment schemes had a significantly higher breeding success with productivity per pair of 0.54 chicks compared to 0.24 chicks on land not in agri-environment schemes. Clearly, getting more land into positive management for these birds remains a key element in securing their long-term future in Bowland.

Rough grazing and pastures with scattered rush tussocks and late cut meadows provide good lapwing habitat. Maintaining wet areas in fields is extremely important for providing food sources for young chicks.

For advice on saving Bowland's lapwings and getting funding to help do so get in touch with the Wader Project on 07814462429.

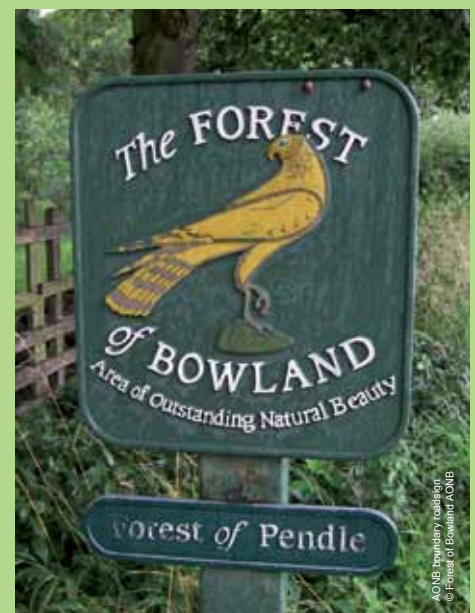
Bowland Lapwing Champion is now National Sheep Champion!

Simon Stott of Laund Farm, Chipping, former winner the RSPB's National Lapwing Champion Award, has recently been crowned The Farmer's Weekly National Sheep Farmer of the Year. The judges said 'Simon symbolises all that is great about British sheep farming. Excellent standards of traditional stockmanship, combined with innovation in tapping into a new market. His vision around environmental stewardship and education is also inspiring'. Inspiring indeed as Simon is a clear example of how first class profitable farming can deliver first class habitat for our country's increasingly impoverished wildlife.

Simon has been working with the RSPB for over ten years now to provide quality habitat for Lapwings (or Tewits as they are known locally!) and other wildlife on his farm through Natural England's Higher Level Stewardship scheme. Simon states that 'when you farm intensively you have to put a bit back and it's working well for us here. Having a thriving population of Tewits is just as important to me as the commercial side of the business'. Simon is keen to re-connect the public with farming and the countryside so if you'd like to see for yourself how award winning farming caters for our dinner tables and our farmland wildlife call Simon or Rachael Stott on 01995 61348.

Global Responsible Tourism Accolade for Bowland

The Forest of Bowland AONB is delighted to have been named the runner-up for the 'Best Destination' award at the International Responsible Tourism Awards. It was presented to the AONB as part of World Responsible Tourism Day at the World Travel Market in London, sponsored by Virgin Holidays. For further information about the awards visit www.responsibletravel.com/awards. This great accolade is testament to the



collective effort of the AONB team, partner organisations such as the RSPB, community groups and most of all the tourism businesses themselves who have worked hard over the last five years to deliver tourism with sustainability at the core.



Back to School

RSPB staff went back to school again this year. Now entering its fourth year, the Bowland Education Outreach Project, supported by Forest of Bowland AONB and Ribbles Valley Borough Council, saw us at Sabden Primary, Sabden St Marys, Newchurch, Roughlee, Caton, Caton St Pauls, St Marys Chipping, Thomeyholme, Hurst Green, Hornby and Bleasdale schools. Field teachers from our Leighton Moss reserve delivered three sessions over the winter to each school to enthuse children about the special habitats and species on their doorsteps.

Then in May, each school visited a local farm to see how Bowland's farmers and their livestock are helping to conserve the area's nationally important populations of wading birds. Kids delighted in seeing their first ever real live lapwing chicks not to mention seeing lambs being born, calves, kids, ponies and plenty of other cute creatures that will no doubt now be on many Christmas lists! Apologies parents!



Retham Primary School, High Level, Cumbria
© Forest of Bowland AONB

Volunteer's view – Ian Walker

As winter arrives in Bowland it seems like only a few days ago that I started my breeding wader surveys back in the spring. I was given the responsibility of surveying two farms and the experience gained taught me the methodology for surveying breeding waders, which included differentiating types of land use and how to record the presence of wetland features like scrapes and their importance for certain species of birds.

The surveys also gave me experience of liaising with the farming community and how to conduct myself as a representative and ambassador for the RSPB. It's been fascinating discovering the importance of the stewardship schemes and how the farming industry is under increasing pressure from national and international policies to provide more cheap food often at the expense of our country's fantastic wildlife. Seeing how the RSPB and its partners are working hard to show how food production can go hand in hand with wildlife conservation however is inspiring. As well as helping with wader surveys, this summer, I was delighted to become part of the local RSPB and Lancashire County Council team, helping to inform visitors about Bowland's breeding hen harriers from the Beacon Fell visitors centre near Preston. These very special rare birds can be seen via a video link here from a nest camera up in the fells. I really enjoy talking to people about these fantastic birds that are nesting on my doorstep!

As it really is on my doorstep, I've also actively supported the Alston Wetland project on the edge of Longridge. Here, the RSPB has been working with a local farmer, Natural England and United Utilities under a Higher Level Stewardship scheme to provide habitats for wading birds and a range of other wildlife. My involvement at Alston has included collating support from local people when planning conditions were

necessary, plus helping to paint the newly erected viewing screens, habitat management tasks, bird recording and surveys. I have also recently started to help with the wintering snipe surveys undertaken by RSPB's Bowland Wader Project. For me, one of the highlights of being involved in this scheme was seeing a newly constructed sand martin nesting bank colonised by up to 500 pairs of these special little birds. I spent one summer evening helping the North Lancashire Ringing Group record and ring over 200 sand martins. It was humbling to think that when I start next years breeding wader surveys, perhaps these very same birds will return after a winter in Africa and two perilous journeys across the Sahara desert!

My day job is in the construction industry so I've even been helping the RSPB make contacts with people in the industry with a view to providing more sustainable development projects through the planning process, providing better habitat for birds and other wildlife. I'm sure whatever skills you have there will be a use for them as an RSPB volunteer so why not get involved yourself? I really can't recommend volunteering enough! I've felt so privileged to be part of the rich variety of work that the RSPB and its partners are undertaking locally and beyond. I have learnt an incredible amount about wildlife, met some fascinating people and helped do my bit by stepping up for nature, which is a very rewarding feeling.



Ian Walker at Alston Wetland
© Gavin Thomas RSPB

Alston Wetland – Longridge's new wildlife oasis!

Alston Wetland, the small wildlife reserve created by United Utilities and the RSPB's Bowland Wader Project on the footprint of the old Alston no.3 reservoir on the edge of Longridge has recently benefitted from funding from Natural England's Higher Level Stewardship scheme. In March, three viewing screens were opened on its southern edge, which allow visitors to view the site's wildlife without causing any disturbance. An electric fence has also been installed to deter predators of ground nesting birds and a Sand Martin nesting bank has been built by a local contractor which has attracted literally hundreds of nesting pairs in its first spring!

The primary objective at Alston Wetland is to manage it for breeding wading birds. Since the reservoir was drained, the site has held breeding little-ringed plover, redshank, snipe, common sandpiper and oystercatcher. The site is particularly important for breeding lapwing - there were a minimum of 22 nests this spring and the majority of these breeding attempts resulted in fledged chicks. The site is not only attracting the birds; great-crested newt, brown hare and roe deer can also be found here and the diverse grassland supports a wide variety of insect life including a number of butterfly, moth, dragonfly and damselfly species.



Alston Wetland
© Gavin Thomas RSPB

The grassland is species-rich in parts with early purple orchids amongst scarce plants flowering annually on remnants of the old grass bank of the reservoir. The botanical interest on parts of the site is more akin to that of unimproved wildflower meadows, a habitat that we've lost a staggering 95% of nationwide. Due to the site's importance for a diverse range of wildlife, it is no surprise that the whole Alston Reservoirs complex is designated as one of Lancashire's Biological Heritage Sites. The project is a fine example of partnership working to deliver effective nature conservation and would not have happened if it wasn't for the combined efforts of a number of organisations and individuals. So why not take a look yourself and see what you're missing?

Carole and Nathan Brown - Deep Clough Farm

Deep Clough is a stunning spot tucked away in Littledale in the Bowland Fells above Lancaster. Nathan grew up in Chorley, left school at 16 to take up farming and soon became a freelance shepherd working throughout the UK after a stint of shearing on the other side of the world in New Zealand. Back home he married Carole and they now live at Deep Clough Farm with their four children; Robert, Stephanie, Jodie and Angus.

The farm is a sheep and beef enterprise but also buys in Saddleback and Old Spot pigs to fatten and sell for meat. Nathan and Carole pride themselves on farming in harmony with nature and have entered the farm into Natural England's Higher Level Stewardship scheme to help conserve the farm's wealth of special wildlife and important habitats.

'We moved to Deep Clough in 2004. It was a move we'd been craving for years - we were renting little bits of land here and there and raising our own livestock, but we wanted a farm where we could settle, invest in and diversify. So in September that year we took over the house and barns and did one up for ourselves and the four kids to live in'.

'With the farm, we rent 792 acres of rough grazing and meadows plus another 800 acres from the farm next door, and have also got grazing rights on Littledale Fell. The fell rises to 1950 feet and due to the harsh climate and soil conditions up here, it is challenging to make a living out of it! That said, it was all we ever wanted. The 455 ewes we took on here have now turned into 2,500 and our 20 suckler cows are now numbering about 180. Our sheep include 800 Dalesbreds, 500 Swales and Mules out of the Swaledales. Some lambs go to land we have down on the coast at Lytham for the winter'.

'In 2009, the RSPB Bowland Wader Project did a Higher Level Stewardship scheme application for us. Gavin from the RSPB did the whole application for free as our land is some of the best in Bowland for wading birds. Our fields have been surveyed since 2006 and we consistently have high densities of these birds breeding as we do not roll or chain harrow the fields which can destroy nests and kill young chicks. We also keep on top of our rushes and maintain all the shallow pools, ditches, flushes and other wet bits which are great feeding places for the birds. Since we entered the scheme, the numbers of breeding Lapwing, Curlew, Snipe, Redshank and Oystercatcher have gone up because we've done even more rush cutting and created more scrapes. It's actually improved the quality of grazing available to the livestock too as in some areas

the rushes were so thick they were swamping out the sweeter grasses. We're also trying to get more heather back on the fell, encourage wildflowers on some of the steeper banks and have put nestboxes up in our oak woodland which have already been used by Pied Flycatchers'. The scheme is working well for us - as well as bringing in extra income, it fits in with our system really well and we've noticed the benefits it brings to the wildlife on the farm. I'd suggest anyone farming in Bowland should see whether it can work for them too'.

'We work with what we've got at Deep Clough, there's no way continental cattle can thrive up here so we now farm native breeds which are suited to the conditions. Our cattle eat the rush re-growth after it's been cut and this keeps Gavin happy as this helps keep the grasslands right for the breeding wading birds! We get a few extra pounds for the native breed cows through our stewardship scheme which makes up for the fact that they grow slower than our trees! I love my native breeds though. We have Galloways, Herefords, Highlands, Angus and a rare Shorthorn called the Whitebred. The Blue-Grey (Whitebred Shorthorn on Galloway cow cross) is a great hardy suckler that can stay out here all winter. We sell some and cross others with Charolais and Simmental to make beef calves to sell as stores, while taking the smaller native beefers for my own customers'.

We've always had Dalesbred sheep which do really well here but the lambs were only fetching £25 each in the butchers' markets when we moved here so we started sourcing our own markets. We've really developed this approach and now sell at many farmers' markets locally and beyond in Liverpool and Manchester and have a website which is a really important part of the business. Useful as it is, the internet can't do all the hard work for us - it's taken a lot of face to face meetings to really get things up and running - nine out of ten of our regular on-line customers have met us first and many have been out to see how the farm is run beforehand. We like this kind of customer - it shows they really care about the quality of our produce'.

'Two years ago we bought the butcher's shop in Bentham and renamed it 'The Dalesbred



Butchers' after our main breed of sheep to help market the lamb brand. We source all the meat locally and most of it comes from Deep Clough. In line with consumers' increasing demands to know more about where their meat comes from and how it has been reared, we proudly promote the facts about how our own livestock have been raised in harmony with nature - our Dalesbreds forage on heather from the fells and our cattle graze on pastures which are managed in a manner which helps conserve the wildlife on our farm. The RSPB provided photos and text for our farm leaflet which helps greatly with marketing our produce'.

'Our most recent project was renovating the other buildings into holiday cottages as we want to share this stunning place with other people. The three cottages provide spectacular views across the fells and we've named them after some of the very special birds we are spoilt with here. You'll have to come and visit though to find out which ones and see them for yourself!'

www.dalesbredfinestmeats.co.uk

www.deepcloughcottages.co.uk

Finally - do one thing for nature:

If you're a **farmer**, manage your least productive field for wildlife. Even one field will make a difference. - To help Lapwings for example, retain any wet features and if there aren't any, create a wader scrape or shallow edged pool and maintain a cattle grazed 'tussocky' sward with a few patches of rush cover.

Whoever you are, spare just one minute to 'Step up for Nature'. <http://www.rspb.org.uk/steppingup/> Becoming part of this campaign will show the government that nature is important to you. Your action will help support not only the work you've read about in this newsletter but a wealth of other work local, national and global: <http://www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/>



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The RSPB speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing - help us keep it that way.
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The RSPB Birds of Bowland Project appreciates the support of the following partner organisations:



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