

The 2003–04 capercaillie survey

Two national capercaillie surveys in the 1990s confirmed that there had been an alarming decline in its numbers in recent decades, and raised fears of a second extinction of this species, which was reintroduced into Scotland in 1837.

To monitor population trends since the last survey in 1998–99, capercaillie were surveyed by the RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage between November 2003 and March 2004 at sample sites throughout the birds' recently occupied range. Fieldworkers walked 463 2 km long transects; capercaillie were recorded

along 70 of these with 120 individual birds in all. The distances of birds from transects were recorded, allowing capercaillie densities, and thus an overall estimate of its population, to be calculated.

The population estimate was 1,980 individuals (95% confidence limits 1,284–2,758). Although this value is 84% greater than that from the previous survey (1,073 individuals), it lies within the wide confidence limits of that survey (549–2,041) and hence did not demonstrate a statistically significant increase, but certainly suggests that the previous decline

has levelled out at the very least. A number of alternative sources of capercaillie data suggest that there may have been a recent increase in core areas, most noticeably in Strathspey.

An examination of the range of capercaillie sightings recorded in the survey suggests that the majority of the population is concentrated in Badenoch and Strathspey, with few birds in the south of the range. Recent conservation efforts, such as the removal of hundreds of kilometres of deer fencing, which caused high adult mortality through

Capercaillie displaying in pinewoods



A male and female capercaillie in pine forest



David Klaier (rspb-images.com)

collisions in flight, may be succeeding in helping to stabilise or even increase numbers in part of the range.

This survey was part of the Statutory Conservation Agencies/RSPB Annual Breeding Bird Scheme (SCARABBS).

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Wilkinson NI, Langston RHW, Gregory RD, Gibbons DW and Marquiss M (2002) Capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus* abundance and habitat use in Scotland, in winter 1998–99. *Bird Study* 49: 177–185.

Eaton MA, Marshall KB and Gregory RD (in press). The status of capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus* in Scotland in the winter 2003–2004. *Bird Study*.

See also: 2001: 33; 2002: 33; 2005: 39

The distribution of capercaillie recorded by the 2003–04 winter survey. Dark blue squares indicate 5-km squares where capercaillie were recorded, light blue squares where surveys were made, but no birds were recorded.

