

Gamewise

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AUTUMN/WINTER 2023

The perfect storm?

Have critical thresholds been reached with bird conservation?

Caught on camera

Identifying predators of ground-nesting wader clutches in the uplands

Also inside

Farming for balance
Conservation in Spain
Restoring our iconic chalk streams
A bastion for birdlife

The official magazine for GWCT members



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On the cover

Red grouse. © Laurie Campbell



© Laurie Campbell

WELCOME

TERESA DENT CBE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Thank you to everyone who came to see us at one or more of the three summer Game Fairs, The GWCT's Scottish and Welsh Game Fairs and Ragley. It is always good to meet members and we are delighted that the Welsh Game Fair has had a successful second year.

We are edging to the end of the year and that brings us a year closer to Defra's target of halting the decline in species abundance by 2030: now only six years in which to achieve it. A tough challenge but one that the GWCT is embracing. GWCT does not own nature reserves, wonderful places though they may be; our mission is to use our science, advice and advocacy to persuade those that manage their own land to make it a better place for nature. Much of what is featured in this edition of *Gamewise* speaks to that mission: from cameras at nests of ground-nesting birds in the uplands (see page 26) to farmers delivering cleaner water in chalk streams (see page 31), and what we need to do to save critically endangered birds like Eurasian curlew (see page 36).

We know from work done at the Allerton Project (and, in fact, now proved twice) that lowland game management can double the numbers of species that were already resident. We know from our work at Otterburn, and now 'repeated' across 18 upland sites that predation management on moorland managed for red grouse supported twice the density of waders as non-grouse moors, with curlew productivity four-fold higher, with similar patterns observed in three of four other wader species.

Everyone wants to help deal with the biodiversity crisis we face. Those that want to stop or curtail shooting may not realise the negative effect that could have on species (see page 47), and the losses we could face. It is up to us, the game and wildlife community, to explain.

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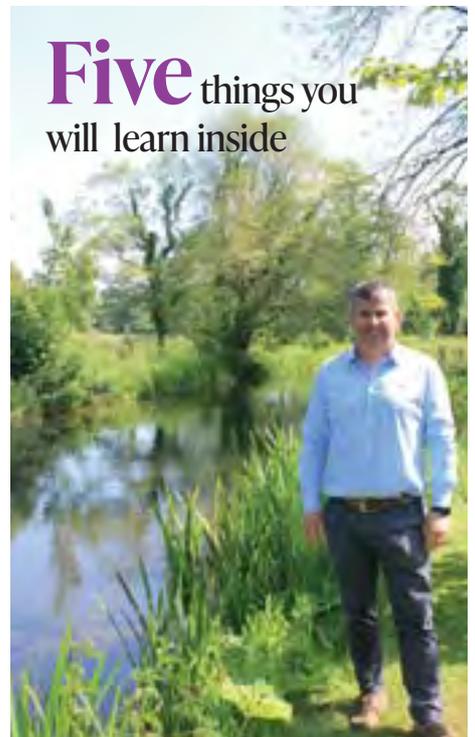
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Five things you will learn inside

1. How our chalk streams are benefiting from an expanded Environmental Farmers Group
2. How farmers will work together to meet environmental objectives
3. Whether critical thresholds have been reached with bird conservation
4. How threatened birds are thriving on the Raby Estate
5. How to create the ultimate wildlife plot

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RESEARCH THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

TICK BURDENS

This summer was the second of a five-year project to investigate the relationship between tick burdens on chicks and mountain hare abundance in the Scottish Highlands. We searched for red grouse broods when chicks were between five and 20 days old, and checked them for ticks and scored their body condition. This year the tick burdens were higher than we recorded across the same sites last year, with the worst case being a chick with 78 ticks attached. Overall, of the 217 broods examined, only 12% were free of tick, compared with 25% in 2022. Hopefully, some of the grouse chicks made it to fledging, but for some the high tick burdens may have resulted in death.



IN *focus*



FIND OUT
MORE



WHY IS SOIL SO IMPORTANT?

When you think of the GWCT, images of pheasants, partridges, and maybe even lapwings come to mind. But there's something we care deeply about that might surprise you: soil. Soil is incredibly important for our well-being. It's the foundation of our health, providing us with the food we eat. In fact, more than 97% of our food comes from soil, according to the United Nations. Soil also has the power to help us fight global warming by storing carbon. And when it comes to preventing floods, healthy soil can play a big role. Soil is one of the most diverse habitats in the world. A recent paper showed that it's home to a whopping 90% of the world's fungi, 85% of its plants, and over half of its bacteria. The GWCT's Allerton Project (see page 17) has been studying soil for many years and, thanks to this research, soil has been incorporated into the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan.

In the NEWS



1 Senior advisor Nick Hesford's 48-hour, 96-mile hike along the West Highland Way was covered by regional newspapers and saw him raise more than £2,500 for PND Borders.

2 The GWCT Partridge Count Scheme is celebrating its 90th birthday this year and the story of how it all began was published in *Shooting Times*.

3 Our advisor Mike Swan appeared on BBC Countryfile to explain the benefits of Humane Cable Restraints in predation management and monitoring ahead of the ban on snares in Wales.

In Brief



DID YOU KNOW?

Louise de Raad, head of Scottish research, completed an epic 170 kilometre hike around Mont Blanc in July to raise funds to build a wader education and visitor centre at our Auchnerran demonstration farm. Support Louise's fundraiser at gwct.org.uk/montblanc.



RESEARCH THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

KATHY FLETCHER

A childhood hobby honed vital skills needed to catch grouse chicks 30 years later

Kathy Fletcher has worked in the uplands research team for 20 years. Her passion for studying birds was ignited by her father who took her out bird ringing from a young age. She studied at the Universities of Durham and Aberdeen, and early in her career studied seabird breeding ecology. This included spending nine months on Coquet Island, off the Northumberland coast, with only one other person and a couple of thousand screaming terns for company. She soon decided she preferred open moorland to coastal islands.

"IN 2002 I started with the GWCT co-ordinating the data collection for the Upland Predation Experiment at Otterburn. This was a great introduction to upland game management and involved working closely with the keepering team. The breeding seasons at Otterburn were very intensive, monitoring breeding birds, as well as avian and mammalian predator species, and vegetation, and quantifying predator management.

"THE UPLAND PREDATION Experiment showed that waders bred three times better

with predator control than without, and that in the absence of predator control the breeding populations declined. It was a privilege to be involved in such a large-scale experimental research project, that has provided vital evidence for policymakers ever since.

"I THEN MOVED to the Scottish Highlands where the breeding season starts and ends with our long-term red grouse counts with pointing dogs. These have been running for more than 30 years, showing long-term changes of grouse and other species responding to management. We use the same survey methods to monitor capercaillie productivity, although their numbers are now depressingly low. The pointing dogs are also used to find grouse broods before the chicks can fly to monitor tick burdens; of great concern on many Scottish moors.

"FIELDWORK INVOLVES BURNING the candle at both ends with spring dawn visits to count lekking black grouse and dusk surveys for roding woodcock or nocturnal mountain hare surveys. However, the reward is knowing that the data help identify local, regional and national trends helping to establish management action to conserve these upland species for future generations."

Breeding curlew are raising four times as many chicks on the UK's grouse moors.



Success story

Moorland, curlew and other waders

BREEDING CURLEW ARE RAISING FOUR times as many chicks on the UK's grouse moors, compared with similar moorland sites where no predator control is carried out. The GWCT study has shown that in addition to maintaining healthy numbers of curlew, grouse moor management can provide a surplus of fledglings, thereby potentially aiding species recovery.

Curlew reared 1.05 fledglings per pair on 18 grouse moors in North Wales, northern England and Scotland, almost double the rate of 0.5-0.6 needed to keep numbers stable. In contrast, on nearby non-grouse moors they only fledged 0.27 chicks per pair, well below that break-even point. The research team made five visits to each site during the breeding season, used satellite images to assess the habitat and recorded sightings of avian predators and fox scats along paths.

Other wading birds such as lapwing, golden plover, oystercatcher and redshank were also more abundant and raised more chicks on grouse moors. Could grouse moor management hold the key to reversing the trend which has seen the UK curlew population in steady decline since the 1990s?

Allerton Project's work recognised

Alastair Leake receives the National Agricultural Award

THE ROYAL AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY PRESENTED ITS NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL Award to Alastair Leake. The Award is made to an individual in recognition of an outstanding contribution to the advancement of agriculture in the UK. Leading the GWCT's Allerton Project demonstration farm, Alastair has had a hugely influential role in developing approaches to agricultural production that maximise farming yields, while also promoting growth in biodiversity. The farm is one of the Defra Sustainable Intensification Demonstration Platforms and is renowned for its ground-breaking research.

David Grint, CEO of the Royal Agricultural Society, said: "Alastair Leake has made an extraordinary contribution to British agriculture through his work leading The Allerton Project, which has done so much to pioneer and popularise ways of farming with nature."

In accepting the award, Alastair said: "I am humbled, honoured and thrilled in equal measure to receive this accolade. I have been fortunate to have worked alongside some outstanding colleagues through my 30 years of involvement with agricultural and environmental trials. The incredibly generous gift of the Loddington Estate by the late Lord and Lady Allerton and their vision for the Allerton Project has inspired all of us. Never before has it been so important for us to find ways to grow our food and protect nature and the environment simultaneously."



(L-R) Andrew Wraith presenting Alastair Leake with his RASE award.



Ed Macfarlane has recently taken up the role as the GWCT's Chief Operating Officer

Ed Macfarlane

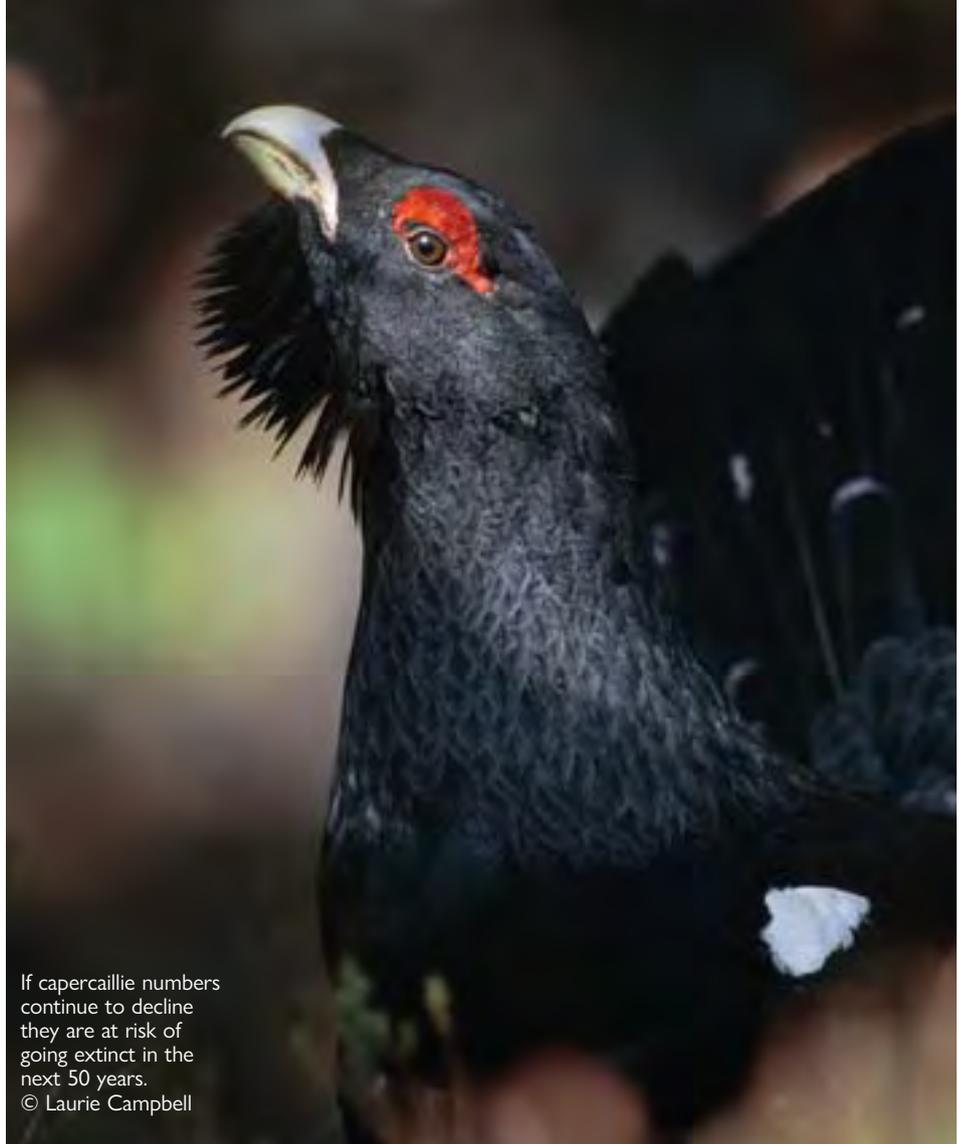
New Chief Operating Officer

ED MACFARLANE HAS RECENTLY taken up the role as chief operating officer (COO), responsible for the internal management of the GWCT. Ed has a broad and varied background, starting his career in the Coldstream Guards, leaving as captain, before entering the commercial world where he spent 20 years working for large and small companies across the UK and Europe. He also ran his own company and worked for the NHS during the entire Covid pandemic, which he described as “a truly challenging and demanding time, requiring immense leadership and team-working skills”.

Ed lives in a rural village in Oxfordshire with his wife Sophie and they have two grown-up daughters. In his spare time Ed gets involved in village life, attends local fitness classes, is chair of the local Royal British Legion and a trustee for the equine therapy charity HorseHeard. He is training for his fifth annual triathlon and enjoys country sports and pursuits, golf, walking, swimming and playing bridge.

He said he was very excited to take on his new role: “The GWCT's history is full of fascinating research that has helped to make conservation decisions based on detailed facts and consistent data collected over long periods of time, in all seasons of weather and global impacts.

“The GWCT's centenary in 2030, only seven years away, is a very exciting and amazing milestone to head towards and enjoy as a team, and I am delighted to be the COO at this historic time.”



If capercaillie numbers continue to decline they are at risk of going extinct in the next 50 years.
© Laurie Campbell

Last chance for capercaillie

Is it too late to save our largest grouse from extinction?

THE ICONIC CAPERCAILLIE WAS ONCE FOUND ACROSS SCOTLAND, BUT IN THE past 50 years numbers have declined rapidly. A GWCT study spanning 10 years found as few as 304 birds remained in 2020. The remaining capercaillie are almost exclusively confined to pockets of old pine forests in the Cairngorms National Park.

In the 1970s there were 20,000 birds, but this number dropped to 2,200 by the early 1990s and just 580 birds in 2010. If the decline continues, the capercaillie is at risk of going extinct in the next 50 years.

David Baines, our head of upland research, said: “Declines are associated with a reduction in breeding success, which varies annually – in relation to poor weather in June when chicks are growing, and increased signs of predators such as pine marten, in recent decades. This has happened despite efforts by land managers to improve habitat, and legally control foxes and crows.”

He said urgent action was needed to reverse the decline. It would include reducing both the predation risk by pine marten and the risk of bird collisions with deer fences, which can injure and kill capercaillie when they fly into them.

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The success of FACE's work is fundamentally dependent on sound scientific research, and this is where the GWCT comes in, as it's known and respected across our membership and beyond. I first came across the GWCT in 2011 at the International Union of Game Biologists (IUGB) and Perdix Congress in Barcelona, and was impressed by its wide-ranging research.

Recently, FACE has been utilising the outcomes of the PARTRIDGE project, a cross-border North Sea Region Interreg programme, advocating improved conditions for the grey partridge and other farmland birds in national farming plans. At a recent conference, we invited GWCT research scientist, Francis Buner, as a keynote speaker, to highlight how GWCT-designed measures have had a positive impact on grey partridge conservation and broader farmland biodiversity.

I am also involved in the European Sustainable Use Group (ESUG), which is chaired by GWCT's principal scientist, Julie Ewald. This organisation has a mission to conduct research that will enhance understanding of conservation through the use of wild living resources and influence policy and practice accordingly.

As an evidence-based organisation, FACE is constantly advocating at European and international forums to further our vision for a Europe rich in biodiversity and game shooting opportunities. Our task is immense, as the continuing loss of biodiversity poses a significant threat to Europe's small wild game populations. It's clear, for example, that national farming policies across Europe need to incentivise farmers better for the dual production of quality food and biodiversity enhancement. The GWCT's work on developing UK agri-environment options is frequently cited around Europe as something to strive for.

Given its international commitments, the UK is likely to develop a national nature restoration plan, aligning with many other European countries under new EU regulation driven by international targets. FACE is also working at the European level to ensure conservation and sustainable harvest of our migratory waterbirds, because many species have a non-secure status. The GWCT is well-placed to contribute to this emerging work through its research and policy engagement.



HOW OTHERS SEE US

DAVID SCALLAN

The Secretary General of FACE gives his opinion

Undeniably, Europe's shooting community is making a substantial contribution to biodiversity. We must strive to communicate our successes more widely and more effectively. This is often challenging considering the increasing number of emerging issues to tackle. The UK is no exception, grappling with challenges around gamebird releasing, protected areas,

regulatory reviews, and the interpretation of European legal principles. These issues demand scientifically grounded guidance, and it's heartening to see the GWCT's expertise being increasingly recognised and utilised more in this respect. From my perspective, the GWCT can do more at the international level to ensure a good future for game and wildlife across the continent. ■

Europe's shooting community is making a substantial contribution to biodiversity. We must strive to communicate our successes more widely

FACE, the European Federation for Hunting and Conservation, comprises member associations from 37 nations, and represents a collective seven million hunters. Our principal aim is to unite our members' shared interests, advocating for sustainable shooting practices and conservation throughout Europe. The UK, representing one of the largest shooting nations in Europe, holds a seat on the FACE board. The main shooting organisations are affiliated to FACE through the umbrella structure FACE UK. face.eu/



Fallow deer. © Peter Thompson



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RESEARCH & DEMONSTRATION

THE ALLERTON PROJECT

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Reducing emissions

New Defra-funded Nitrogen Efficient Plant project



THE ALLERTON PROJECT IS PART OF A new Defra-funded initiative: Nitrogen Efficient Plants for Climate Smart Arable Cropping Systems (NCS), one of 17 industry and research partners and a potential 200 farmers looking to increase the area of pulses and legumes grown in UK arable rotations from the current 5% to 20%.

On the average arable farm, synthetic nitrogen fertiliser contributes some 65% of greenhouse gas emissions; given national and industry 'net zero' targets, the reduction in this carbon-heavy input via an increase in nitrogen-fixing break crops such as peas and beans may make a significant contribution to agricultural decarbonisation. A major aim is to bring about a reduction of 1.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per annum across the industry.

In addition, it's hoped that domestically grown legumes may be able to displace up to 50% of the soya imported for use in livestock feed rations, thus reducing our reliance on extended supply chains of sometimes questionable environmental provenance.

Working alongside ADAS, PGRO, LEAF, the James Hutton Institute and others, we hope to be able to demonstrate the benefits of bi-cropping winter peas and rye for nutrient use efficiency and farm carbon accounting. Fieldwork begins this autumn.



Open Farm Sunday was well supported with more than 400 visitors enjoying tours of the farm and finding out about our work.

Opening the farm gates

Sharing our knowledge far and wide

LEAF'S ANNUAL OPEN FARM SUNDAY WAS A RESOUNDING SUCCESS, ATTRACTING a remarkable 400 visitors to the Allerton Project. We were one of 257 farms who opened their doors to the public this year, with so much to do and see, including tractor rides, farm walks (plus a nature hunt for the little ones), delicious cream teas from the WI, and a variety of games and stands to enjoy. As usual, we teamed up with neighbouring farmers – who contributed machinery and livestock – to put on a great show. It was an excellent opportunity to showcase all the amazing things that happen at the Project, to individuals who might not typically have the chance to experience a farm first-hand, and it was fun answering so many questions from the non-farming public.

In June, we also had a presence at the national Cereals event in Nottinghamshire and at Groundswell in Hertfordshire. Over the course of the two shows, we welcomed many agricultural professionals to the stand, where we proudly exhibited all Allerton had to offer, as well as talking to people about AgriCaptureCO₂, an EU Horizon 2020 project in which we are partners. AgriCaptureCO₂ focuses on regenerative agriculture, which fostered lots of fascinating conversations.

We had lots of interest in our open day in September and our BASIS Sustainable Land Management Course, which is offered throughout the year. We were thrilled by the enthusiasm shown towards us by visitors to the shows and look forward to some of them coming to see the Allerton Project for themselves.

Did you know?

FOR AQUATIC WILDLIFE, IT IS POSSIBLE TO AVOID catchment-scale nutrient enrichment by creating small, clean water ponds in micro-catchments, which are not affected by domestic or agricultural sources of nutrients.

Farming for balance

Chris Stoate weighs up the large scale loss of production areas to meet environmental objectives

Our local farmers are concerned that there is not yet a policy framework that will meet economic and environmental objectives

In Brief

FARMING BACKED BY RESEARCH

Farming with the Environment, written by Chris Stoate, is a detailed account of 30 years of research. The book is particularly timely as both farmers and policymakers seek a post-EU path that delivers our food, economically viable farm businesses and numerous societal benefits from the farmed environment. Available from gwctshop.org.uk.
Paperback: 978-0-367-74897-5 | £29.99
eBook: 978-1-003-16013-7.



IF YOU DOUBLE THE DIMENSIONS OF AN average hedgerow you quadruple the amount of carbon it contains. It's thought British hedgerows currently contain some £65m of carbon by value.



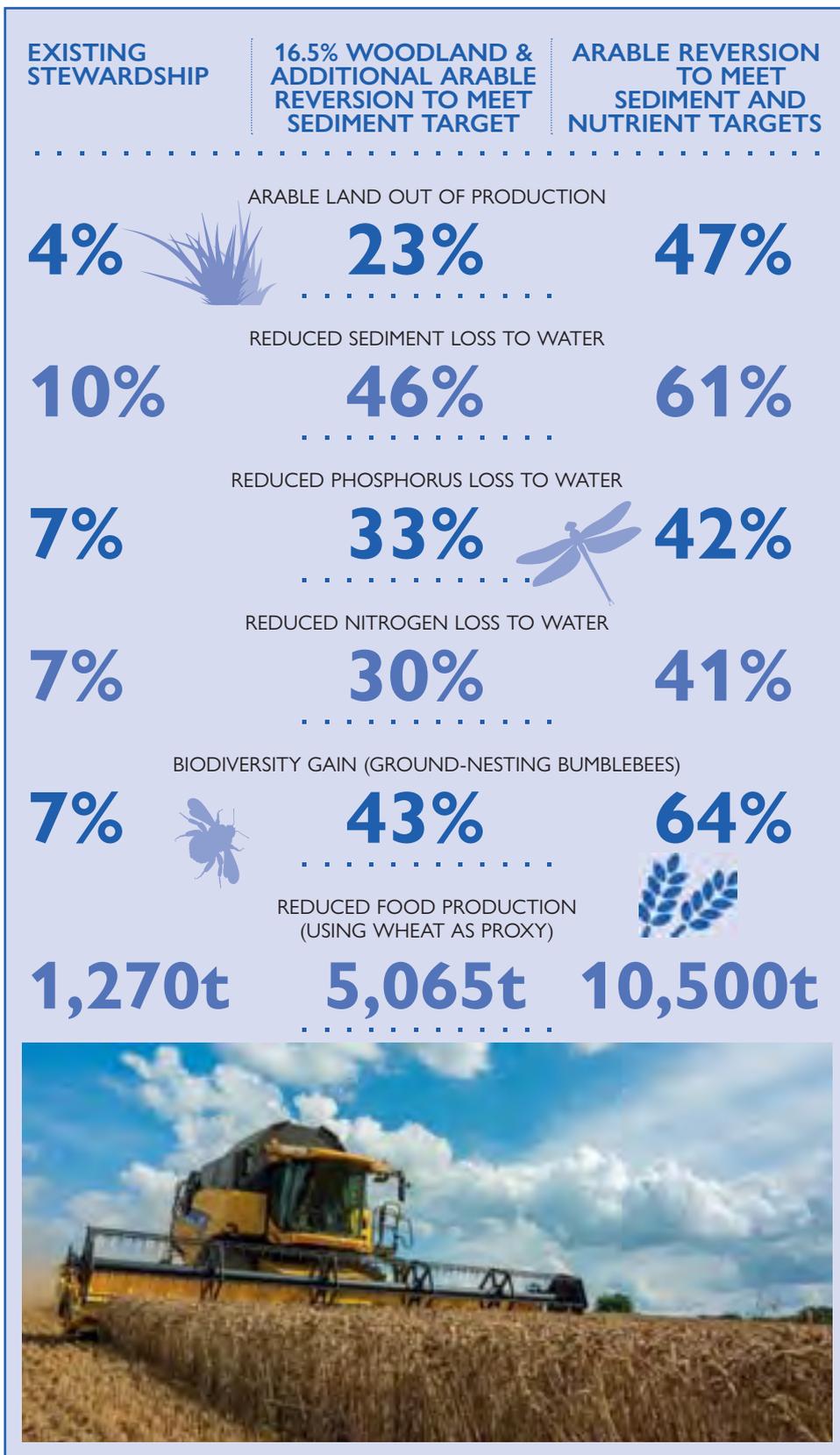
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In 2022, the Government set national targets to meet environmental objectives in England. These include increasing the national woodland area to 16.5% by 2050, reducing sediment and phosphorous loss from agriculture to water by 40% by 2037, and increasing wildlife species populations by 10% by 2042. Now it is largely up to farmers to deliver.

Farmer Clusters exemplify an approach to meeting environmental objectives at the landscape scale through collaboration between groups of like-minded farmers. Their motivation is often centred on iconic wildlife species or landscape character. But what about those areas where these drivers are not present, and where farms differ widely in size, farming system and tenure arrangements, making it difficult to identify common objectives or ways of working? Such is the case around the Allerton Project's research and demonstration farm in the Eye Brook catchment of the Welland.

The loss of area payments since the UK's departure from the EU highlights the need for farm businesses to manage productive land more efficiently and sustainably for food production, while turning over less productive land to environmental management through the Environmental Land Management scheme. A Farmer Cluster of eight farms was formed to explore this approach in the Eye Brook catchment in 2022.

We have used an interactive map of ecosystem services that was developed by Max Rayner, a recent PhD student, to explore options for land use change that might meet the objectives of both farm businesses and the Government in the upper 6,743 hectares (ha) of the Eye Brook catchment. This pioneering approach estimates that current adoption of Countryside Stewardship reduces sediment and phosphorus loss to water by 7-10% and increases abundance of bumblebees, our proxy for wildlife, by 7%. This is good news but falls short of the Government's targets. Farmers consider payment rates for Countryside Stewardship to be too low to warrant increasing the area in Stewardship, but it is important to understand what would be required to meet Government targets.



In the absence of new woodland, we would need to convert nearly half the arable land to grassland to meet the sediment and phosphorus loss targets

If we were to increase the woodland area to 16.5%, we would also need to convert an additional 626ha of arable land to no input grassland to meet the 40% reduction in sediment loss to water. This assumes the land most susceptible to runoff is adopted; less targeted conversion of land may require an even larger area.

With some small-scale exceptions, farmers are generally reluctant to create woodland as it is a permanent change in land use that precludes future food production. In the absence of new woodland, we would need to convert nearly half the arable land to grassland to meet the sediment and phosphorus loss targets. This would also result in a 64% increase in bumblebees but is associated with 10,500 tonnes less wheat production.

The loss of productive area at this scale is an important consideration for farmers in our group who see themselves mainly as food producers and recognise the need for food security at a national level. However, global commodity markets and input costs remain uncertain, raising a large question mark over the future economic viability of farm businesses. Farmers are keen to explore ways to improve management of the land that continues to be used for food production to reduce environmental impacts and improve resource use efficiency. But this

is challenging in our undulating landscape of clay soils, and many similar landscapes across lowland England.

Reducing the size of the productive area at the farm scale increases fixed costs, reducing further the economic viability of individual farm businesses and forcing a move towards land management by contractors. That is a move away from the local knowledge, ownership and identity associated with successful environmental management.

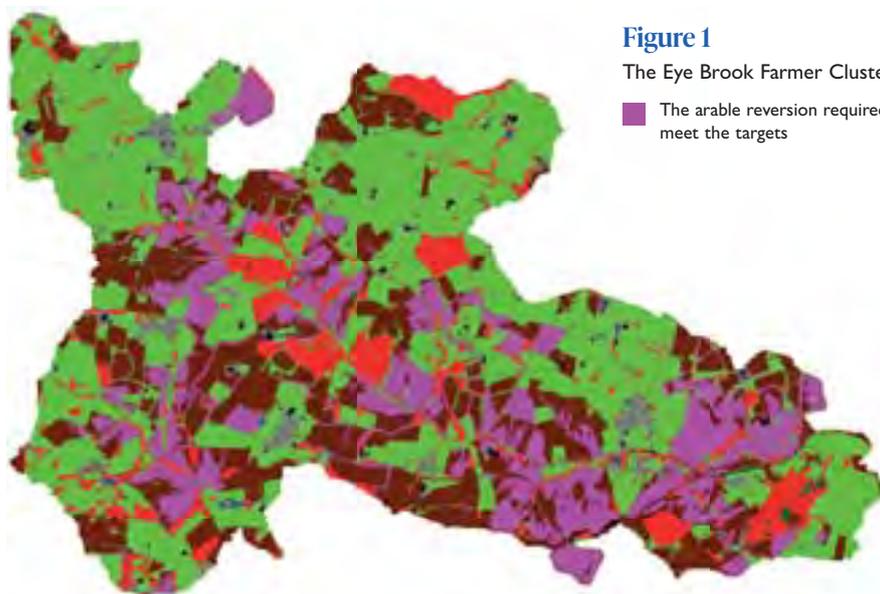
A viable carbon market for productive land is a long way off, benefits of Biodiversity Net Gain to farm businesses remain uncertain and these and other funding schemes for nature recovery are likely to be geographically restricted. Our local farmers are concerned that there is not yet a policy framework that will meet economic and environmental objectives at both farm and national levels. Making long-term decisions for large areas is difficult in these circumstances but the farming community is keen to explore the options. ■

Chris Stoate is head of research at the Allerton Project and is keen to help farmers achieve both economic and environmental objectives.



Figure 1
The Eye Brook Farmer Cluster area

 The arable reversion required to meet the targets



In the field



COVER CROP CORNER

THE WET CONDITIONS CREATED challenges this spring and some AB16 (autumn-sown bumblebird mix) areas needed to be re-drilled. The AB9 (winter bird food) plots were worked and rolled ready to be drilled, with the GS4 (legume and herb-rich swards) overseeding mix also prepped.

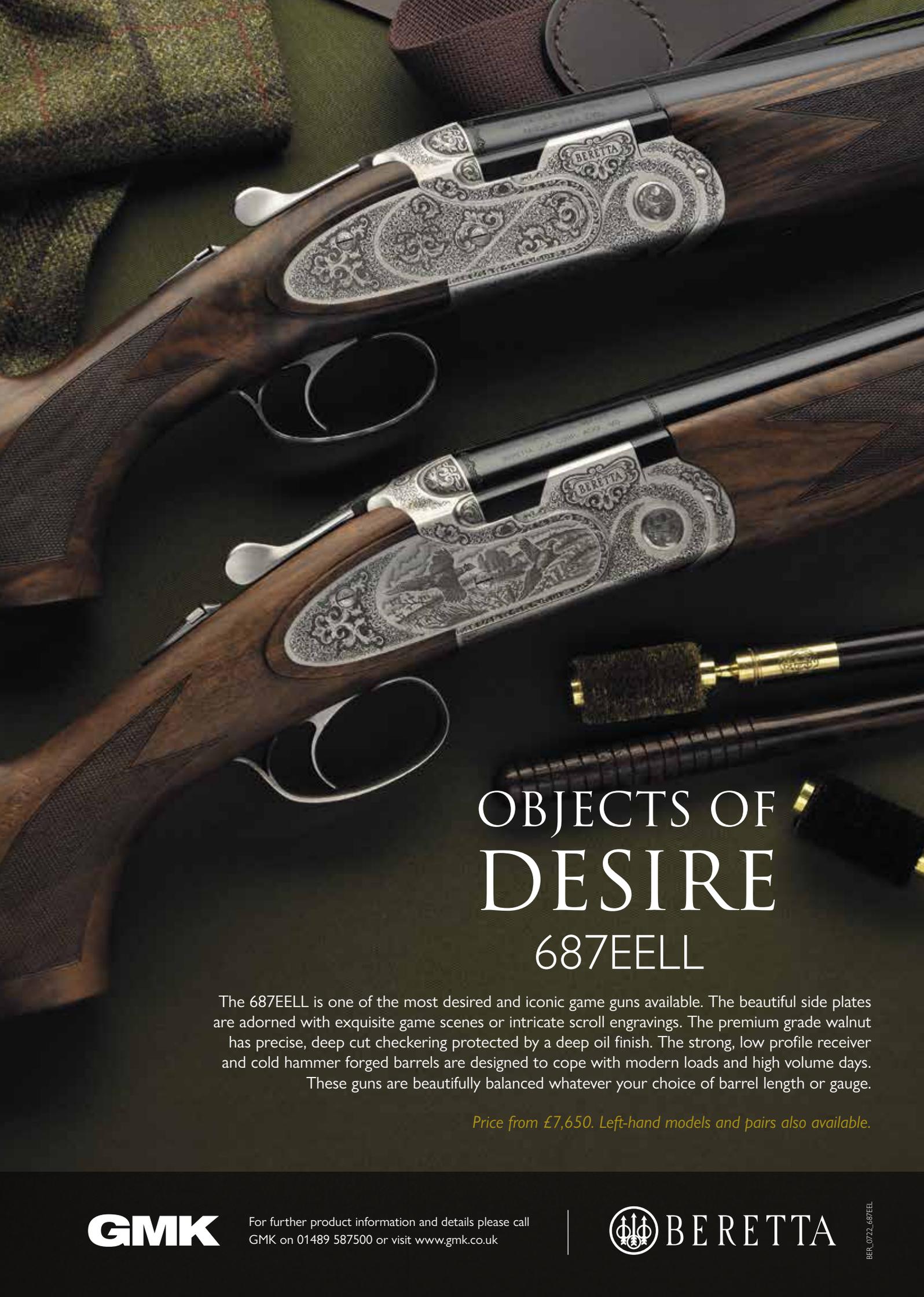
Our inspection in July showed that the GS4 areas were flourishing, with lots of herbs and legume elements present in the bottom of the sward. The AB9 mixes, comprising our Take-Off Mix and Campaign Mix, were generally looking good. The pre-emergence herbicide programmes for the Take-Off Mix plots worked well despite the dry conditions, while the Campaign Mix areas just needed a follow up post-emergence herbicide programme. All the AB9 plots required a final application of fertiliser, with the crops now ready for the winter ahead. We also identified the areas of AB15 (two-year sown legume fallow) that will soon be rotated around the estate; the seed will be ready to drill as soon as the winter crops have been harvested.

This growing season has been challenging, but shows the importance of careful planning, good seedbed preparation and waiting for optimum drilling conditions. All this is vital for the establishment of Stewardship options, especially given the unpredictable nature of our recent weather patterns. ■

Meehal Grint

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Conservation in Spain

Inspired by the GWCT, the Artemisan Foundation has recently celebrated its sixth anniversary and now includes a team of 10 researchers. Head researcher, Carlos Sánchez talks to James Swyer and reflects on its achievements so far



James Swyer is our director of marketing and membership and is keen to show the far-reaching effect of the GWCT.

I'm very proud" says Carlos Sanchez, "that we have been able to accomplish the aims that the Board of Trustees gave us six years ago. We believe that applied science and its dissemination should be the basis for the development of sustainable hunting management and we can now proudly say that we are a significant player in the hunting sector in Spain."

Is that how you view yourself, as a hunting organisation?

Our bread and butter is hunting, but since the beginning we have worked with protected species such as the Iberian lynx. We work in close collaboration with the farming and forestry sectors as everything goes hand-

in-hand with the management of the countryside and biodiversity. We make no secret of the fact we are an organisation made up of different groups including hunting federations, private landowners, companies, and individuals, but there is always conservation running through what we do.

How is the organisation funded?

We are privately funded, and this ensures an independent point of view. We have a mix of research projects that are funded from our core funds and others that are supported by outside organisations. Currently, our most important project is Observatorio Cinegético, or the Hunter's Watch. This is a mobile app which enables

people to undertake a partridge count, like the one run by the GWCT. Since its launch we have had support from the Spanish ministry equivalent of Defra, private donors and others. However, if there's a project about predator removal that nobody wants to support, we have the core funds.

Hunter's Watch sounds interesting. Could you talk me through that and some other projects you're running?

We have around 8-900 people using the app: hunters and game managers mainly, doing counts of different species – partridges, rabbits, deer, Spanish ibex (see box below), all kinds of things. We're also researching small game species, some of which have been in decline or have an uncertain status. For example, common quail numbers can fluctuate a lot and are a popular game species in Mediterranean countries. We're also running demonstration projects, engaging local hunters and farmers to benefit red-legged partridges. Finally, our socioeconomic studies are important and we recently undertook a study into the role of women in hunting, that was very well received.

You worked at the GWCT as a researcher. How did this help inform what you have achieved in Spain?

For myself and for the Board of Trustees, the GWCT has always been our main inspiration. Long before we existed, the GWCT was the organisation people wanted to have in Spain. We always view the GWCT with respect, and I'm trying to strengthen our collaboration step-by-step. We have an aspiration to be here for a long time, just like the GWCT. We would like to be the hunters' and countryside's long-lasting project.

The UK is facing lots of challenges, such as Humane Cable Restraints being banned in Wales and licensing reviews for grouse shooting in Scotland. How is the political landscape in Spain?

For a long time, hunting has been under pressure. Ten or 15 years ago, there were pressures on hunting and



Even years before we existed, the GWCT was the organisation people wanted to have in Spain

predator removal, but there was a turning point in 2016. One of the hunting federations in Andalucía, a member of Artemisan, started a campaign called 'Hunters also vote'. Every time we have regional or national elections, representatives from each political party sit down with them and they explain the importance of the hunting community. At the beginning, it was only a few parties

(Clockwise from top) Projects include working with protected species such as the Iberian lynx; the trustees of the Artemisan Foundation; head researcher Carlos Sánchez; demonstration projects are benefiting red-legged partridges.

Project Profile

The Spanish ibex is an example of success in the management and conservation of game. The ibex population is now growing rapidly after having been close to extinction in the mid-20th century, thanks, among other things, to correct hunting management, the creation of game reserves, and the revaluation of trophy hunting'.

A study directed by the Artemisan Foundation showed that despite the population growth during the last

decades, the ibex still faces important threats such as sarcoptic mange and poaching. In addition, there is concern about the effects on the species, and the economic losses, that the increase in the wolf population may entail.

The species is also causing problems in some places due to overabundance. The research points to hunting as a useful and necessary management tool to regulate its populations, while highlighting the added value of hunting providing an important source of income for the rural world.





THE ARTEMISAN FOUNDATION

is a private non-profit organisation, whose objective is to promote the management and conservation of fauna and flora species through research, communication and legal defence, paying special attention to the sustainable use of game species for the benefit of ecosystems and the rural world.



that were keen to speak, but now all our political parties are very happy to talk about hunting. Hunting is on the political agenda.

How is the socioeconomic work you're undertaking making a difference?

This work has been one of the main achievements of the Artemisan Foundation. When politicians quote figures about hunting, they will be speaking about our study. We always insist that it is not only about money, but society. In many parts of Spain, there would be a spike in unemployment without hunting, so it's very important.

You've achieved a lot in six years. What happens next?

We are in the process of trying to stabilise what we have achieved. We are reaching the level we set out to meet, so now we would like to consolidate the team of people we have. We would like to establish long-term projects like the Hunter's Watch and spread our activity to some regions where we haven't been able to do much so far. When it comes to policymakers, we are quite happy with our connections, but we would like to help them to develop policies. Last, but not least, we want to support the hunters, game managers and gamekeepers, the people who are out there in the field every day with dusty boots.



What are the best and worst parts of the role?

I dislike conflicts in certain topics, but we have to be prepared. I'm always frustrated when we are not able to help people with certain problems when time is limited. The best thing is the places we visit, the biodiversity we see and the people we work with. You'll meet someone working in a very isolated part of Spain and help them discover species they never knew they had. When they feel valued and they thank you, that's a good feeling. ■

Nest predators caught on camera



Holly Appleby shows how nest cameras are helping to identify predators of ground-nesting wader clutches in the North Pennine uplands



135
NESTS WERE MONITORED

5 SPECIES
WERE STUDIED

62
CAMERA TRAPS WERE USED
OVER TWO YEARS ON

14 ESTATES

CAMERA TRAPS WERE CHECKED
ONCE PER WEEK PRODUCING

2
MILLION IMAGES

TAKING
200 HOURS
TO SORT THROUGH



Camera traps are a vital tool in showing which species are predated nests, such as stoats.

Eleven wader species regularly breed in the North Pennines. Of these, curlew, lapwing, ringed plover, dunlin and woodcock are now red-listed, indicating more than a halving in breeding population size since the 1970s, while oystercatcher, redshank, snipe, and common sandpiper are amber-listed indicating a 25-50% decline in breeding population size since the 1970s.

Predation-induced low breeding success has been cited as a cause of decline in European waders. To understand the pressures faced by waders, we need to identify the relative impact of each predator. Doing so may influence policy, especially important when some lobbying groups seek an end to predator control. To achieve this, we used camera traps to monitor wader clutches remotely across large upland areas of Teesdale and Weardale, in the North Pennines. Here, current wader strongholds are associated with moors managed for driven grouse shooting, where several predator species are legally controlled and heather habitats are managed by cutting and burning creating wader nesting habitat.

Over the 2022 and 2023 breeding seasons, we deployed cameras at 135 nests across 14 moorland estates (see Table 1). Of these, 127 had a known fate, 78% hatched, 19% were predated and 3% were

Predation-induced low breeding success has been cited as a cause of decline in European waders



To understand the pressures faced by waders, we need to identify the relative impact of each predator. Doing so may influence policy, especially important when some lobbying groups seek an end to predator control

seemingly abandoned. We calculated nest survival based on daily survival probabilities over the full incubation period. These ranged from 0.51 in curlew to 0.90 in oystercatcher and averaged 0.71 across four species. Of the 24 clutches that were predated, six were by badgers, five by stoats, five by sheep, one by a fox, one by a ferret, one by a black-headed gull, one by a raptor and four by unknown predators.

These nest survival rates are high. This was expected as all nests were located on or close to grouse moors, where predators are managed. Were it not for predator management, we would predict values to be broadly half those observed and more akin to those found for curlew by the GWCT across 18 non-grouse moor sites across

the UK, and those found for waders in the Upland Predation Experiment at Otterburn during periods when predators were not controlled.

Of concern was the impact that sheep had on nests, which could have been exacerbated by the presence of cameras initially attracting them to the nests. In recognition of this, future work will try to avoid areas with sheep, ensure cameras are as inconspicuous as possible, and are placed further from the nest without reducing predator detection rates.

We are particularly grateful to the landowners and gamekeepers for their assistance in finding nests and hosting our study. This work was made possible through donations to the GWCT's nest camera appeal. ■

(Above) Using nest cameras, we have been able to show that badgers and foxes, along with stoats, are some of the key predators of wader nests, many of which are destroyed at night. Sheep can also cause disturbance to nests and can eat or trample eggs.



Holly Appleby is our uplands research assistant focusing on identifying wader nest predators with camera traps.

TABLE 1

Summary data for the 2022-2023 nest cameras

Species	Total nests	Hatched	Failed	Unknown	Nest survival probability
Curlew	53	35	15	3	0.51
Lapwing	50	35	11	4	0.52
Oystercatcher	17	15	1	1	0.90
Golden plover	14	13	1	0	0.89

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An aerial photograph of a chalk stream, showing a person fishing in the water. The stream is surrounded by lush green trees and houses on a hillside. The water is clear and blue, with green algae or moss growing in the shallows. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

Restoring our ICONIC chalk streams

Joe Dimbleby reports on how our world famous chalk streams are to benefit from an expanded Environmental Farmers Group



In June this year, 37 farmers of the Test and Itchen catchments in Hampshire joined the 195 neighbouring farmers already supporting the Environmental Farmers Group (EFG) making a total of 232 farms, covering 116,098 hectares, the largest initiative of its kind. The EFG was set up to help its members navigate the carbon, phosphate and biodiversity offset market, giving them an opportunity to replace the loss of subsidy by implementing conservation measures on their land to mitigate developments elsewhere.

The group's expansion will make restoration of rare chalk stream habitats a key component of the EFG's three principle aims of biodiversity and species recovery, clean water, and net carbon zero farming by 2040. The farmers involved already have a proven track record of delivering measurable improvements on the ground. Joe Edwards, manages the Middleton Estate, which has dramatically improved the water quality along its three-mile stretch on the River Test. He said: "We set out to recover the river, combining a wide range of measures including bringing back *Ranunculus* and other habitats that insects will naturally thrive in and encouraging wild brown trout populations. The result when we tested the water for 300 chemicals, showed that the water is cleaner when



it leaves Middleton than when it entered. There are other private land managers on the River Test who are starting to think about implementing similar management and I believe the EFG's conservation plan, led by the GWCT's CEO Teresa Dent, will succeed in protecting the river."

Improving water quality will be a central aim, but the two catchments have many other spectacular natural habitats and species, which need protecting and enhancing including rare chalk downland wildflowers. James Hewetson-Brown runs Ashe Warren Farm near the source of the River Test. Alongside his arable operation he and his wife Claire set up Wildflower Turf Ltd. James said: "Hampshire chalk downland is famous for its wildflowers and we have encouraged their return through managing margins round the edges of our fields. The EFG has great potential to unlock funding to create new and better networks of these type of measures and restore wildflowers to the countryside. Farmers are, in so many ways, best placed to deliver really good biodiversity because they have the equipment and practical understanding to make it work and by joining together, they can achieve it on a scale that will make a real difference."

As well as meeting the challenges of nature recovery and climate change on a large scale, the EFG, which is

(Left) Joe Edwards, manages the Middleton Estate, which has dramatically improved the water quality; (Top) James and Claire Hewetson-Brown who grow rare chalk downland wildflowers.



Joe Dimbleby our head of communications is keen to highlight the successes being achieved by farmers in the EFG.



In Brief



NATURAL CAPITAL ADVISORY (NCA)

THE NCA USES ITS HANDS-ON EXPERTISE AND industry connections to provide advice and services to farmers, investors, corporates, housing developers and local authorities across the UK. If you would like to find out more or to speak to someone at NCA, please email: nca@gwct.org.uk or contact us on 07458 147154. naturalcapitaladvisory.co.uk.

As well as meeting the challenges of nature recovery and climate change on a large scale, the EFG will support farmers to deliver increased food security through a blend of public and private funding

convened by the GWCT, will support farmers to deliver increased food security through a blend of public and private funding, which would otherwise be difficult for individual farm businesses to access.

While benefiting from being part of a larger cooperative, the Test and Itchen group's local knowledge and cultural identity will be key to its success. Many

of the families involved have farmed the same land for generations representing centuries of continuous connection with the local countryside. They are experts at delivering practical land management and personally invested for the sake of future generations.

Teresa Dent said: "To meet its legally-binding environmental targets, the Government is going to need to harness the environmental delivery of the farmers and land managers, the Working Conservationists, who look after the 72% of land that is in private stewardship in England. The addition of the farmers of the Test and Itchen to the EFG is an important step on the way to achieving this. We just need every farmer to improve on their previous best and the combined effect of working together could be significant."

The environmental auditing and monitoring of EFG projects is carried out by Natural Capital Advisory (NCA). Funding will be a combination of public money in the form of Environmental Land Management Schemes and private finance from sponsorship, offset markets, and companies looking to improve their Environmental Social Governance (ESG) rating. NCA chief executive, Christopher Sparrow, said: "In an often confusing and uncertain emerging market, both landowners and investors can be reassured that NCA has the right professional experience to deliver the highest quality advice and ongoing monitoring service. Our partnership with EFG will appeal to investors who want to contribute to the restoration of some of our most iconic landscapes, places they can visit to see the improvements for themselves." ■

By combining a wide range of measures including bringing back *Ranunculus* and other habitats, insects are thriving encouraging wild brown trout populations.



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The PERFECT STORM?

Henrietta Appleton asks whether critical thresholds
have been reached with bird conservation



THE CURLEW AN EXAMPLE OF A LONGER-LIVED SPECIES

MAXIMUM AGE SPAN

32

YEARS AND SEVEN MONTHS

TYPICAL LIFESPAN

11-16 YEARS

AGE AT FIRST BREEDING

2-3 YEARS

BTO data

The term 'critical threshold' is often associated with the availability of habitat and defines an abrupt change in species population levels because of habitat loss or fragmentation. However, perhaps more appropriate now, is the concept of density-dependent population dynamics and depensation. This is where species population growth rates have become negative because a population becomes unable to reproduce sufficiently at least to maintain its population and has the potential to accelerate population declines leading to local extinctions.

The current focus in wildlife conservation policy on abundance rather than breeding success has potentially clouded our understanding of the extent of wildlife declines by overlooking the problems that nest failure and chick losses create in terms of a species' ability to at least maintain its population level. This is likely to be particularly the case in longer-lived species. Low turnover in adults, due to poor breeding success, combined with reduced fecundity with age will, in time, reduce a population's ability to at least maintain itself. This might not be the case with all long-lived species or indeed all individuals, as demonstrated by a 31-year-old curlew nest-trapped by the GWCT which was incubating three eggs, but increasingly the fate of the population may rest with a few more successful individuals.

Consequently, the decline in our biodiversity so evident in short-lived 'indicator' species such as the grey partridge and some invertebrates has, for longer-

The current focus in wildlife conservation policy on abundance rather than breeding success has potentially clouded our understanding of the extent of wildlife declines

lived species, potentially been obscured or hidden at a broader population level by their longer life spans, such as those found in waders (maximum ages can be between 20-40 years) and raptors (which can reach 15-20 years of age). We could now have reached the point where the longer-living species are in evident decline and/or getting beyond breeding age because of management changes that have affected their reproductive success over a long period. In addition, the impacts of habitat loss and fragmentation, and predation may now be compounded by the effects of climate change, creating a 'perfect storm'.

One could argue that critical thresholds have been reached for a number of species already, leading to local extinctions, and the increased attraction of intense conservation efforts based on species reintroductions or translocations eg. for curlew. But why wait for species to reach critical depensation when in many cases the conservation answer is well understood and thoroughly researched? Does conservation not mean saving our species?



Henrietta Appleton is our policy officer (England) who believes that conservation policy needs to embrace breeding success if Government targets are to be met.



But why wait for species to reach critical depensation when in many cases the conservation answer is well understood and thoroughly researched? Does conservation not mean saving our species?

It appears that grouse moors may be helping to slow decline by acting as a source population for red-listed wader species such as curlew and golden plover.

Studies have found that depensation is connected to increased rates of predation, particularly at lower population densities. A recent paper by the upland research team, *Lethal predator control on UK moorland is associated with high breeding success of curlew, a globally near-threatened wader* has reinforced the value of predation management, as undertaken on grouse moors, to red-listed upland wader species that the GWCT first identified in its Upland Predation Experiment

more than 10 years ago. Indeed, it appears that grouse moors may be helping to slow decline by acting as a source population of curlew. Linking back to the theory of depensation, while loss of habitat is undoubtedly a significant cause of curlew decline, the impact of predation on populations will become more significant the smaller the population becomes and so accelerate population declines.

This example (and others that can be found on the GWCT website) reinforce the message that reliance on habitat alone is insufficient to increase the populations of much of our at-risk wildlife. Indeed, there have been incidents where the provision of 'perfect' habitat without the accompanying protection from predation has created a population 'sink', attracting the species in question and creating a 'honeypot' for predators.

The failure of Governments, their advisers and other conservation bodies to meet successive biodiversity targets is surely a damning indictment of current approaches to conservation. If we are to achieve the EIP23 goals for biodiversity, now is the time for conservation policy to change to embrace a more species-led approach to conservation. This needs to include predation management, underpinned by the monitoring of breeding success, not just population abundance. ■

THE GOVERNMENT'S LONG-TERM BIODIVERSITY ON LAND TARGETS IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN (EIP23)

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2. By the end of 2042, we will increase species abundance so that it is greater than in 2022 and at least 10% greater than in 2030.
3. By the end of 2042, we will restore or create in excess of 500,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites, compared with 2022 levels.

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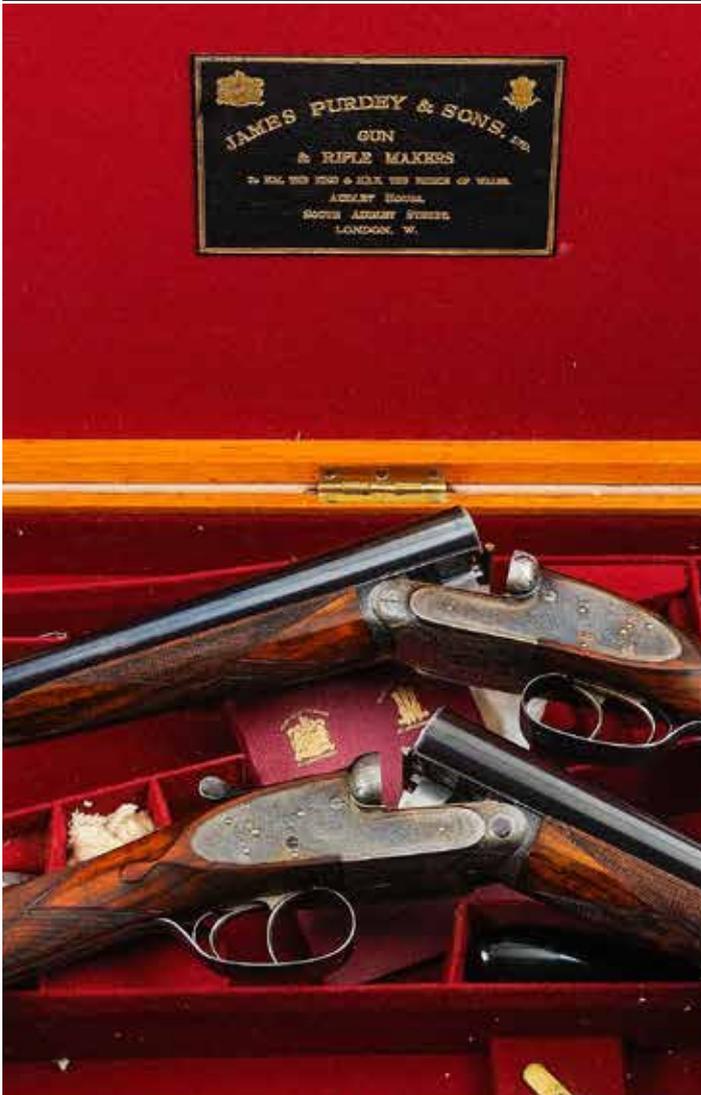
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Blow for ground-nesting birds

What is the future for the curlew population of Wales?

AFTER HAVING INVESTED THOUSANDS OF HOURS DEVELOPING AN AIHTS-APPROVED humane trapping device, the GWCT is disappointed that the Welsh Government has chosen to ignore the science and banned the use of Humane Cable Restraints (HCRs). During an episode of BBC Countryfile (aired 16 July) Lesley Griffiths, Minister for Rural Affairs did say that she would revisit the ban, if curlew numbers continued to decline. However, the fact remains that in refusing to accept the amendment to the Agriculture Bill, which would have permitted the use of HCRs under licence, the Welsh Government has put the survival of the curlew and other ground-nesting species in doubt. In doing so it has ignored peer-reviewed scientific evidence.

Moreover, the minister's suggestion that practitioners rely only on alternative methods of control such as shooting and electric fencing shows a lack of appreciation of the practical issues facing those who are desperate to protect the last few breeding curlew and other ground-nesting birds. The minister has admitted that predator control may be necessary as a last resort and stated that the impact of the ban will be monitored, but with the species predicted to be extinct in Wales by 2033, there is a real risk that it will be too late.

New interactive map launched

All our projects at the touch of a button

A NEW INTERACTIVE MAP HAS BEEN PRODUCED SHOWCASING THE VARIETY OF projects since GWCT Wales' inception in 2017, highlighting the locations and objectives associated with each project. Indeed, the main projects over the past two years ended in September: the Bro Cors Caron and Elwy Valley Sustainable Management Schemes, which were two large-scale landscape recovery projects. However, we are excited to see how the rest of our current and future projects progress, including the pan-Wales Curlew Connections project. Find out more at gwct.org.uk/walesprojects.

MORE INFORMATION

Contact: Interim Director for Wales:
Lee Oliver loliver@gwct.org.uk
07984 016102.



(L-R) Sue Evans, Efa Gruffudd Jones, Owen Williams.

Language Award

Offering our services in Welsh

GWCT CYMRU HAS BEEN AWARDED The Welsh Offer ('Cynnig Cymraeg') by the Welsh Language Commissioner. It is recognition of an organisation's commitment to the Welsh language and using it as an integral part of their work. It is an opportunity to transform our engagement with the public by showing how proud we are to offer services in Welsh. The Welsh Language Commissioner, Efa Gruffudd Jones, presented the team with an award at the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show in July.

Community Spirit showcased

SUE EVANS AND EMMA MELLEN attended the cross-party conference on shooting and conservation in June, where the GWCT *Community Spirit* document was the focus of discussions around mental health in the countryside. Given the challenges faced by field sports and farming in Wales since the document's publication, the intersection between policy, environmental change and mental health is important to consider and discuss. Community spirit research showed that game management provides an important driver for biodiversity net gain, a society that promotes and protects culture, heritage and the Welsh Language and encourages people to participate in the arts, sport and recreation.

Hamish Mackie

HAMISH MACKIE SCULPTURE

LIFE IN BRONZE



The Scottish capercaillie population is under threat with an estimated 580 birds in 2011, falling to 304 birds by 2020.



Grouse in focus

The pressures facing Scotland's grouse species

THE PRACTICAL CONSERVATION FOR Scotland's Grouse symposium, organised by the GWCT and the World Pheasant Association took place at Balhousie Castle, Perth, in May, sponsored by Hampden & Co.

Finlay Carson MSP and Convener of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee opened the event which provided a platform to air the latest research and advice. Speakers highlighted the pressures on Scotland's four grouse species, especially the capercaillie. These included climate change, disease, disturbance, failure to agree on the way forward among 'stakeholders', 'green washing' and carbon offsetting, extensive afforestation, and political change and its unintended consequences all impacting on conservation effort.

© Marek Rybar

Visitors flock to GWCT Scottish Game Fair

Scottish countryside takes centre stage

THE GWCT SCOTTISH GAME FAIR ATTRACTED 34,400 VISITORS this July at Scone Palace, Perthshire. As ever, a jam-packed programme saw visitors enjoying displays, demonstrations, have-a-go attractions and exhibitors covering everything from fishing, ferrets and falconry to gundogs and game cookery.

This event, first held in 1989, is the largest and longest-running Game Fair in Scotland and an important GWCT fundraiser. Rory Kennedy, director Scotland, said: "The fair plays an ever-increasing role in education and as a forum for discussion about the Scottish countryside. Our central exhibit showcased the vital role traditional land management plays in addressing the climate change crisis and biodiversity recovery. Once again, our Listen to the Land feature was well attended with an impressive amount of film content included too. A newly configured fishing area included a giant high-definition screen showing 17 fishing films, ranging from conservation documentaries through to artistic films romanticising fishing in Scotland's wildest places."

One highlight of the Fair was the Fred Taylor Memorial Trophy for Working Hill Ponies. In its 10th year running, with 18 entries, and coincidentally the centenary of the Highland Pony Society, the trophy was awarded to Eric Starke of Glen Clova Estate with his 14-year old mare Cally. Next year's Scottish Game Fair takes place from 5-7 July.



(Left) Eric Starke and Cally from Glen Clova Estate win the Fred Taylor Memorial Trophy for Working Hill Ponies.



We are learning about regenerative grazing principles for our Auchnerran farm.

Tackling grazing

Regenerative agriculture leads the way

LOUISE DE RAAD, HEAD OF RESEARCH, and Dyfan Jenkins, livestock manager at our Auchnerran demonstration farm, attended a regenerative agriculture training course in the Lake District. The event included sessions on maximising grazing productivity; soil health and improving water cycles; managing weeds; and most importantly the principles of regenerative grazing and planning your grazing. Louise said: "The course explained how to move a farm from traditional rotational grazing practices to one based on regenerative principles with nature friendly farming and soil restoration at the heart of it, all of which is extremely relevant to our direction of travel at Auchnerran."

Bryony joins the team

BRYONY TOLHURST HAS JOINED AS our new senior scientist. Bryony has 15 years' experience as a researcher and university lecturer, and has expertise in mammal behavioural ecology, particularly of foxes and badgers. She will help to expand the GWCT's applied research informing predator management to protect breeding waders.

An unduly precautionary approach to muirburn legislation will curtail management, just when we need to research and evaluate the potential benefits of carbon sequestration, mitigation of wildfire and conservation of upland floral biodiversity.



A burning question

Muirburn legislation in Scotland

THE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT & MUIRBURN (SCOTLAND) BILL WAS PUBLISHED IN March and then became the subject of further consultation by Scottish Parliament's Rural Affairs and Islands Committee in advance of debate and amendment later in 2023. GWCT Scotland provided both written and oral evidence to the committee on muirburn.

Muirburn Bill proposals

A landowner or occupier will need to apply for a licence to:

- Burn on 'peatland', defined as land with a peat depth of 40cm or more.
- Burn on non-peatland areas where peat is shallower than 40cm, or not present.

Applicants will need to identify:

- The licence holder; provide a map to identify the land where muirburn is proposed; indicate what is peatland and non-peatland.

Non-peatland licences may be granted for:

- Managing habitat for game or wildlife; improving grazing for livestock; conserving, restoring or enhancing, or managing the natural environment; preventing or reducing wildfires that may cause harm to people or damage to property; research.

Peatland muirburn licences cover:

- Restoring the natural environment; preventing risk of wildfires causing damage to habitats, harm to people or damage to property; research.

GWCT perspective

An unduly precautionary approach to muirburn legislation will curtail management, just when we need to research and evaluate the potential benefits of carbon sequestration, mitigation of wildfire, conservation of upland floral biodiversity, as well as cultural and economic aspects.

We are particularly concerned that muirburn might only be permitted as a last resort on peatland. The alternative of cutting and leaving heather brash on the ground creates other risks. We would also like to see consistency by making 'conserving, restoring, enhancing or managing the natural environment' a licensable purpose on peatland as well as non-peatland.

We were pleased that during the committee evidence sessions, there was recognition that muirburn has a role to play in mitigating wildfire and that NatureScot acknowledged the case for further research through an adaptive management approach. We will continue to advocate for these as the Bill proceeds through Scottish Parliament.



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Abastion for birdlife

The Raby Estate in County Durham was planting trees and rewetting long before the current trend, providing a haven for a wide range of threatened bird species. Joe Dimbleby reports

Project Profile

Location: Teesdale, County Durham

Type of landscape: Sheep and beef

Acreage: 30,000

Conservation measures: Rewetting, tree planting, cutting, controlled burning, extensive grazing, predation management, wildlife monitoring



Lindsay Waddell believes tree planting in the uplands can be integrated into grouse moor management. In the distance is one of many native woodland plantations he established more than 30 years ago.

When it comes to demonstrating the conservation benefits of grouse moor management, it doesn't get better than Raby. The 30,000-acre estate has the highest density of waders in Britain outside the Orkneys, about a third of all the black grouse left in England, and a breeding population of merlin of regional importance, as well as large numbers of passerines and a whole suite of raptors. When retired headkeeper Lindsay Waddell first came down from Scotland, he hadn't seen anything like it. He said: "Brought up in an Angus glen, I was used to a good selection of birds, but my move south brought me into contact with a completely different density of ground-nesting birds. I shall never forget one of my first spring mornings at Raby. The sound of the dawn chorus was almost deafening. The whole assemblage was at it: black grouse, curlew, lapwing, snipe, redshank, skylark, and many more."

So how has the estate been so successful in maintaining such an extraordinary abundance of red-listed species when alternative land uses have seen them disappear? In the 1970s and '80s, Common Agricultural Policy headage payments, subsidies based on the number of sheep on the ground, led to vast swathes of the UK's heather moorland being destroyed by overgrazing. Lindsay explained: "Once sheep remove most of the heather, bilberry, cotton grass and other plants from the surface, if you get the wrong kind of grass growing back, it is very difficult for those

The sound of the dawn chorus was almost deafening

dwarf shrubs to re-establish themselves. The impact on biodiversity is massive. From keeping the whole range of moorland birds, you completely remove some of them. It's not much good for black grouse, red grouse, and even a lot of the pipits prefer the dwarf shrub mix, which has a knock-on impact on predators like merlin."

The fact that Raby was managed for grouse, meant that subsidies to overgraze were resisted as sheep production was not its primary objective. At the same time, entirely eradicating herbivores from the ecosystem would be damaging. Grazing plays a vital role in maintaining the grass swards on the in-bye land next to the moors, which are the favoured breeding places of lapwing, redshank, oystercatchers and other waders; and sheep on the hill help prevent vegetation growing rank or being lost entirely due to the natural regeneration of woodland. Lindsay said: "In everything, keeping the balance is very important. If you had no grazing, mostly non-native trees would recolonise and the main breeding ground for waders in this country would be lost because they need wide open spaces."

Grouse management is often wrongly blamed for the huge ditches dug across vast swathes of heather moorland,



Joe Dimbleby our head of communications reports on Raby Estate which is ahead of the curve for conservation with an outstanding number of red-listed birds.



which were funded by the Government in the mistaken belief they would improve grazing and, therefore, productivity following wartime food shortages. These drains or 'grips' are a danger to grouse chicks, whereas keeping water on the hill, particularly in drier summers, is of great benefit to them. Rewetting is the current trend in upland management – Lindsay was blocking grips 40 years ago. Ironically, his work was being part-funded by English Nature, while at the same time the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was still offering grants for digging drains.

He said: "Though, these days, rewetting is flagged up as something new – we were doing this way back in the 1980s to stop the erosion of peat by excessive water flow. We plugged up the whole drainage system on 16,000 acres of moorland on Raby over five to 10 years, which saved numerous broods of grouse as well as lambs from getting trapped in the drains. Today they have refilled with vegetation with small pools along their length providing ideal habitat for numerous species of *Sphagnum* and invertebrates, an important food source for the chicks of moorland birds."

Tree planting at Raby is another example of where a measured approach has been in contrast to ever-changing and potentially damaging Government policy. About 30 years ago, concerned that the black grouse population was suffering due to a series of severe winters, Lindsay began establishing plantations of native trees on the edges of the moor to provide food and shelter for the red-listed species. On one occasion, even with Natural England support, he struggled to get permission because at the same time Defra schemes prohibited tree planting on the grounds that it spoiled the integrity of the open moorland. In the end, a compromise was reached whereby trees were allowed as long as they didn't protrude above the skyline.

Lindsay said: "We planted a lot whenever the opportunity arose, and they've proved very beneficial to black grouse in particular. There is room for more tree

David Raw has been monitoring merlin on the moor for 30 years.



Wildlife Highlights



CURLEW

© Bob Eade



BLACK GROUSE



HEN HARRIER



LAPWING

© Bob Eade



SKYLARK



WHINCHAT



planting around the fringes of grouse moors, and a lot of other moor owners have followed suit since then. Grouse moor management done well is the best of both worlds because you end up with a mixed landscape that's good for your upland breeding waders and passerines, as well as species that benefit from tree cover."

Historically, grouse management saved large areas of the uplands from commercial sitka spruce plantations, which were heavily incentivised by Government grants. Raby resisted the temptation and the estate even purchased a piece of land next to a grouse moor to prevent it becoming a conifer plantation. Such tree plantations are a threat to upland bird assemblages, both because they harbour predators and because many species are not adapted to closed canopy woodland.

Government grants to drain the uplands for agriculture caused damaging erosion.

David Raw a volunteer field-worker from the Durham Upland Bird Study Group has been studying merlin in the area for more than 30 years to provide one of the most comprehensive breeding studies of the species in the UK. He said: "Merlin are birds of the open moor and close canopy woodland wouldn't be appropriate."

As ground-nesting birds, merlin also benefit from the legal control of generalist predators by current headkeeper Andrew Hyslop and his team. Andrew said: "We carry out predator control for the grouse, but by doing so we are protecting all ground-nesting birds including curlew, lapwing, hen harriers and merlin."

Raby prides itself on the fact that you can see the full suite of raptors on the moor and many breed there. This is in part due to the abundance of food in the form of the passerines and small mammals that thrive under grouse management. David said: "Merlin is a Schedule 1 species, and it was recently red-listed with a UK population of only 1,100-1,350 pairs. But here in Durham we have a good proportion. Pairs on Raby, in particular, show really good productivity. Managed grouse moors are

Managed grouse moors are the optimal habitat for breeding merlin

RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

Langholm Moor



Simon Lester
Headkeeper, Langholm Moor
Demonstration Project (LMDP) 2008-2016

The LMDP was intended to investigate whether a grouse population could be recovered from low numbers in the presence of breeding raptors. The moor covered almost 12,000 hectares of land then owned by Buccleuch Estates and the project was a joint initiative between Buccleuch Estates, the GWCT, Scottish Natural Heritage, the RSPB and Natural England. When it began, Langholm Moor was a failing SPA for hen harriers and a failing Site of Special Scientific Interest for habitat and upland bird assemblage, with one merlin's nest up a tree. By the end of the project, we had double figures of merlin nests on the ground and all raptor species had increased, along with red grouse, black grouse and waders. This was all achieved by employing grouse moor management measures including the removal of 1,600 foxes and 2,081 crows. By the time keeping ceased in 2016, Langholm Moor was back in favourable condition. ■



If you take any of the management tools away, you are severely restricting our ability to ensure the breeding success of the red-listed species

(L-R) In the 1980s, long before the current trend for rewetting, Lindsay was blocking up the grips, helping *Sphagnum* and other mosses retain moisture; Moorland on Raby is not a monoculture, but a mix of dwarf shrub species; Raby headkeeper, Andrew Hyslop, demonstrates the depth of the peat with his walking stick. He is concerned that banning controlled burns on such areas will lead to devastating wildfires.

the optimal habitat for breeding merlin, providing heather for nesting sites, predator control and their principal prey, meadow pipits and skylark. We get a tremendous amount of co-operation from the keepers, who are immensely proud of their merlin. We are allowed free access to complete the studies and we share information. Together we build a comprehensive, independently verified picture of productivity each season.”

Raby’s grouse moors are listed as a Special Area of Conservation and a Special Protection Area (SPA), affording them the highest level of protection, and many of the birds listed in the original designations, like golden plover and curlew, are still in abundance. Lindsay believes it would be disastrous if grouse management were to cease in favour of a light touch or abandonment approach and points to the example of Langholm Moor (see box on page 50), which is a short flight for a wader over the Scottish border from Raby.

“Upon the cessation of the game management at the end of the final piece of work there in 2018 the bird populations of the Langholm moors have pretty much slid to oblivion,” he said. “I’ve heard that most of the ground-nesting birds, including the raptors, have suffered serious declines. Merlin are down from seven pairs to one left nesting in a tree, a strategy the bird employs when being predated at ground level. It’s become a classic example of moorland scrubbing, with a lot of non-native pine trees

taking over what was an open landscape but will soon be no more than a woodland. It’s an SPA for hen harriers, but how long it will stay like that I don’t know.”

There are no plans to leave Raby to a similar fate, but recent changes in regulations have caused the effective abandonment of large areas of heather moorland. Andrew Hyslop is deeply concerned that Natural England’s decision to ban controlled burning on deep peat in designated areas will eventually make the habitat unsuitable. He said: “We are doing our best using grazing and cutting, but in many instances these methods are impractical. If you take any of the management tools away, you are severely restricting our ability to ensure the breeding success of the red-listed species.”

Over decades, Lindsay has seen grouse management’s remarkable conservation success continue as fads for upland land use come and go, but he is concerned that current direction of policy and ideology threatens this legacy at a time when many of the species associated with it need it most. He said: “There is a real risk that the rewilding bandwagon takes over from the reality and economics of traditional upland land management as myths are perpetrated regarding exactly what a grouse moor is. It is not a monoculture of heather, indeed far from it. It is a mosaic of the whole suite of moorland dwarf shrubs with room for larger cover on the periphery aiding a wide range of species.” ■

Managing through the “Hungry Gap”

By **Simon Evans** Oakwood Feeds Ltd.

From when the first chicks hatch, the nurture process commences, considerably time, attention and effort is spent to ensure that the young chicks grow on well and healthy.

The very same dedication should also be applied when both partridge and pheasant poults arrive in well-established cover crops, the nurture process continues.

Sowing top quality Game Cover Mixes is paramount not only for the survival of Game birds but also Farmland birds too.

Where you see an abundance of Farmland and Game birds, living happily together this is a strong indicator that the correct cover crops were sown to suit both the topography and the inevitable limitations that arrives from time to time.

Game and Farmland birds that seek to eat seeds can really benefit from the choice of Cover Crops sown, keeping them nourished through the dormant months of December to April, where natural food sources can be scarce, the term better known as the “hungry gap”

Through the late winter period when natural food sources are in short supply, as birds enter the new breeding season, Supplementary feeding will also significantly help through this challenging period.

Native birds such as Grey Partridge, Yellowhammer, Corn Bunting, Linnets, Tree Sparrows and many more will all benefit by the introduction of Supplementary feed.

SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING

Supplementary Feeding normally arrives in the form of seed mix or individual seeds, such as Cut and or Whole Maize, Sunflower Hearts, Striped Sunflower, White Millet, Cereals, and many more.

To attract birds to feed, the seeds must be clean and fresh, varied in colour and texture size.

There are a wide selection of Feeder hoppers to choose from, it is imperative however that feed must be kept clean at all times, replenishing the feed hopper little and often to avoid any possible build-up of mould and other toxins.

It is imperative to source feed carefully, free from any contaminants.

Where Stewardship schemes are available, a specialised supplementary feeding mix, sourced from recommended suppliers.

The mix includes both cereals (not maize) and other small seeds. The small seeds component must be a minimum of 30% of the total mix by weight and contain at least three of the following, Canary, Linseed, Oilseed Rape, Red Millet, White Millet Sunflower Hearts with no individual species exceeding 50% of the total small seed component by weight. The selection of which Cover Crops best suited for me, can be a dilemma?!

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- ✓ Although maize is a favourite with many, large stalk leafy Kale or Wild Bird mixtures from RC Crops is often the best option.



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Keeping rats under control

The changes to rules using rodenticides are due to come in next year. Mike Swan explains

Most gamekeepers will have heard by now that 'open area' use of second generation anticoagulant rodenticides will cease to be legal at the end of 2024. This is not because of a Government edict, but because the manufacturers have unanimously agreed to withdraw their licences for this type of use. So, from the end of next year, there will be no anticoagulants available for the sort of burrow baiting around game feeders that keepers are used to using for controlling rats.

The manufacturers have taken this decision because, despite strenuous efforts, they are concerned that no progress has been made over the last decade, on reducing the extent to which rodenticide residues occur in non-target wildlife, and accumulate up the food chain. They hope that by taking this action, exposure of wildlife will reduce. Meanwhile use both indoors, and outdoors around buildings will continue to be allowed. In this regard it is important to stress that the label phrases 'In and around buildings' and 'outdoors around buildings' mean the same thing legally, and only allow outdoor application to address infestation of buildings.



If you use maize, choose late varieties that do not set viable cobs, or consider an alternative cover crop.
© Peter Thompson

In announcing this decision, the manufacturers have been keen to stress that there are other options that can be used in open areas. Firstly, there is an alternative poisoning approach using cholecalciferol, some formulations of which have been newly approved. Cholecalciferol is vitamin D3, but in overdose it is toxic through attacking kidney function. It is an acute poison, but unlike anticoagulants, there is no issue of cumulative effects, thus bringing significantly less risk of secondary poisoning.

Another approach is to gas rat burrows using aluminium phosphide pellets. This again avoids secondary poisoning issues, but it does require operators to go through a significant training and certification process. Meanwhile, there have been great improvements in both night vision and thermal imaging equipment in recent years, and many keepers have moved to night shooting as a key part of their rat control strategy.

Trapping is perhaps a neglected option too. Returning to the 'good old days' of keepers running multiple trap lines across their beat is unlikely to be an option for most, but managing a few strategically sited kill traps is not so onerous, and every rat that is killed in a trap is one less that needs poisoning or shooting. Strategic trapping may well also help to nip infestations in the bud, saving effort further down the line.

Avoiding infestation in the first place is something for all game managers to consider

Avoiding infestation in the first place is something for all game managers to consider. If our activities did not provide food and harbour for rats, we would not need to deal with them in the first place.

Using hopper designs that are hard for rats to access is an obvious starting point, but there is much more to consider. Rats are slow to change their habits, so moving hoppers each time you fill them can keep you one jump ahead. Maize offers great cover for pheasants and partridges but crops full of ripe cobs are a rat paradise. Choosing late varieties that do not set viable cobs in our climate gives the same or possibly better cover without the rat harbourage. Or consider alternative cover crops – contact your local adviser (see page 59). Avoiding trail feeding late in the day means less food lying about overnight when the rats wake from their siesta. I could go on, but if we stop and think about it, we can surely all work out strategies to make life harder for rats going into the future, and in the end that will be good PR for game management too. ■

In Brief

THE RISKS RATS POSE

Rodents pose a threat to people's health and to health and hygiene in animal husbandry. They may cause significant damage to commodities, especially stored food and animal feeds, and to the fabric of buildings and infrastructure, such as electrical cables, drains and sewers. Rodents pose a risk to food safety and food hygiene because they are attracted to areas where food is stored, prepared and sold and because many food-borne pathogens are carried by rodents and transmitted to humans, pets and to farm livestock.





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In Brief



Yorkshire hosts GAME 24

GAME 24 IS HEADING NORTH NEXT year and will take place on 5 March at The Garden Rooms at Tennants, Leyburn, North Yorkshire. This annual conference provides vital information for all those involved in game management, with talks from industry experts who will share their knowledge and experience. Tickets are limited but to book and reserve your space go to gwct.org.uk/game24.

Don't forget the GWT

THERE COULD HARDLY BE A MORE worrying and stressful time to be a gamekeeper. No sooner were we getting past covid, there was a gamebird supply crisis due to avian influenza, and then to cap it all lots of shoots were thrown into further chaos over licensing of release in and around Special Protection Areas. So, please don't forget that The Gamekeepers Welfare Trust (GWT) is there to help with advice and support. You do not need to be a member of any organisation to qualify, GWT is there for all gamekeepers, stalkers, ghillies and their families. Please don't hesitate to ring Jamie's confidential helpline on 0300 1233088.

Gamekeepers Welfare Trust

Being there for gamekeepers, stalkers and ghillies. For more information see thegamekeeperswelfaretrust.com.



Released pheasants are notorious wanderers, especially if habitat is poor. Your local GWCT adviser has a wealth of knowledge to help you hold on to your birds.

Around the shoot

Innovative research in practice

Allerton Project Shoot, Loddington

For the previous few years, half of our 2,600 pheasant poult have been wing tagged as part of a long-term research project looking at the movement of pheasants around the shoot, and the effect of enhanced rearing on survival rate. The small plastic tag sits at the top of the wing, it doesn't restrict movement and is well tucked in to reduce the risk of snagging and damaging the wing itself. Each release pen is allocated a different colour, and information on which pen the bird was released into, where it was shot, tag year, and whether it is male or female is recorded after every drive. However, the total bag of our shoot days never contains a very high percentage of tagged birds, which asks the question, where do they go? Some are predated, and some succumb to other causes, but we all know how much pheasants move around the countryside and it can be a struggle getting them to stay in the right place. Perhaps by radio-tracking a proportion of these birds it would give us a better idea of how far and where they move across the countryside, and at what time of the year, providing additional game management insights for future years.

On the ground



MOVE YOUR FEEDERS EACH TIME you fill them to avoid muddy patches forming and significantly reduce parasite and disease risk for your birds.



This autumn

A BROOD-REARING MIX CAN either be established in the autumn or spring. The latter is usually kale based, providing good over-winter cover and supplementary feed in year one before re-seeding to form useful brood-rearing habitat in the following spring. A good spring sown mix might consist of kale, a small quantity of mustard to act as a nurse, sweet blossom clover and a food crop such as linseed, millet, quinoa or a cereal.

PHEASANTS LOVE TO SCRATCH in straw. Scattering some along a ride in a cover crop significantly improves its attractiveness.

ATTEND A GWCT BEST PRACTICE course. Keep up to date with the changes in corvid control, tunnel trapping, fox control using HCRs (Humane Cable Restraints) and game management. This year we continued to offer a wide-ranging suite of courses including the BASIS Certificate in Game Management – Lowland, the only independently accredited course for shoot managers, and the popular Part-Time Keepers Course. Next year we will be working with the National Gamekeepers' Organisation to deliver a new level of refresher courses for experienced gamekeepers. Look out for further details.



Clean water is vital and can play a key role in holding game on your shoot.

HOW TO...

provide clean water

Providing clean water is an essential part of both maintaining wild game stocks and retaining released game. On my previous game shoots a water source was provided by every feed station, or along feed rides to give the birds access to water after they had fed. Water is more vital than feed so providing this, especially in a dry period, can help hold game.

1. Half cut drums or open feed troughs should be avoided, from a biosecurity point of view, as birds often drop faeces within them, and debris can build up causing a potential disease issue. If you do choose to use them, clean them regularly and use a stone or brick to hold them in place.
2. Positioning a large IBC header tank within a drive and having bell drinkers arranged down the feed ride can save time and effort in filling water troughs. You can either paint the tank or cover it with silage wrap to prevent the light turning the water green. Although an initial outlay, overall, it will save time and money by increasing percentage returns.

3. Another method is to have a small tank positioned on top of a feeder to allow gravity to feed a bell drinker which can be hung from a metal road pin. These drinkers can last a few weeks full and are much easier to keep clean.

4. Biomaster guards can be purchased to cover a bell drinker to help reduce contamination. These are especially beneficial within woodland release pens where game can defecate into the drinkers while roosting within trees.



DID YOU KNOW?

Although the summer weather this year was wet, the provision of fresh water should still be maintained to offer the birds a clean supply in comparison to a muddy puddle.

DID YOU KNOW? Don't leave it until after the end of the season to book a visit from your GWCT adviser if you are planning improvements to your shoot. An autumn visit allows much more time to implement changes for the 2024/5 season.



FOR MORE ADVICE – book a visit or join one of our courses. Get in touch: 01425 651013 (England/Wales) or 0131 202 7670 (Scotland). gwct.org.uk/advisory



CREATING THE ULTIMATE... Wildlife Plot

(L-R) Once established a wildlife plot will provide for wildlife all year round for up to 10 years.

To supercharge biodiversity on land that you manage, why not try a wildlife plot which caters for insects, birds and almost every other group of wildlife. Once established the plot will provide for wildlife all year round for up to 10 years, and GWCT research has revealed that it is the best wild bird seed mix in the country for insects, both in quantity and variety of species. Also called the 'Advanced Partridge Mix', it is the result of years of research across Europe and lengthy trials conducted by the GWCT and Oakbank.

ESTABLISHING A WILDLIFE PLOT

1. Sow into a prepared sterile seed bed in a one hectare (ha) block or wide strip (15 metres plus) at a rate of 20kg/ha, in autumn.
2. Leave alone in the first two years. Mow 50% of the plot (in blocks or strips) every autumn from year three onward in late summer. Remove the cuttings before lightly cultivating the cut area to encourage the newly-shed seed to germinate and renew the plot.

the plot will provide for wildlife all year round for up to 10 years, and GWCT research has revealed that it is the best wild bird seed mix in the country for insects, both in quantity and variety of species

3. Spot-treat problematic weeds, but remember wild bees will thank you for not eliminating every last thistle.

4. Get in touch with your local GWCT adviser for tips on siting the mix and blending into your agri-environment scheme or shoot.

The wildlife plot mix can be tailored to suit your soil and is available from seed merchants including Oakbank, Kings Crops and Bright Seeds. From 2023 the mix has been available as 'IPM2: Flower-rich grass margins, blocks or in-field strips' at a payment rate of £673/ha per year in the Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme.

THE WILDLIFE PLOT MIX TYPICALLY INCLUDES:



Common poppy & black knapweed

Yarrow & oxeye daisies

AS WELL AS:

Triticale, sunflower, kale millet, stubble turnip, teasel sweet fennel, sainfoin, chicory, kidney vetch, black medick, cornflower, corn cockle, corn poppy, black knapweed, wild carrot, self-heal, winter vetch, musk mallow, greater mullein.



It is often easier to hear skylark singing their distinctive rolling whistling song, than it is to see them.

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT...

The soaring skylark

© Gallinago Media

My father was upset when he thought skylarks had disappeared from our farm. After much nagging he finally booked an appointment to have his ears tested and was overjoyed to discover that their return coincided with the arrival of his new hearing aids. It is often easier to hear skylarks than it is to see them, as they sing their distinctive rolling whistling song while flying high in the sky. Skylarks breed between April and August laying their eggs in nests on the ground, ideally in short and medium height vegetation. They lay two to six eggs per brood which are incubated for 11 days. Both parents feed the chicks insects for their first week before gradually introducing small shoots and seeds. Grass pastures and spring cereals are preferred breeding sites due to the shorter vegetation. Silage fields and winter cereals are normally too tall and dense to allow more than one early nesting opportunity.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

1. Introduce spring cereals into the rotation and create skylark plots within winter cereals.
2. Enhance overwinter stubbles with summer fallow as it will provide nesting and foraging habitat.
3. Create wide buffer strips around cereal fields to provide plenty of foraging opportunities.

4. In grassland, manage stocking densities to ensure that nests aren't at risk of being trampled and fields are not overgrazed – bare fields increase predation risk.

Jennie Stafford is our northern farmland biodiversity adviser working with farmers to improve habitats for game and wildlife on their farms.



THIS WORK ALSO BENEFITS

Skylark plots, summer fallow and field margins will also help the majority of our beneficial insects including pollinators and many farmland birds.



© Peter Thompson

Being ground nesters, skylarks are at high risk of nest predation and therefore need to produce up to

3

broods per breeding season to maintain their population.

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AIR CHARTER SERVICE

Memorial shoot



The Duke of Edinburgh Memorial Challenge

(Left) Lord Dalmeny; (above) all the guests who enjoyed the fantastic five-star challenge in memory of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh.



A CHARITY DAY HELD AT Sandringham Estate in May, honouring the extraordinary legacy of HRH The late Duke of Edinburgh's contribution to conservation, raised £330,000. Lord Salisbury said: "The late Duke of Edinburgh was the GWCT's long-serving Patron and our most knowledgeable and incisive advocate. Sandringham is where he put so many of his conservation principles into practice and we were extraordinarily lucky to be allowed to hold this event there, so appropriately, in his memory."

Jim Paice, GWCT chairman, said: "We are honoured and hugely grateful for the funds raised, which will make a significant contribution to our research. Thank you to the organising committee His Grace The Duke of Roxburghe, The Hon. Michael Marsham, Marina Lund, Annika Purdey and Thomas van Straubenzee and our generous sponsors for making the event in his memory such a success."

Guests were treated to a five-star day and competed on five simulated drives in the spectacular landscape of the estate. After the last drive, guests returned to the marquee for a Champagne reception, before enjoying an exquisite four-course lunch including a starter of asparagus and hollandaise foam followed by venison haunch and loin, then a shooter's cigar made of chocolate and salted caramel rolled in cocoa and served with shortbread matchsticks over dry ice from humidors. Thank you to everyone who supported such a special day.



The Sandringham keepers.



(LR) Roger Draycott, Jim Paice, Rory Kennedy, Marcus Janssen, Corry Taylor.



(L-R) Edward Chichester, The Duke of Westminster, Thomas Wills, Thomas van Straubenzee; (Middle) Annika Purdey; (Far right) Earl Spencer, George Courtauld, Edward Peel, Richard Wingfield; (Inset) Dylan Williams.



THANK YOU TO ALL OUR SPONSORS

Supporting Sponsor: Air Charter Service. Sponsors: Agri Cycle, Baco-Compak, Berry Bros. & Rudd, Clarence Court, Eat Wild, Eley Hawk, Diptyque, DukesHill, Dunkeld Smoked Salmon, Fortnum & Mason, Gritchie Brewing Company, Hattiers rum, Heather's Kettle Corn, Hildon Water, Inchcape, King Stone Dairy, Knight Frank, Le Chateau, Laporte, Luscombe, Marsdens Game Feeds, Norfolk Tea Co, Peter's Yard, Prestat, Risdon & Risdon, Schöffel, Purdey at the Royal Berkshire, Salcombe gin, Smythson, Taylor's port, The House of Bruar.

BEDFORDSHIRE

Shoot walk

RICHARD AND PETER KENDELL HOSTED the shoot walk on a lovely summer's evening followed by the renowned hog roast, and scrumptious puddings. Thanks to sponsors Robinson Hall, Hutchinsons, Tuckwells and Kings.

The Fantastic Four raffle was won by Matt Riddington who with his team of eight guns will enjoy shooting a drive on Luton Hoo, St Paul's Walden, King's Walden and Lilley Manor.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE

Competitive clays

THE COMPETITIVE CLAY DAY WAS HELD at Six Mile Bottom with All the Gear And No Idea the winning team. Thank you to sponsors Price Bailey and Ashton Legal, Birketts, Sworders and Oakbank. It was great to see the changes and developments on the Kingston Wood Estate for the shoot walk, kindly hosted by Julian Metherell. With sponsors Oakbank and Brown & Co, a tour of the estate was followed by a good social and supper.

The Cambridge Country Club will host a dinner and talk from Sir Johnny Scott on 13 October. Tickets are £75 per person gwct.org.uk/johnnyscotttalk.

CHESHIRE

Team Dowd

A successful clay shoot at West Midland Shooting Ground was held in April and raised more than £4,000. Team Dowd were the overall winners of the Cheshire claret jug for the second year running. Our thanks to Tanners Wine Merchants and a kind supporter for their generous sponsorship. Next year's clay shoot will be held on Friday 19 April.

The Manchester Tennis & Racquet Club dinner and auction will be held on Thursday 12 October.

Team Dowd, the winning team.



BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Thank you

WE MARKED THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF PETER Vallis and Tim Oliver with a Life Fellowship award for their outstanding contributions to the GWCT. Former chairman Peter Vallis ran simulated game days over many years helping to generate between £80,000 to £100,000. He also ran the successful ferret racing which helped to attract a wider audience. Best summed up by one person who described him as a: 'grade-A, free-range, good egg'. Tim Oliver has also been a generous supporter donating many auction lots and allowing the Hampden Group to be a lead sponsor of many events including the Scottish Game Fair. Generous with his time and contacts, he also donated Hampden House Estate for two simulated game days which have raised more than £100,000. Thank you both for your ongoing support.

The Chiltern Gundog Society ran a popular working test kindly hosted by Messers M & R Redman. Attracting more than 60 entries the day raised £1,500. The winner of the Novice Dog/Novice Handler was Belinda Moon and the Novice winner was Hannah Collyer, with Annie Andrews' dog awarded the highest scoring spaniel. Thank you to sponsors Rosie Sampson, Paws @ Brooklyn, The Swanbourne Estate, Furnace Lakes Estate and Sporting Saint.



(Top) Peter Vallis and Jim Paice; (above) Jim Paice with Tim Oliver.

CUMBRIA

Fantastic views at Lingholm

AN EXCELLENT SHOOT WALK WAS held in June at the beautiful Lingholm Estate, Derwent Water. Owner Mike Anderton and GWCT adviser, Matt Goodall, spoke very informatively and guests were treated

to fantastic views and heard how birds are presented on shoot days. Thanks to Mike Anderton, his family and estate staff. Look out for the Levens Kitchen Quiz on Thursday 16 November.

DEVON

Castle Hill

A FASCINATING SHOOT WALK WAS held at Castle Hill Estate, where guests were guided by long standing head keeper Brian Mitchell and given an insight into their incredible drives. Burgers, brownies and beverages rounded off the evening, kindly hosted by the Duckworth-Chad family.

The spectacular scenery at the Castle Hill Estate.



DORSET

Quality days

A WARM SUMMER'S EVENING GREETED guests at the Pitts farm shoot walk. Guests were shown around the 240-acre farm by Charlie and Peter Wilson who explained how the shoot has evolved over the years using the topography to produce a quality day. A delicious BBQ rounded off the evening together with a raffle.



Guests enjoying the Pitts Farm shoot walk.

GCUSA

Memorial shoot

GCUSA WAS PLEASED TO LEND ITS support to the special fundraising event held in July in memory of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, with both current and former GCUSA Presidents Ron Beck and Bruce Sargent attending.

We will host our **37th auction** in support of GWCT on Tuesday 14 November at the University Club in Manhattan. All GCUSA and GWCT members in good standing are invited



(L-R) Bruce Sargent, Lord Salisbury, Ian Coghill, Ron Beck and John Browning.

and encouraged to attend. For more details please contact Robert Hatch rhatch@gcusa.org

HERTFORDSHIRE

Fantastic Four & Escoffier Game

THE FANTASTIC FOUR RAFFLE WINNER WAS MATT RIDDINGTON WHO WITH HIS TEAM of guns will enjoy shooting a drive on Luton Hoo, Lilley Manor, St Paul's Walden and King's Walden.

Join us for an Escoffier Game inspired lunch at the Westminster Kingsway College on Friday 6 October, hosted by senior chef lecturer, Jose Souto. Boasting an alumni of famous chefs, this promises to be a fantastic evening, with Nigel Barden, food and drink broadcaster, in charge of the auction. Thank you to Lincolnshire Game and sponsors Harbright and LSPB. Tickets cost £75. Please contact Gay Wilmot-Smith gwilmotsmith@gwct.org.uk.

LONDON

Packed summer of events

IN JUNE, WE HOSTED A FANTASTIC CLAY day at the Holland & Holland shooting grounds. The day offered challenges for a wide range of shooting levels with stands provided by Holland & Holland. Guests were then treated to a Champagne reception and a scrumptious three-course dinner featuring rabbit terrine, venison fillet and lemon posset. The day was a tremendous success and together with a fantastic auction raised more than £6,000. Thank you to sponsors Eley Hawk and Willo Game.

Cara Hutchens and Caroline Pringle who spoke about their experiences in the fieldsports sector.



gwct.org.uk/events

ESSEX

Fantastic clay shoot

THE CLAY SHOOT WAS HELD IN JUNE at the fabulous Coptford Hall, by kind permission of Simon Upton. Teams enjoyed a sunshine filled day, great targets supplied by Simulated Game Essex, and had enormous fun raising more than £24,000. Thank you to organiser Ed, our sponsors and auction givers and Eley. Next year's event will take place on Friday 7 June at Audley End Estate.

HAMPSHIRE



Michelin-starred chef Pat McDonald.

Cookery skills

THE RIVER TEST NOT ONLY SHOWED itself as a stunning backdrop, but provided the fresh brown trout for Michelin-starred chef Pat McDonald to work his magic, with a demonstration of cookery skills and an explosion of taste and colour.

KENT

BTF clay shoot

THE BTF CLAY DAY WAS A HUGE success and included a very competitive auction, offering a shoot day at the Allerton Project. Roger Draycott drew the winning ticket for the Kent McNab raffle, which was won by Zac Feather. Thank you to our sponsors Birketts, Chavereys and The Rose & Crown at Mundy Bois.

The winners, Andrew Hooker and team



GAMEWISE • AUTUMN/WINTER 2023 | 65

NORFOLK



Guests listening to the GWCT's Roger Draycott.

Discovering pingos

MORE THAN 30 GUESTS ENJOYED A unique shoot walk at Lee Pilkington's Breckles farm. The farm has many pingos, round ponds, which are rarely found elsewhere in the UK. GWCT adviser, Roger Draycott, and Lee spoke about various elements of the shoot including the impressive GWCT Partridge mix. The walk was rounded off with a BBQ supplied by sponsors Hardy Agronomy.

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

North Lodge success

IN JUNE WE RETURNED ONCE AGAIN to North Lodge Farm, Widmerpool, for our clay shoot by kind permission of Chris and Julia Butterfield. Honesberie Shooting provided some excellent birds before guests enjoyed a delicious game-themed lunch. Thanks to the generosity of our sponsors, Evenbrook, RH Commercial Vehicles, Openfield and Stratstone. Ian Walter conducted a fiercely competitive auction which helped to raise £20,000.

SOMERSET

New clay shoot

THE BEAUTIFUL CRICKET ST. THOMAS estate played host to a new clay shoot, by kind permission of the Taylor family. Fifteen teams battled it out shooting two flushes of 240 clays with the Litton Shoot team the overall winners. Thank you to the sponsors Vine Wine, Carter Jonas and Clarke Willmott.

LEICESTERSHIRE & RUTLAND

Glorious Prestwold

TEAMS ENJOYED GLORIOUS WEATHER for the clay shoot and lunch at Prestwold Hall in May, by kind permission of the Packe-Drury-Lowe family. Challenging birds from Honesberie Shooting, saw CNA Sporting win for the second year running. More than £13,000 was raised thanks to the support of our sponsors, Mather Jamie, Davidsons, Howes Percival, Bentley Leicester, NFU and Oakbank. Next year's clay shoot will be on Thursday 16 May.



The sun shone for the clay shoot at Prestwold.

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Warren Hill success

IT WAS ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL CLAY day at Warren Hill, by kind permission of David Crouch and organised by Richard Wright and team. Challenging stands tested the competitors and the Welham Lane Game Farm emerged victorious (Marek Kwisiuk, Jason Dawes, Jonny Steel and Ed Solomons). Thanks to sponsors Weatherbys Bank, Osprey Property, Van Oppen Polo Club/The Safari Bar, TNR Haulage and Travis Perkins. The event raised £9,150.

Jim Paice chaired the panellists' at the

'Question of the Countryside' discussion held at Heygates Mill, kindly sponsored by Heygates, Carter Jonas, Nicholsons and Kings. The panellists' Will Moynan, Kings, Natham Him, St David's Poultry Team and Matt Goodall, GWCT adviser, answered questions on topical issues sparking lively discussion.

Join us for a game dinner at the Walnut Tree, Blisworth on 16 November. Tickets are £55 and to book please contact Gay Wilmot-Smith gwilmotsmith@gwct.org.uk.

NORTHUMBERLAND & COUNTY DURHAM

Middleton North walk

CHARLIE BENNETT HOSTED A wonderful evening walk on his farm at Middleton North in early June. Attended by more than 30 people Charlie spoke about his approach of 'commonsense farming' which allows him to have natural and environmental assets working in tandem and farming profitably. Charlie's book *Down the Rabbit Hole* is a delightful insight into his deep connection to his historic farmland and the

creatures which populate it.

A Wild Produce dinner is planned on Thursday 19 October at the Northern Counties Club in Newcastle, with Ian Coghill as guest speaker, culminating in an auction. Kindly sponsored by Womble Bond Dickinson, Lycetts, Ryecroft Glenton and GSC Grays. Tickets are £100 each. For further information please contact Sophie Dingwall sdingwall@gwct.org.uk.

The commonsense farming walk at Middleton North.



SCOTLAND

Successful Scottish events

WE HELD ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL Scottish Auction at Prestonfield, Edinburgh, in May, raising more than £144,000. Kindly sponsored by Saffery Champness, Pentland Land Rover and Invenergy, the lots included jewellery, portraits and saplings, as well as a fantastic selection of fishing, stalking and shooting with two fabulous shooting days taking the top slots. Thanks to Tim Wishart and his committee. Next year's event will take place on Thursday 2 May.

The Grampian sporting auction at Lochter Activity Centre in April set a new record for the event, raising more than £47,000. As ever, food at Lochter was phenomenal and set everyone up for a marvellous auction with the top lot a fantastic day for two guns at Fettercairn,



Guests arriving for the Scottish Auction.

kindly donated by Brian Carnegie. Thank you to sponsors A-Plan Insurance and Strutt & Parker and everyone who supported the event.

YORKSHIRE

Shoot walks, clay shoots & dinner

IN MAY, ADRIAN THORNTON-BERRY hosted a fascinating and popular evening walk at Swinithwaite in Wensleydale. Joined by Roger Draycott, they discussed the woodland work to improve holding and showing of game, which has also led to a net biodiversity benefit for other bird species too. Food and drinks were provided at Berry's Farmshop.

Stuart Stark, owner and Charlie Garbutt, keeper from Fridlington Farms hosted an entertaining evening showing how wild bird rearing has been successful due to an extensive conservation programme for which they won the Purdey Bronze Award for Conservation in 2020.

At the end of June, Neil Colver hosted a walk on the Skelton Estate with Dave Newborn, GWCT consultant. Moorland

management was discussed and Colin Gibson gave an interesting insight into his work monitoring the barn owl population.

Special thanks to Strutt & Parker for sponsoring the walks, Nick Barnard for organising them and all the hosts, owners and everyone who attended.

More than 40 teams participated in the Wykeham clay shoot raising a magnificent £55,000 shared between the GWCT, Support Dogs, the Gamekeepers Welfare Trust and Scarborough and Ryedale Mountain Rescue. More than £205,000 has been raised since 2017 and we are most grateful to Lord Downe for consistently supporting the GWCT. Next year's event will be on Thursday 23 May – please contact James Stephenson j.stephenson@dawnay.co.uk.

(L-R) James Stephenson (Head of Dawnay Estate's Property and Sporting), Harry Scrope (chairman) and Sophie Dingwall.



gwct.org.uk/events

The game dinner at Swinton Park Hotel on 16 November is proving to be very popular. Special thanks to sponsors Carter Jonas, Lycetts, Saffery Champness, Traditum, Tyndall and Withers and for all the amazing auction lots, including a four moors day. Tickets are £130 each and discounted rooms are available. Please contact Sophie Dingwall sdingwall@gwct.org.uk.

SHROPSHIRE

Lakeside fun

A SHOOT WALK AT HARNAGE GRANGE, Cressage took place in May, hosted by Simon and Justin Scott. Guests heard the latest advice on best practice game management and the options available as lead shot is phased out. Thanks to sponsors Wynnstay, Savills, Willo Game and Massey Feeds.

A fabulous lakeside evening was held at Upper Shadymoor Farm in June with thanks to hosts Kevan and Joy Fox for organising a fun gundog water test and also wild swimming and paddleboarding. A fun night had by all particularly those who got wet. Thanks to sponsors NFU.

Nestled within the scenic south Shropshire hills, Pool Farm at Smethcott held a remarkable conservation walk in July. Attendees all gathered to explore the intricacies of managing wildflower meadows and hedges. Thank you to Tim and Victoria Main who provided valuable insights into the delicate balance required for nurturing wildflower meadows. Thank you to sponsors Ace Farming Supplies and Willo Game.

SUFFOLK

Euston Hall walk

FIFTY MEMBERS ENJOYED A SHOOT walk around the Euston Hall Estate, kindly guided by estate director Andrew Blenkinsop and farm manager Matthew Hawthorne. Visitors saw the estate's Anaerobic Digestion plant, visited one of the best drives, and also saw a 500 acre plantation of Paulownia trees for carbon sequestration. Thank you to sponsors Birketts Solicitors and Walton Engineering.

E YORKSHIRE

Dance the night away

THE BANG BANG BALL WILL TAKE place on Saturday 18 November at the Attraction Restaurant, Beverley Racecourse, kindly sponsored by Hull Cartridge and Gamebore. For more information, please contact Sophie Dingwall sdingwall@gwct.org.uk.



NE WALES

Gwysaney walk

JAMES DAVIES COOKE THE GAMEKEEPER at Gwysaney, welcomed guests on a tour around the shoot. It was also a great opportunity to hear from adviser Matt Goodall, regarding the latest policy news. Guests were then treated to a delicious curry in the shoot's gun room.

NW WALES

Grey partridge talk

AT ORIEL PLAS GLYN Y WEDDWW Gallery in Llanbedrog, the first event hosted by the newly-formed committee 'How to save the grey partridge', was a huge success. Lee Oliver, GWCT's Cymru head of projects and Owain Griffith the newly-appointed chair, opened the evening before the GWCT's Francis Buner spoke about the grey partridge and successful re-introduction projects in the UK, and how it could be possible in North Wales. Thanks to sponsors by Oakbank Game & Conservation Ltd.

WILTSHIRE

Diverse habitats

CHALK DOWNLAND IS ONE OF THE most diverse habitats, supporting a range of wildlife from butterflies and wildflowers, to insects, mammals and birds and Matthew's picturesque Stoke Farm had all those in abundance. Guests on the conservation walk learnt about a newly created butterfly bank and the 'poor piece of ground given by the Church to help those suffering from hardship'. Thanks to sponsors Wilson's Solicitors.

A successful clay event was held at Barbury Shooting School with a sporting course, followed by refreshments and a raffle. The day had an emphasis on junior member teams, who certainly showed plenty of talent.

Winners at the Wiltshire clay shoot.



DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

For a full listing see gwct.org.uk/events

OCTOBER

- 5 LINCOLNSHIRE** Partridge dinner, Washingborough Hall Hotel, Washingborough, Lincoln, Lottie Meeson cmeeson@gwct.org.uk.
- 6 HERTFORDSHIRE** game inspired lunch, Westminster Kingsway College, London, Gay Wilmot-Smith gwilmotsmith@gwct.org.uk.
- 6 NORFOLK** clay shoot, Mid Norfolk Shooting Ground, Fakenham Road, Taverham, office@hardyagronomy.co.uk.
- 6 WEST TAYSIDE** Fairways & Flushes golf & clay day, The Gleneagles Hotel, Rory Donaldson rdonaldson@gwct.org.uk, 07718 780700.
- 12 CHESHIRE** dinner & auction, Manchester Tennis & Racquet Club, Manchester, Pippa Hackett phackett@gwct.org.uk.
- 12 WILTSHIRE** supper and auction, Marlborough, Fleur Fillingham ffillingham@gwct.org.uk.
- 13 CORNWALL** dinner, The Atlantic Hotel, Dane Road, Newquay, sheila@caerhays.co.uk.
- 13 CAMBRIDGE** dinner and talk from Sir Johnny Scott, Cambridge Country Club, Claire Smith claire@russellsmithfarms.co.uk.
- 19 NORTHUMBERLAND** dinner, Northern Counties Club, Newcastle, Sophie Dingwall sdingwall@gwct.org.uk.
- 23 WALES** Welsh visit to The Allerton Project, Loddington, Leicestershire, Alaw Ceris 07494476750, aceris@gwct.org.uk.

NOVEMBER

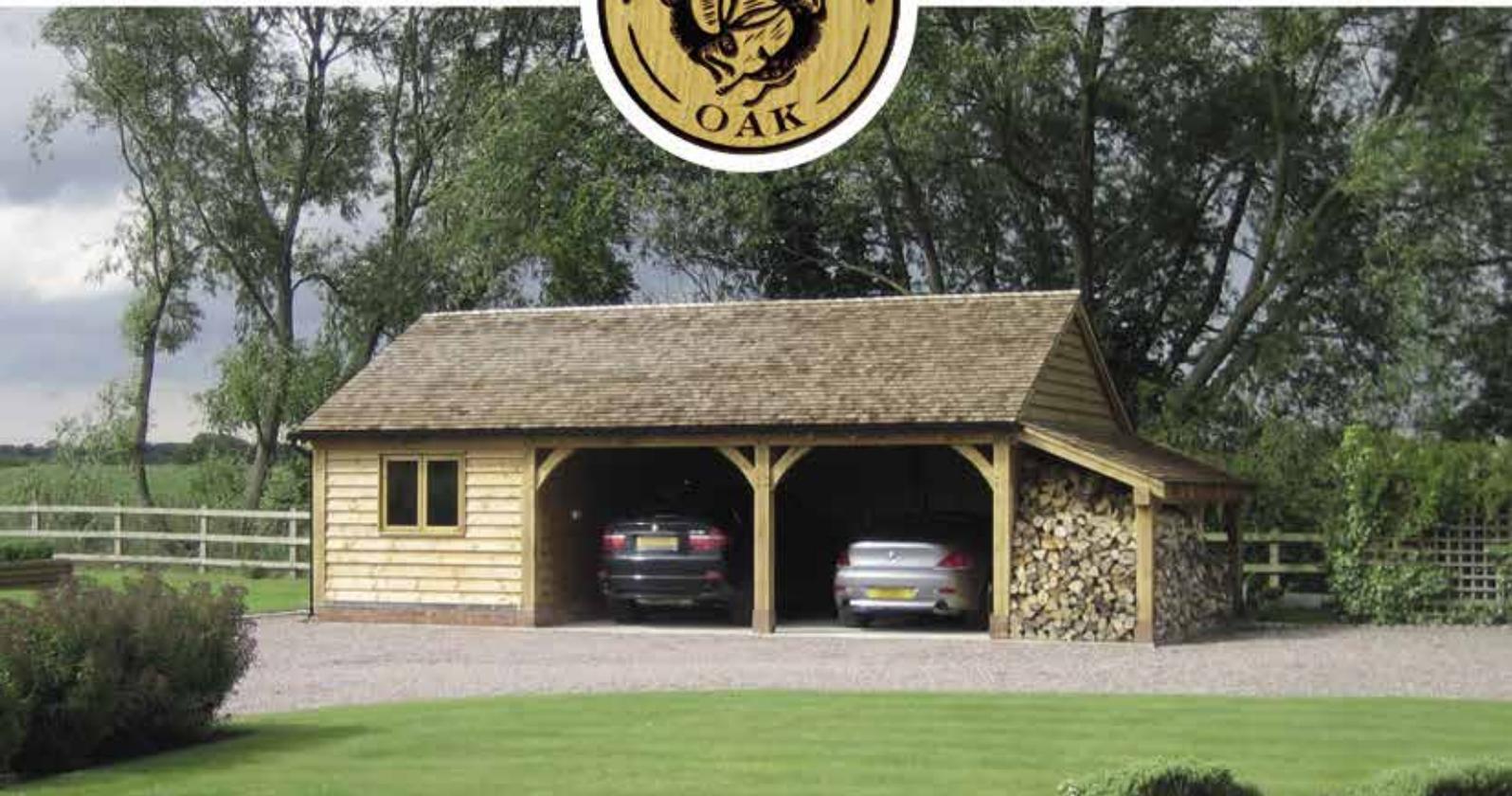
- 9 LEICESTERSHIRE & RUTLAND** drinks reception and talk by Jim Paice, The Barnsdale, The Avenue, Exton, Oakham, Lottie Meeson cmeeson@gwct.org.uk, 07976 207113.
- 10 KENT** pub quiz and talk, Marden, Maidstone, Fleur Fillingham ffillingham@gwct.org.uk.
- 16 CUMBRIA** Levens kitchen quiz, Levens Hall, Kendal, Will Johnson wjohnson@weatherbyshamilton.co.uk.
- 16 NORTHAMPTONSHIRE** game dinner, The Walnut Tree, Blisworth, Gay Wilmot-Smith gwilmotsmith@gwct.org.uk.
- 16 N YORKSHIRE** dinner, Swinton Park Hotel, near Masham, Sophie Dingwall sdingwall@gwct.org.uk.
- 18 E YORKSHIRE** Bang Bang Ball, The Attraction Restaurant, Beverley, Sophie Dingwall sdingwall@gwct.org.uk.
- 23 SW WALES** A Taste of Game Evening, Seed restaurant and coffee shop, Pembrokeshire College, Amanda Harris-Lea 07970 570137.
- 24 SHROPSHIRE** Tanners wine and game tasting, Wyle Cop, Shrewsbury, Charlotte Marrison cmarrison@camlandandproperty.co.uk.

DECEMBER

- 7 EDINBURGH & SE SCOTLAND** Christmas drinks party, Crookston House, Heriot, Rory Donaldson rdonaldson@gwct.org.uk, 07718 780700.

We advise checking with the organisers before attending any of the events listed.





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MISO MUSHROOM SOUP

Mike Short shares his passion for wild and home-grown food

The appropriately named Trumpet Chanterelle also goes by the name of the Winter Chanterelle, and from late autumn it forms dense fungal-clusters in woodland. Although growing in profusion in both coniferous and deciduous forest, Trumpet Chanterelles are easily overlooked but keep your eyes peeled on mossy banks and leaf litter and you might find some. This is a robust finger-sized mushroom that thwarts snails, slugs and bugs, and it's even resistant to frost. For the forager-cook, discovering a patch of Trumpets is like discovering a perpetual trove of treasure as they typically fruit in the same spots year after year.

The trumpet-shaped caps are thin and vary in colour from lilac-grey to chestnut brown. They are ridged and wrinkled underneath. The stems are fibrous and hollow and vary from bright yellow to a pale buff colour. These physical attributes make Trumpet Chanterelles particularly good for drying which is the classic way of storing mushrooms. Some people use purpose-made dehydrators, but I simply spread them whole on a wire cooling rack by the Aga, until they're withered and bone dry.

Trumpet Chanterelles are a perfect partner for wild game meat, but their

earthy and powerful Umami flavour also makes them a great ingredient for hot and spicy oriental-style soups. In Japanese, the word Umami translates as 'the essence of deliciousness' and I shan't argue with that.

If you don't have Trumpet Chanterelles, you could use another type of dried mushroom instead or use fresh mushrooms. Please don't harvest wild mushrooms unless you are 100% certain of their identity and always pick them in moderation with the landowner's permission.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 litre vegetable stock
- 2 tsp grated fresh ginger
- 3 tbsp white miso paste
- 20g dried Trumpet Chanterelles or another dried mushroom
- 4 radishes, sliced
- 2 spring onions, sliced
- 30g chard leaves (or other green leafy vegetable), shredded
- 1 red chilli, deseeded and sliced

METHOD

1. Heat the stock in a saucepan and add the ginger and miso paste. Slowly bring to the boil.
2. As soon as it bubbles, turn down the heat

and add the mushrooms. Cook gently for 10 minutes until they have rehydrated, and then add all the other ingredients and simmer for a further two minutes.

3. Serve it straight away or leave the flavours to further infuse and then reheat and serve. ■

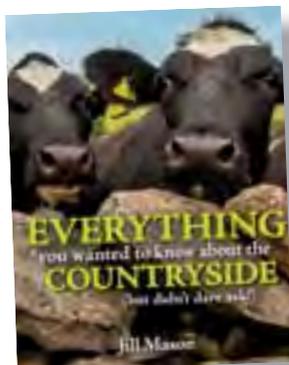


Mike Short is our head of predation management research. He is passionate about wild and home-grown food, and here shares his enthusiasm for tasty ingredients.



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The flexibility of the sustainable farming initiative (SFI) is key to its success

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It cites the flexibility of SFI agreements and their scope for bespoke solutions – being able to add more actions and land before the end of the first year, and similarly in the second year – as a major factor contributing to its success.

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THE FINAL WORD

MICHAEL STINSON

Passionate about woodcock, Michael aims to produce Northern Ireland's first estimate of woodcock population size

Michael Stinson is an ecologist and project manager for the Boa Island Breeding Wader Project. The initiative is led by Lough Erne Wildfowlers' Council and is aiming to restore breeding wader populations in the Erne Basin. He's currently working (with financial support from BASC) to ensure that the GWCT/BTO Breeding Woodcock Survey coverage is high enough to produce Northern Ireland's first estimate of woodcock population size.

What's the best advice you've been given?

The importance of being open minded in conservation and listening to a wide range of voices – following the evidence, not simply what is fashionable at any given time.

What motivates you?

A desire to restore the lost biodiversity of rural Ireland. I hope that future generations might know the abundance of wildlife which was present when my grandfather grew up.

What have you learnt during the Boa Island Breeding Wader Project?

This grassroots, community-based initiative, has built a genuine partnership between the shooting community and landowners to benefit breeding waders and wider biodiversity. Both local farmers and wildfowlers are passionate about seeing once familiar species thrive again, which is inspiring.

What do you think the relationship is between shooting and conservation?

At its best, management undertaken for shooting can be exceptionally valuable for conservation. While poor practice associated

with shooting is thankfully limited, any remaining negative actions must cease. The overall benefit of shooting for conservation is too frequently overshadowed. The shooting community must grasp all opportunities to highlight the positives and reach out to wider circles.

Why is the GWCT's research so important?

GWCT's evidence-based research and advice is of the highest calibre and is invaluable for those undertaking conservation activities in the agricultural landscape. Its approach to working collaboratively with different communities mirrors that undertaken through our project.

Why is it important that people monitor woodcock populations?

Until 2023 there has been no baseline population estimate for NI breeding woodcock and a key objective of the survey was to ensure coverage of sufficient sites to enable calculation of this figure. The local shooting community, together with BASC, have been very supportive. Breeding woodcock here face a range of potential challenges including habitat loss, increasing deer populations, changes in woodland management and large numbers of generalist predators. As a quarry species, it is crucial that we have an accurate understanding of the current situation to ensure future sustainability of hunting.

What do you think the future holds?

Despite sustained efforts and decades of agri-environment scheme funding, breeding wader populations have collapsed (often by 90%+). However, there are projects where wader decline has been halted and reversed. Expansion of these types of socially embedded approaches to conservation will be key to the future survival of breeding waders in NI.

What are the main conservation challenges?

Our breeding waders face the same challenges as elsewhere – agricultural intensification, abundance of generalist predators, inappropriately sited commercial forestry and the lack of sufficient, long-term funding support for landowners to undertake breeding wader friendly measures.

What is your favourite species and why?

Snipe, circling local reedbeds at dusk and the arrow-like displacement of air as they land. ■

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