

Action Countryside – Reversing Fortunes



The Duke of Northumberland gives an insight into the Ratcheugh Partridge Project, where grey partridges and other farmland birds are staging a remarkable comeback

I am no expert on the grey partridge, but I am incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to help revive this little gamebird's fortunes in Northumberland over the last few years.

For much of the last century, grey partridges had a hard time at Alnwick as my father and grandfather were passionate fox hunters. Through the 70s, 80s and 90s, the partridge, along with other farmland wildlife, all but disappeared under an intensive farming regime. When I took over, I aimed to run a viable farming business, but gradually increase the conservation areas, hoping that a few partridges might return. However, it was too half-hearted and by 2002 there wasn't much improvement.

Garry Whitfield then became head keeper and with a passion for all things wild, we persuaded our agent and farming partners to work with us to create a profitable farming operation and a wild partridge shoot all in one. We employed Kevan McCaig as a full-time keeper and started planting new hedges, with 11 miles planted since 2003. Along the hedges we have created six metre field margins with suitable grasses and crops for nesting cover, feed and protection. In effect, we have created two farming operations where the productive areas of each field are intensively cultivated, whereas the headlands are cultivated in a partridge friendly manner. Our early headland grass mixes were replaced with a finer pollen nectar mix, predation control was increased and hoppers were set up – there are now 1,800 in total, 200 metres apart in every hedgerow, with a little tin dusting shelter and a tunnel trap. Farm operations were controlled so that sprays didn't drift into headlands, tractors wouldn't crush nests and combines wouldn't eradicate broods by working at night. We only had 15 pairs of partridges so maximum survival was essential.

By 2005 it was going well and we set a target to try and shoot 50 brace the following year. The 2006 spring pair count was 118 and with an autumn count of 1,148 birds, we planned a late October day. We took a bag of 86 brace of partridges and quite a lot of wild pheasants, amazingly, breaking the previous Alnwick partridge record set in 1910. Since then, flushed with success, we have gradually increased the managed area, focusing on habitat improvement and predator control on the core area, but also keeping some of the surrounding let farms. The first year we shot, we left about 900 birds on the ground, but lost over 50% of those in the winter. Plenty were being killed by predators, but a good proportion were migrating to neighbouring farms. Fortunately this wasn't a problem for us as many of them were on the tenant farms, which have all supported the project from the start, and it coincided with moves by several of these farmers to enter environmental schemes. From the 200 remaining pairs in the spring, we had about 2,000 birds in the autumn of 2007 and that season we shot 125 brace in a day. Today the partridge area covers 6,000 acres, incorporating many of the tenant farms, and looked after by three keepers. In the last two years we have shot about 350 brace each year including several days over 100 brace, and we feel that if we can get all the factors right, we are poised for greater things.



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Habitat is the key to the project’s success. When the partridges pair up at the end of January most of the grass margins are bare and some of the headland crops squashed by snow, so our winter feed and holding covers of fodder radish, kale, dwarf quinoa, stubble turnips and mustard are vital, as are the hedges and rough corners. On an intensive farm, headlands help provide the insects chicks need to grow quickly and our headlands have insect-rich brood-rearing cover consisting of red millet, reed canary grass, sweet clover, lucerne and chicory, undersown in a triticale crop in the first year for nesting cover, feed and protection. To reduce pesticides drifting we have a 12 metre spray exclusion zone in every field ie. the headland plus another six metres into the crop.



(L-R) Each feeder has a tunnel trap and a dusting shelter by it; the headlands provide the partridges with the right habitat; over 11 miles of new hedges have been planted and there are 1,800 feeders; taking a few days shooting is the icing on the cake.

After harvest we count every brood and work out whether there are enough to shoot. We assume that we will lose 50% to mortality and migration over the winter and we would aim for say 500 breeding pairs the following spring, so we need to leave 2,000 birds at the end of the season and we can theoretically harvest the surplus, a relatively small proportion. Hence last season we shot 700 birds. Reducing migration is really important and we are gradually changing the farming system with more spring crops, leaving more over-wintered stubbles. Hopefully as new hedgerows and other measures mature, there will be less migration and we have also tried putting millet, maize, aniseed and small seeds in the hoppers, which seems to be helping.

Our predator control continues throughout the year, but is at its most determined in February/March when cover is poor and pairs are abundant looking for territories. It is also really important to have thick hedges and other cover so that partridges can escape and hide from protected species, especially sparrowhawks. Our spring pair counts then give a clear idea of the success of the strategy over the winter.

In the past when partridges nested in unsuitable places, we collected the eggs, reared them under bantams and fostered them to barren pairs. It is an age-old method that works well, however, it is artificial and we believe that these offspring could be more prone to migration, as an area we stocked heavily with fostered chicks last year, had the poorest spring pair counts despite suitable habitat. Although we will continue with this method, we will use it sparingly. I am against fostering game farm chicks to wild pairs unless there is absolutely no alternative. Genetics are very important – generations of hardship and survival of the fittest have created the stock that survived at Alnwick and I would hate to dilute this. In my opinion anyone trying to establish partridges without a viable wild stock should ideally find a generous wild egg donor or vendor.

“The big question is whether all this is worthwhile”

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The big question is whether all this is worthwhile. It has been a long and costly process; it has undoubtedly reduced the home farm's profitability; predation control has created a rabbit explosion, there has been some local friction from errant walkers, riders and uncontrolled dogs and our hoppers are feeding every pigeon and crow in the area.

However, independent bird surveys have demonstrated an amazing reversal in the fortunes of many threatened farmland birds. Of the 21 species monitored over the 10 year period, all increased except skylarks which are abundant anyway. Breeding lapwing, blackbirds and dunnock are all increasing and although robins and wrens did well in early years, they have been hit hard by a couple of bad winters. Tree sparrow numbers have increased hugely and we now have a nationally significant population. Chaffinch, goldfinch and reed bunting have increased and yellowhammer numbers are up 800%. Buzzards, kestrels and sparrowhawks are all doing well and in the last two years we have had three breeding pairs of sedge warblers and several corn buntings. Funding under Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) helps mitigate the loss of farm profitability and on the back of our project, local farmers are being encouraged to apply for HLS to improve the habitat for wildlife and create and maintain a substantial farmland area of extremely high conservation value. This gives farm tenants a useful source of income and helps the relationship between gamekeeper and farmer.

The driving force for all this is the grey partridge, which is virtually extinct in many parts of the UK. Our spring counts have increased from 15 pairs in 2004 to about 460 pairs this spring, and autumn counts reached just under 3,000 birds last year. The ability to take a harvest out of this number is the icing on the cake.

There is still a lot to learn, but it shows that even with modern farming methods and chemicals, it is possible, with care and some compromise, to create rich environmental seams within our industrial and intensively farmed country and enjoy the cream of sport.



Managing the habitat has been key to our success and proves that farming and gamekeeping can work together

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