

## Action Countryside – Wales's Crisis of Conservation

The GWCT's Ian Lindsay looks at how upland bird populations have reached critical levels in Wales



The uplands of Wales once supported the most productive grouse moors in the UK as well as abundant populations of other birds. It was to the moors of Wales, not the North of England, that the Edwardian “big Guns” travelled to shoot red grouse. Indeed, until recently the record for the highest number of grouse shot in a day was held by Ruabon Estate near Wrexham.

However, since the last war almost half of the heather cover in Wales has been lost. The remaining characteristic heather uplands — much of it now designated for its nature conservation value — from the industrialised valleys of South Wales to the Berwyn and Denbigh moors in the North, is a direct legacy of historic grouse management. Unfortunately, since the 1990s, owing to disease, overgrazing 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.

In recent years the GWCT's Upland Predation Experiment conclusively demonstrated the effect of predator control — a core element of grouse management — on upland waders. Lapwing, curlew and golden plover increased in abundance up to three-fold compared with “uncontrolled” areas. More broadly, throughout the UK, there is a significant positive correlation between grouse moor management and the abundance and productivity of these species, which are increasingly rare.

This has been given further focus by a recent study carried out by the GWCT, 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

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parts of Wales, grouse bags peaked in the early 1900s but through a process of gradual decline, driven grouse shooting, and with it upland keeping, had virtually ceased by 1990.

### *Bad management*

Objectively, over the first decade of this important conservation designation, corresponding with the abandonment of grouse management and its replacement by a regime of protection and conservation management, with the exception of the peregrine, buzzard and raven, the Berwyn SPA has been a disappointing failure. And 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. Paradoxically, this very management — heather burning and predator control — which had produced such an important landscape worthy of designation was to be discouraged in favour of a new era of “enlightened” conservation management and protectionist policies.

To those most able to deliver it, the message was that grouse management was now deemed a potentially damaging activity requiring control rather than one capable of delivering important conservation targets at no cost to the taxpayer! Given such a negative view, is it surprising that individuals wishing to invest in restoring grouse moors have shunned Wales, taking with them the private conservation investment that the Welsh uplands so badly lack?

Given the private investment and measurable biodiversity benefits that grouse management brings to the rest of the UK, many Welsh moor owners find it difficult to understand the opposition to it. Despite its central historic role in creating these landscapes, heather burning is routinely prohibited by conservation agencies.

Yet such areas appear defined by precautionary lines on bureaucratic maps with little flexibility on a moor-by-moor basis, to facilitate the joint outcomes of bird conservation and favourable management of the blanket bog habitat. Similarly, the impression held by many keepers is that their predator control activities are viewed, at best, as having no role in species recovery.

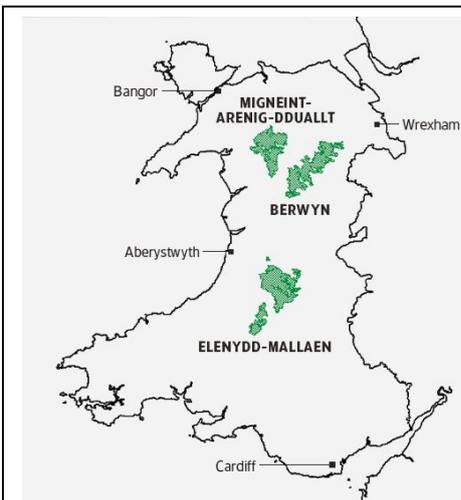
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The number of peregrine falcons has increased seven-fold in the Berwyn SPA

And still the birds continue to decline. Even the hen harrier — that most celebrated 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. It is hardly to the credit of either side, neither the moor owners nor conservation agencies, that this has arisen. Some — particularly game managers — would point to a lack of courage or willingness on the part of the conservation agencies to embrace practical evidence-led policies and a reluctance to risk criticism from well-resourced, powerful protection organisations well versed in

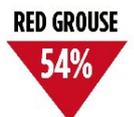
managing the media message. At the same time, conservationists might criticise moor owners who, with a few exceptions, have failed to demonstrate any significant financial investment in their moors. But with the right encouragement and a more enlightened attitude, this could change.



### Percentage changes of species on Berwyn moor from 1983 to 2002

The GWCT's recent study of trends in bird populations in the Berwyn SPA showed that between 1983 and 2002 red grouse declined by 54 per cent, and blackgrouse by 78 per cent. Today more than 75 per cent of the entire Welsh blackgrouse population exists on the one remaining kept moor in 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 per cent.

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



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The Common Curlew population declined by 79 per cent between 1983 to 2002 on Berwyn



Owing to continued mismanagement lapwings were extinct in the Berwyn SPA 21 years ago



Golden plover numbers had plummeted from 10 to only one by 2002 in the Berwyn SPA

### *A need for action*

The recent State of Nature report, launched by a number of major conservation organisations, paints a depressing picture of wildlife conservation in the UK. Over the past 10 years the populations of many of our key bird species have continued to decline. Behind this, at least in part, has been a failure on the part 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 prescriptions 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” prescriptions such as predator control, or even supplementary feeding, which have been scientifically proven by the GWCT to redress the balance in certain circumstances, have been deemed unpalatable by conservation organisations sensitive to media scrutiny.

Just as on Exmoor and Dartmoor in the south-west of England, grouse and upland bird populations in Wales have reached critical levels and there is a need for a partnership between conservation agencies and sporting interests.

Conservation management, on its own, has failed. If we are to reverse these declines, agencies should embrace grouse management and the private investment it brings as a positive contribution to biodiversity. They need more flexibility.

But this is only part of the story. It rests with moor owners to give the other ingredients: gamekeepers, disease management and habitat management programmes, which are at the heart of successful grouse management.

The NGO Educational Trust wishes to thank the Shooting Times Magazine for permitting us to reproduce this article for the benefit of our website users.