

Where have our birds gone?

The State of Nature report highlighted that many of our key bird species are declining, but in Wales levels have reached critically low levels. Ian Lindsay asks if it is too late?

Over the past 10 years populations of many of our key bird species have continued to decline, as highlighted by the recent *State of Nature* report. Behind this, at least in part, has been a failure of our conservation agencies to harness the broadest support from those who own or make a living from the land or to consider the widest range of management options to address these declines.

Thirty years of reliance on protectionist policies, site designations and 'control' of other land users has failed to help much of our wildlife. During this time habitat management, almost in isolation, has remained the mantra of those seeking species recovery. Other, more 'interventionist' options such as predator control, or even supplementary feeding, which have been scientifically proven by our research to redress the balance in certain circumstances, have been deemed unpalatable by conservation organisations sensitive to media scrutiny.

Nowhere in the UK is this better illustrated than in the uplands of Wales, which once supported the most productive grouse moors in the UK as well as abundant populations of other birds. Unfortunately, since the 1990s, owing to disease, over-grazing and from

the moor owners' perspective, a lack of support from conservation agencies, grouse management has been all but abandoned and, with it, upland bird populations have crashed alarmingly.

This has been given further focus by our recent study, funded by the Moorland Association, which analysed the trends of upland birds in the Berwyn Special Protection Area (SPA) in North Wales. The 'Berwyn' supports the most extensive tract of blanket bog and upland heath in Wales and in 1998 was designated for its populations of hen harrier, merlin, red kite and peregrine. In addition, it also supported key populations of upland breeding waders. The study focused on changes in red grouse numbers and other upland birds between 1983 and 2002. Like many other parts of Wales, grouse bags peaked in the early 1900s but through a process of gradual decline, driven by grouse shooting and upland keeping had virtually ceased by 1990.

The study showed that between 1983 and 2002 red grouse declined by 54%, and black grouse by 78%. Today over 75% of the entire Welsh black grouse population exists on the one remaining kept moor in the Berwyn. Over the same period, in the Berwyn SPA, lapwing became extinct, golden plover declined from 10 birds to one and curlew declined by 79%.

Looking for positives, carrion crows increased six-fold and ravens doubled. Among the raptor species, whereas buzzards doubled in abundance and peregrines increased seven-fold, ground-nesters such as hen harriers halved and merlin showed no change.

Objectively, over the first decade of this important conservation designation, corresponding with the abandonment of grouse management, the Berwyn SPA has been a disappointing failure. There seems little doubt that until predator control, a key part of game management, is reintroduced to this area, the productivity of ground-nesting species will only continue to decline.

Since the launch of the Berwyn

SPA there has been a widely held perception among owners and keepers of a negative and obstructive attitude towards traditional moorland management. But it was this very management – heather burning and predator control which had produced such an important landscape worthy of designation.

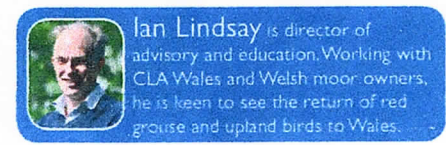
Given such a negative view is it surprising that individuals wishing to invest in restoring

...there is a desperate need for a partnership between conservation agencies and sporting interests

grouse moors have shunned Wales, taking with them the private investment that the Welsh uplands so badly lack?

And still the birds continue to decline. Even the hen harrier, that most iconic of species, whose decline elsewhere is popularly placed by its opponents at the hands of grouse managers, has failed to benefit from the loss of upland management for grouse.

More than ever, there is a desperate need for a partnership between conservation agencies and sporting interests. Conservation management, on its own, has failed. If we are to be successful in reversing these declines, agencies should embrace grouse management and the private investment it brings as a positive contribution to biodiversity. They need to show flexibility towards those wishing to implement it. But this is only part of the story. It rests with the moor owners to provide the other ingredients: gamekeepers, disease management and habitat management programmes which are at the heart of successful grouse management elsewhere. (See page 24.)



Ian Lindsay is director of advisory and education, working with CLA Wales and Welsh moor owners. He is keen to see the return of red grouse and upland birds to Wales.

Berwyn Study Facts (1983-2002)

- Red grouse declined by 54%
- Black grouse declined by 78% and now over 75% of the entire Welsh black grouse population exists on one kept moor
- Lapwing became extinct
- Golden plover declined from 10 birds to one
- Curlew declined by 79%
- Carrion crows increased six-fold and ravens doubled
- Buzzards doubled in abundance and peregrines increased seven-fold
- Hen harrier numbers halved and merlin showed no change

Red grouse and golden plover numbers have declined and lapwing are now extinct.



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