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Peak Malpractice

Update 2007



RSPB again calls for action as the killing goes on

Our hills, moors and mountains take your breath away with their awe-inspiring beauty. As well as being integral to a working countryside, they are also important places for wildlife. This is why almost a quarter of the English uplands are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

However, despite this designation, all is not well for our precious wildlife in some of these nationally important and specially protected landscapes.

Progress is being made on reversing decades of management that led to much of the SSSI in the Dark Peak being in unfavourable condition, but some of the birds that should nest and feed on that land are not so lucky.

In some areas of the Peak District, magnificent birds such as goshawks and peregrines are teetering on the brink of local extinction. During the last year, the evidence of illegal killing of rare and protected species has increased – 2006 was the worst year on record.

There are numerous pressures on wildlife in the uplands, including overgrazing, inappropriate management, atmospheric pollution and the impacts of climate change. Illegal persecution only adds to these pressures, further threatening the fragile balance that exists in these very special places.

Much of the moorland in the Dark Peak is managed for driven grouse-shooting. Across the UK, the presence of grouse-shooting undoubtedly saved a significant amount of heather moorland from post-war tree-planting and intensification of farming, benefiting a number of wading birds and other species. However, the illegal persecution of birds of prey is a blight on some moors.

One bird that has suffered throughout the English uplands has been the hen harrier. However, there was some very good news in 2006 when two pairs nested in the Peak District. They were only the second and third pairs of hen harriers to nest successfully in the Peak District for almost 140 years, nesting in and hunting over habitat managed by the sporting tenant. Unfortunately, however, they were only successful thanks to the considerable efforts of conservationists, who provided the female harriers with food following the unexplained disappearance of the two male birds.

Natural England reports that this was not an isolated incident: many hen harriers fail to rear young because adults go missing. Since 2002, nearly 60% of hen harrier nesting attempts on grouse moors in England (away from the Forest of Bowland, Lancashire) failed because adult birds disappeared. During the same period, no hen harriers disappeared from 52 nesting attempts in Bowland.

Peak Malpractice, published last year by the RSPB, highlighted the unacceptable plight of birds of prey in the Dark Peak area of the Peak District. We called for statutory agencies, voluntary groups and landowners to protect wild birds and tackle with vigour and determination any criminal activity against wildlife.

I am therefore appalled to have to report that bird of prey persecution continued unabated during 2006.

This has driven our decision to publish this update to *Peak Malpractice* and renew our call to all those involved in the Peak District to join together in condemning this shameful persecution and press for the effective enforcement of the law.

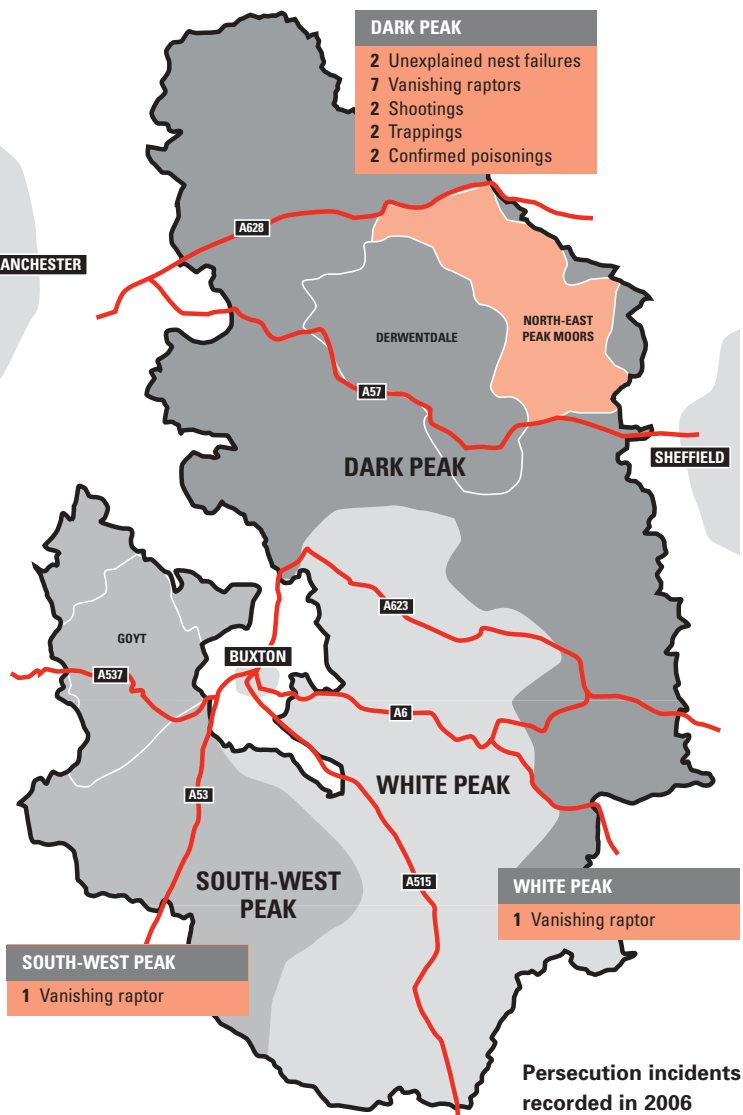
Despite hen harriers having successfully fledged in the Peak District last year, no harriers have bred this season – it is our collective responsibility to ensure a safe environment for their return.

Dr Mark Avery
RSPB Director, Conservation



Dark Peak breeding birds 2006

– a summary of the season



The moors and surrounding woodlands of the Dark Peak area of the Peak District again proved an inhospitable place for some of our most cherished birds of prey.

In parts of the Dark Peak, goshawks, buzzards, peregrines and ravens once more failed to breed, despite the habitat suggesting the birds should thrive and there being healthy populations nearby.

Among a sickening list of apparent persecution incidents in 2006, a female peregrine was found dead after being shot on two separate occasions, and laboratory testing showed that a raven had been poisoned.

The one bright ray of hope in the Dark Peak was the successful fledging of 10 hen harrier chicks from two nests in the Derwent Valley. Before 2006, hen harriers had only successfully nested in Derbyshire once in the previous 136 years.

But, the celebrations of this historic event must be tempered by the knowledge that only intensive human intervention in the form of feeding ensured the success of these nests after both male birds disappeared.

The decision to implement such drastic action was not taken lightly; the RSPB supported the move as a way of safeguarding birds which, if they survived, would give a much-needed boost to the population of one of England's most threatened species. Without this action, coupled with the heroic efforts of a dedicated band of volunteers who guarded the nests round the clock, the nests would certainly have failed.

Goshawks are now totally absent as a breeding species on the north-east Peak moors



Roy Mangeršnes

Peregrines were found that had been shot and trapped.



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Below is a summary of the 2006 breeding season for the key species identified by *Peak Malpractice* as being under threat. All nests were monitored under licence by raptor field workers.

A round-up of the season in the north-east Peak moors

Goshawk – no birds breeding on the north-east Peak moors.

Peregrine – no birds breeding on the north-east Peak moors.

Raven – no birds breeding on the north-east Peak moors.

Buzzard – after gun shots were heard in woods where buzzards had built and lined a nest, both birds vanished. There were no other buzzard breeding attempts in the north-east moorland fringe.

A round-up of the season in the Derwent Valley area

Goshawk – six chicks fledged from two nests but at two other sites both nests failed, with evidence that one nest tree had recently been climbed. At a fifth site, a nest was built but the adults then vanished.

Peregrine – six juveniles fledged from two nests; at another site, where display and territorial behaviour had been seen, the adult birds vanished and breeding did not take place.

Hen harrier – two nests produced 10 fledged juveniles. But both males vanished and the chicks were only successfully raised as a result of staff and volunteers providing additional food to that brought by the female.

Buzzard – at two sites, four juveniles fledged.

Raven – despite a nest being built at one site the birds vanished, but four juveniles fledged from a second site.

Elsewhere in the Peak District moorlands

Goshawk – one pair failed after the female vanished. Another female paired up with the male, then laid eggs but also disappeared, resulting in the nest failing.

Peregrine – six juveniles fledged from two sites, another pair hatched young but these failed to fledge. At a further two sites the territorial pair

vanished, including a location where earlier that year a dead peregrine was found in a pole trap.

Hen harrier – a pair of apparently territorial birds was seen regularly in the south-west Peak but sightings then ceased. An inspection of the area revealed that the ground was criss-crossed with fresh tracks from an all-terrain vehicle.

Conclusion

Despite the publication of *Peak Malpractice* in March 2006 and the increased profile of the plight of birds of prey in the Dark Peak, the evidence points to illegal persecution not only continuing but increasing.

As with *Peak Malpractice*, this update does not lay the blame at any particular door, but the failure of so many nests and the absence of breeding birds from good habitat have no natural explanation.

Sadly, it is hard to avoid concluding that illegal persecution continues to make parts of the Dark Peak a no-go zone for spectacular birds such as goshawks, peregrines and buzzards.

If such illegal and unacceptable practices continue to deny us all the thrill of seeing some of the UK's most magnificent birds flying freely over the breath-taking landscape of the Dark Peak, then the Peak District will become a poorer place for local people, visitors – and its very special wildlife.

We hope that statutory agencies, voluntary groups and landowners can rally together to ensure that all wildlife can thrive in the Dark Peak.



The importance of the Peak District hen harriers

The hen harriers which nested in the Peak District last year were only the second and third pairs to successfully nest here for almost 140 years.

They were also an important addition to the English breeding population of these magnificent birds, accounting for two of 22 nests in England in 2006. Only 12 nests were successful, between them producing 46 chicks.*

The Peak District nests would almost certainly have failed following the unexplained disappearance of the males had it not been for the provision of supplementary food by staff and volunteers watching over the nests 24 hours a day.

Elsewhere in England, over the last 25 years, hen harriers have only nested regularly with any success on the United Utilities Estate in the Forest of Bowland, in Lancashire, where they have been monitored by RSPB staff since 1981.

One or two pairs have also nested annually for the past 10 years at the RSPB's Geltsdale reserve, on the

Northumberland/Cumbria border. However, despite being the subject of nest protection measures, they have frequently suffered deliberate persecution, often by people trespassing on the nature reserve.

In the Yorkshire Dales, there have been 26 nesting attempts since 1992 but only seven have been successful (Yorkshire Dales Upland Bird Study Group, 2006).

Hen harriers are birds of open moorland, such as that managed for driven grouse-shooting. Unfortunately, across Scotland, hen harriers have become less abundant on grouse moors and in England they are virtually absent.

Furthermore, when hen harriers do attempt to nest on driven grouse moors, they consistently fare less well than when nesting on other habitats. A study in Scotland showed that the number of chicks raised by each female hen harrier was three times higher on moors with no driven grouse-shooting (Etheridge *et al* 1997).

In England, figures since 1994 show that fewer than 30% of nests on driven grouse moors have been



Roy Mangeršnes

The hen harrier is the bird whose conservation status is most affected by illegal persecution in England

Watching a slice of history unfold

successful, compared to a success rate of more than 65% on other moorland.

There is no natural explanation for the reduced success of breeding hen harriers on driven grouse moors.

According to English Nature – now Natural England – since 2002 nearly 60% of hen harrier nesting attempts on grouse moors in England (away from the Forest of Bowland, Lancashire) failed because of adult birds disappearing*. Over the same period, no hen harriers disappeared from 52 breeding attempts in the Forest of Bowland, where the birds have been monitored by the RSPB and Natural England.

*<http://www.english-nature.org.uk/news/story.asp?ID=827>



The male hen harrier has strikingly different plumage to the female and does most of the hunting away from the nest area



Phillip Newman (rspb-images.com)

Zoe Pittaway worked through sweltering heat and torrential rain to watch over the Peak District's nesting hen harriers.

Throughout the spring and summer of 2006, I was privileged to watch as a historic story unfolded. In May I began working as part of a hen harrier team on a joint project involving the RSPB, English Nature and the National Trust. The primary objective was to provide 24-hour protection and surveillance of a hen harrier nest on National Trust land in Derwentdale. This was only the second time hen harriers had nested in the Peak District in almost 140 years.

Soon after starting the watches, a second nest was located nearby. We pitched tents across the valley, from where, with the aid of binoculars and telescopes and with the invaluable help of a rota of 40 volunteers, the harriers' progress was observed. Walkers and other members of the public were informed of any potential disturbance and were redirected away from the nests.

Through the extremes of rain and blistering sun, we watched the development of the nests. While we cowered in tents to avoid a drenching, it was heartening to envisage the females protecting their youngsters during summer storms.

The whole team was devastated when the females were mysteriously abandoned. We provided food at both nests as an emergency measure. Without such drastic intervention, the nests would certainly have failed.

As the chicks got bigger and stronger, we started to see them stretching their wings in preparation for flying. At each nest the chicks were ringed, wing-tagged and fitted with radio transmitters, allowing them to be identified after their dispersal. This also enabled us to track the juveniles' progress in the first year, learning more about their movements and behaviour. It was extremely satisfying and exciting to see all 10 youngsters finally take to the air.

Hen harrier chicks under 24-hour protection in Derwentdale



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Case studies from 2006

Peregrine

On Friday, 12 May, two birdwatchers found a dead female peregrine on the moors of Upper Derwentdale.

The bird appeared to have been shot, so it was taken to a qualified vet, who carried out a post-mortem. He confirmed by X-ray that it had been shot on two separate occasions with shotgun pellets.

Clearly, this unfortunate bird was a target for at least one, and possibly two, shotgun-carrying criminals. The RSPB has offered a £1,000 reward for information leading to a conviction in this case.

A small pellet had been lodged in the bird's rump for some time and had healed over. The body also contained a larger pellet in the breast, and evidence of internal damage, probably from other pellets that had passed straight through the bird. This second shooting ultimately led to the bird's death, although the vet concluded that it did not die immediately.

A young female peregrine had been seen regularly in the area prior to the discovery of the body. No young female peregrines were subsequently seen in this area, so it is possible that this was the same, local bird.

Hen harrier

Two pairs of hen harriers nested within two kilometres of each other in Upper Derwentdale. One female paired with an immature male, recognisable by brown feathers in its wings. The other pair involved a fully-grown adult male.

However, in early June both males mysteriously vanished. Up until that point, males had been seen bringing food to both nests. Hunting for food is the responsibility of male hen harriers, while the females incubate eggs and brood young chicks.

The disappearance of the males would usually result in nest failure. The chicks only fledged successfully thanks to food provided to both nests by wardens from English Nature, the National Trust, the RSPB and volunteers.

Adult hen harriers are at the top of the food chain. Summer is a season of plentiful food and the birds appeared fit and healthy. English Nature, now Natural England, have described the disappearance of breeding male hen harriers in similar circumstances as 'almost unheard of naturally and is highly suspicious'.

Goshawk

A pair of goshawks started nesting at a traditional site near Bamford. The nest was doing well, with growing chicks, but in late June the tree was climbed by someone using climbing irons. Later inspection revealed that the chicks had disappeared. A long ladder appears to have also been used, as the climbing iron marks only appeared high up the tree.

Most goshawk nesting trees in the area are painted with an invisible substance called Trace-tag, which will leave long-lasting evidence on any person who has had contact with the tree. The ladder would have reached beyond the area where Trace-tag is usually applied.

Raven

A pair of ravens started to nest on a traditional cliff nest in Longdendale, but both birds mysteriously vanished. Subsequently, the body of one adult raven was found nearby and was sent for analysis to Government laboratories.

It was established that the bird had been poisoned with carbofuran. This is a pesticide, formerly used by arable farmers, which has been banned since 2001. Its continued use in 2006, well away from arable farmland, is a clear indication that this banned substance has been retained for abuse as bird poison.

In November 2006, a man wearing camouflaged clothing was seen and photographed carrying a gun and a dead raven in the Derwent Valley. Some minutes before the sighting, a gunshot had been heard. Ravens traditionally bred at a site within a kilometre of this sighting, but failed to return in 2007.

Man carrying dead raven,
Dark Peak, November 2006



Reported incidents in the Peak District 2006

In 2006, there were 17 suspected illegal persecution incidents in the Peak District making it the worst year on record.

Unexplained nest failures

Species	Area	Details
Goshawk	Dark Peak	Chicks disappeared; evidence of climbing irons on upper tree trunk
Raven	Dark Peak	Nest built up – birds vanished

Vanishing raptors

Species	Area	Details
Hen harrier	Dark Peak	Breeding male vanished, chicks provided with extra food
Hen harrier	Dark Peak	Second breeding male vanished, chicks provided with extra food
Hen harrier	South-west Peak	Displaying pair, birds vanished. Fresh four-wheeled drive tracks found criss-crossing the heather
Short-eared owl	Dark Peak	Nesting pair – both vanished
Peregrine	White Peak	Nest failed, man with firearm seen at site, male subsequently vanished
Goshawk	Dark Peak	Female vanished, nest failed
Goshawk	Dark Peak	Female vanished, nest failed
Buzzard	Dark Peak	Nesting pair, both adults vanished
Buzzard	Dark Peak	Nesting pair, both adults vanished after shots heard in vicinity of nest site

Shooting

Species	Area	Details
Peregrine	Dark Peak	First summer female found dead, shot twice
Raven	Dark Peak	Shot heard, man seen carrying dead raven

Trapping

Species	Area	Details
Peregrine	Dark Peak	Found dead in pole trap
Birds of prey	Dark Peak	Larsen trap baited with pigeon

Confirmed poisoning

Species	Area	Details
Raven	Dark Peak	Carbofuran
Jay	Dark Peak	Mevinphos (<i>incident occurred in 2005, results from analysis confirmed 2006</i>)
Badger	Dark Peak	Potato containing Metaldehyde found at badger sett

More must be done to tackle wildlife crime

I was shocked to read *Peak Malpractice*, and to learn of the extent of illegal persecution of wild birds in the Dark Peak. I know the area well, both as a local MP and a regular walker on the moors. Its rare wildlife, such as goshawks and peregrines, is now under real threat due to the activities of an unscrupulous few.

Illegal persecution of wildlife is unacceptable, as I said when I secured a parliamentary debate on the Dark Peak's wild birds last March. But, despite the publicity generated by *Peak Malpractice*, and the outrage expressed by local people at the destruction of their precious wildlife, last summer was another bad one for our birds of prey with, among other things, the disappearance of hen harriers on breeding territory and the shooting of a peregrine. These incidents sadly reinforce the view that the Dark Peak has become a no-go area for threatened wildlife.

Last spring, I called for more action on wildlife crime from both the Government and enforcement agencies. There has been progress – new powers to help protect birds of prey and other wildlife in last year's Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act, and a new National Wildlife Crime Unit – but more must be done. In particular, the Police need to do more to tackle wildlife crime, and be given the political and financial support to enable them to do so.

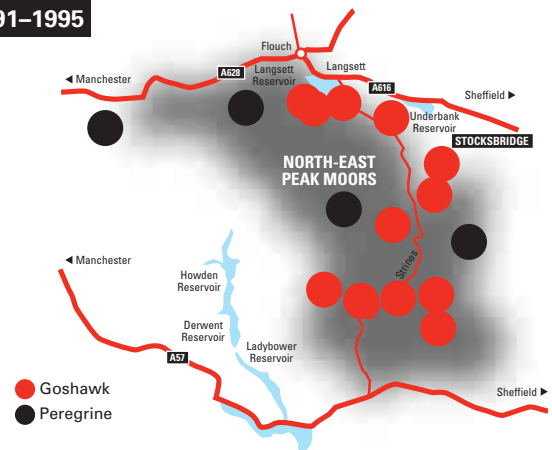
I want my constituents to be able to walk in the Dark Peak and enjoy the spectacle of a displaying goshawk or a skydancing hen harrier. A few unscrupulous individuals have no right to deny people the richness of their natural heritage.

Angela Smith
MP for Sheffield Hillsborough

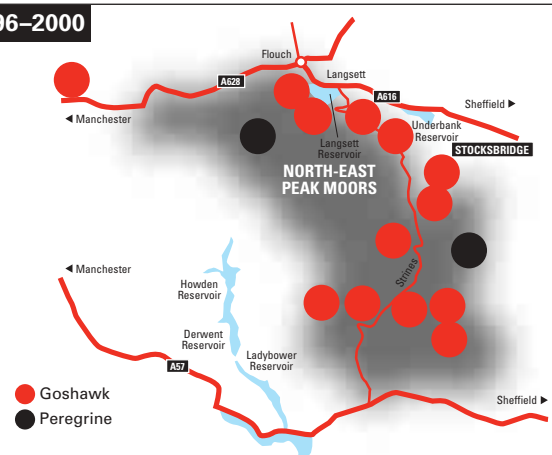


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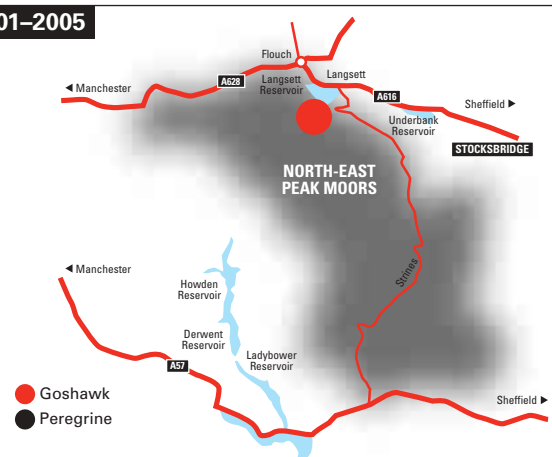
1991–1995



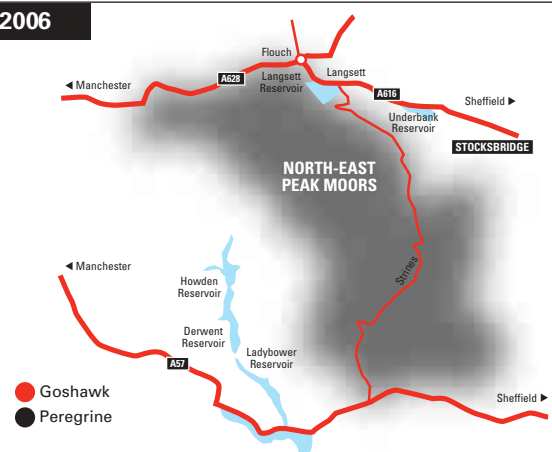
1996–2000



2001–2005



2006



Distribution of breeding territories of goshawks and peregrines on the north-east Peak moors between 1991–2006



Despite abundant habitat and prey, peregrines have not bred on the north-east Peak moors since 2000



Urgent action is needed to save the last few pairs of goshawks in the Dark Peak





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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.

The RSPB is very grateful to the many wildlife enthusiasts who collected and provided the data on which the report is based. In particular, we wish to thank the raptor fieldworkers who devote their time to monitoring breeding birds of prey in the Peak District.

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