

Action Countryside – Fighting for Black Grouse

Black grouse remain threatened in England due to their severely contracted range, but new work is helping these spectacular birds. Phil Warren explains



In 2006, we were delighted when the rare black grouse population in northern England reached its 2010 Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) target of 1,000 male birds ahead of schedule. This was quite an achievement, particularly as the population saw an increase from just 773 displaying males in 1998 to 1,029 in 2006.

Despite this increase in abundance, the occupied range remained static, with two thirds of birds found in just three North Pennine dales. This contracted range means that the population is particularly vulnerable to random environmental factors, such as that witnessed during the severe winter of 2009/10. The prolonged freezing temperatures particularly highlighted the dependence of black grouse on woodland cover as the number of birds halved in areas where woodland was absent. In contrast, in areas with woodland cover the birds showed better rates of survival.

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Phil Warren, describes our progress: “Since the 15 year North Pennines Black Grouse Recovery Project ended, we have been fighting hard to save this very threatened bird and we have been fortunate in securing funding from new sources to continue our work. We have established a Heritage Lottery Funded ‘Woodlands for Black Grouse’ project, which in partnership with the Woodland Trust, is endeavouring to provide pockets of woodland to provide emergency food sources in severe winters to maintain high survival rates. Although there has been considerable woodland planting across the region over the past 15 years, woodland is still absent from many key areas, which is why this next stage of the project is so important.”

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More conservation effort is also required to deliver the next BAP target, that of increasing the range from 42 occupied 10km grid squares to 61 by 2030 to create a larger more robust population. Phil says: “Our research has identified that range expansion may be limited by the low dispersal capacity of male black grouse, with males in northern England dispersing only an average of 0.8km compared with juvenile females which disperse on average 9.3km. These findings suggest that yearling females may disperse into and re-colonise areas of suitable habitat on the fringe of the range where unfortunately, there are no males present.”

To stimulate range expansion, we instigated a trial in 2006 funded by the SITA Trust to try and establish new leks on the fringe of the range by moving males to attract dispersing females. Between 2006 and 2009, 24 males were released, which remained within the vicinity of the release areas, displayed and were observed with females which subsequently bred. This has resulted in the establishment of new lekking groups at both release areas and has led to an increase in their occupied range. Following on from this successful translocation trial, we are now planning a new phase.



Phil explains: “Building on this initial success, we have identified two further release areas in the Yorkshire Dales in Nidderdale and Coverdale, which offer similar suitable conditions. To enable this phase to go ahead, we are fortunate to have secured funding from Biffaward, Yorkshire Water and a private landowner to continue this work over the next three years. With these new projects now well established, we are hoping that the future for black grouse in the north of England is looking a lot more positive and secure.”

*Our study seeks to expand the range of black grouse by translocating the males to suitable release sites.
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