

# ROD & GUN

## The Earl and the English partridge

The Earl of Leicester, pioneering conservationist of the wild grey partridge, looks in dismay at the looming threat of their predation to extinction by raptors

BY PAULA MINCHIN

**The Earl of Leicester with Simon Lester, his headkeeper (right), champions of a once common farmland bird. The greatest threat to their future is now attack from the air.**

AS the pale early morning sunlight streams across a stubble field on the north Norfolk coast, a Land Rover makes its way down the tramlines beside a tall hedge. Its slow progress is halted when a brood of wild grey partridges darts out from a rearing strip, parents calling to their young. The gamekeeper at the wheel raises his binoculars and counts the number of birds, noting their age and gender. His companion plots their location on a map of his beat.

These September mornings are a magical time for the gamekeepers on the Earl of Leicester's 25,000-acre Holkham estate as they complete the autumn brood counts. When the harvest is in, Simon



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Lester, the headkeeper, and his seven beatkeepers are out by 6am each day, doing the counts which reveal whether each keeper has enough wild grey partridges on his beat for a shootable surplus, and whether their entire year's work has been successful in increasing the numbers of this special game bird.

Although Holkham, near Wells-next-the-Sea, has been a wild pheasant and partridge shoot for nearly 300 years, it has not escaped the dramatic decline of the English grey partridge, once a common sight on farmland across Britain. Game Conservancy Trust figures estimate that there were one million pairs of wild grey partridges in the UK in 1911. After World War Two, numbers fell by 80% in 40 years, and today there are 145,000 spring pairs. Most are found on the arable lowlands of eastern Britain. They are now largely extinct in South-West England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Researchers believe there are three main causes of decline. First, the introduction of herbicides in the 1950s, which eliminated many crop weeds that were insect-producing food plants, vital to partridge chick survival. Secondly, many gamekeepers either lost their jobs or switched to pheasant rearing, concentrating less on predator control. And thirdly, in some areas there was loss of grassy nesting cover as fields were enlarged by removal of boundaries. All these factors contributed to the bird's arrival on the UK Red Data List, and on the shortlist of the UK's Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), of which the Game Conservancy is a lead partner. It has the task of increasing the population to 150,000 pairs by 2010—a rise of 55,000 on current numbers.

Shooting estates are at the forefront of the campaign to increase the numbers of wild grey partridges, particularly those in north Norfolk, where the natural elements of light soil and relatively low annual rainfall, combined with careful management and the density of gamekeepers on wild or semi-wild

bird kept areas. Looking through Holkham estate's game books since 1793, Lord Leicester notes that 1962 was an excellent partridge year. 'We had great numbers of partridges here in the 1960s. Gamekeepers controlled raptors then and, as farming was not as tidy as it is now, there were more weeds and areas of scruffy ground, which was exceptionally good habitat for partridges.'

'Holkham has always been a partridge Mecca. We held the

shoot.' This emphasis on the wild bird is essential, because although it is possible to rear and to release grey partridges in larger numbers, experience shows that these birds do not fare well in the wild. They disperse off land quickly, winter losses are high, and many fail to breed. Adds Simon Lester, 'I also admire the wild grey partridge's character: it is robust in guarding its chicks and hides its nests so cleverly. The sound of partridges chattering to each

major swings in the population of wild birds, the success of which largely depended on the weather. He believes three main factors govern the wild partridge population: good habitat, good predator control, and dry weather in summer. 'If the weather is bad, no matter what one does, there will not be a shootable surplus of partridges. We simply have to accept that,' he says.

As the years went by, fewer and fewer partridges were shot at Holkham, although there was a revival in 1976 and in the early 1990s. 'It went downhill rapidly, largely due to the way we were farming at the time, the monoculture we were creating, and the sprays,' says Lord Leicester. 'Farming certainly wasn't friendly in those days. There were no headlands and every inch of land was cultivated. So, despite stringent predator control by the keepers, the partridge population continued to decrease; they just did not have the habitat.'

In the mid-1980s the estate began releasing reared French partridges, but Lord Leicester soon returned to a largely wild bird shoot (apart from 4,000 pheasants released in the Park to help with let days). 'I took courage and decided to end the rearing programme and heed the Game Conservancy advice, which warned that if we continued to release reared game farm stock, it would interfere with our wild partridges,' he says.

The 1990s saw resurgence in partridge numbers at Holkham. 'The first big year was 1992. On October 30, we shot 187 wild grey partridges on the Wighton beat, then 381 the following day on Warham. I wrote at the time, "Shot with double guns for the first time since 1976, saw masses of birds that did not even come to the Guns." That November, we shot 202 partridges on Wells Fields and 135 on Warham.'

In 1994, Lord Leicester won the Laurent Perrier Award (now the Purdey Award) for the estate's work with the grey partridge. 'And so it went on, and we all got terribly cocky for four or five years as we knew for certain that we would have partridges,



Simon Lester walks the six-metre field margins, partridge-friendly habitat.

## England now has 145,000 spring pairs of greys. The aim: to reach 150,000 in four years

record in 1885 for the most partridges shot in four days, then again in 1905 for the most partridges shot in one day. For that one reason alone, we should do everything we can to continue to shoot them. They are such an iconic bird, a Biodiversity Action Plan species, and, as I understand it, one of the main indicators of the health of the countryside.'

Simon Lester is equally clear about why wild grey partridges are so important to Holkham. 'They are our indigenous game bird. They are endearing to game managers, because they perform so well on a shoot day and they are exciting to drive and to

other in the early morning and evening is one of the special sounds of the countryside.'

When Lord Leicester moved to Norfolk from South Africa, aged 30, to learn how to run the estate from the fifth Earl, he was not invited to shoot on partridge days. 'I used to go out to watch, as the fifth Earl invited only his closest friends to shoot. In those days, everything on the estate was subordinate to the shooting interests. The farm manager was not allowed to start ploughing until February 1.'

When Lord Leicester took over the management of the shooting in 1973, he noticed





**More wild English grey partridges for Holkham's September count. This year, after a hot summer and hard work on habitat and predator control, hopes are high.**

and then of course we jolly well didn't. After those good years, the population crashed.' Thus, in recent years the Game Department at Holkham has devoted much of its energy to recovery of wild partridge numbers. The beatkeepers' main job is to carry out a stringent, legal, year-round programme of predator control, with many running 100-plus traps on their 2,000-acre beats.

Legal predator control is taken very seriously, especially as, seven years ago, a Holkham keeper was prosecuted for killing three kestrels. Last year, the keepers accounted for 82 foxes, 420 stoats, 188 weasels, 7,653 rats, 1,209 grey squirrels, 171 carrion crows, 249 magpies, 221 jackdaws and 16,296 rabbits. Throughout the year, keepers also distribute 200 tonnes of wheat through a network of feed hoppers on the estate.

Since Simon Lester became headkeeper in May 2001, the

keepers have spent more time looking for nests, picking up eggs and hatching them under broody hens, then fostering an average of 500 six-week-old poults back to barren pairs, every year. 'When I came here, my intentions were to improve legal predator control and create more habitat, because it has long been identified that lack of chick food and winter retention of birds were the biggest problems. If there isn't a supply of insects at the right time, chicks will die, and if food is not easily accessible it subjects the brood to more dangers for longer, as they spend more time searching for food.'

His arrival coincided with the advent of the Countryside Stewardship schemes, which, along with increased set-aside, meant that six-metre margins were established on most of the farms, and wild bird mixes were planted over many acres to create more cover, including plants

such as chicory and sunflowers to protect birds and their chicks from predators. Initially, this work had a positive effect. In Simon Lester's first two years, the number of partridges on the estate's two best beats rose from 50 to 130 pairs, enabling a modest number of partridges to be shot, while increasing the stock.

The estate had a great year in 2003 when, on November 1, 188 wild grey and French partridges were accounted for on Wells Field and Wighton. Lord Leicester wrote in his game book, 'First real partridge day since 1997. Masses of game, lovely to see the English again.' This year should also be a good one for wild game production, having had one of the hottest summers on record.

Holkham has increased not only its population of wild partridges, but also that of its raptors, which Simon Lester fears are now present in such great numbers that their killing of

young birds is having a serious effect on brood sizes. 'Not long ago we had 12 pairs of harriers and a reasonable number of sparrowhawks and kestrels,' he says. 'We could cope with them at that level, and the game birds benefited from improved control of the predators that could be killed within the law, such as foxes and stoats. But in the past three to four years, numbers of birds of prey at Holkham have increased dramatically.'

'Last year, the RSPB recorded 30 pairs of nesting marsh harriers and two pairs of rare Montagu's harriers, plus perhaps two non-breeding birds for every breeding pair. Along with the growing numbers of sparrowhawks, kestrels and buzzards, it is becoming overwhelming and makes me feel desperate,' he says. 'When you add what they kill to everything else that preys on the partridge chicks, the number being eaten



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has now become unsustainable.

'Predation is a growing problem, especially avian predation. We need young grey partridges on the ground to produce a viable stock, let alone a shootable surplus. When brood sizes are limited due to a lack of insects for chick feed, and then those chicks are relentlessly pursued by birds of prey, we seem to be fighting a losing battle.'

This explosion in predators does not threaten game birds only. 'I know some conservationists would argue that we are just trying to conserve partridges in order to shoot them, but we are not interested in shooting the record bags they once did here. We would be happy if we could shoot a modest amount and not have to worry about the status of the grey partridge. And it's not only the grey partridge we are concerned about, it's all the other hedgerow birds under threat; even sparrows are not here in the numbers they once were.'

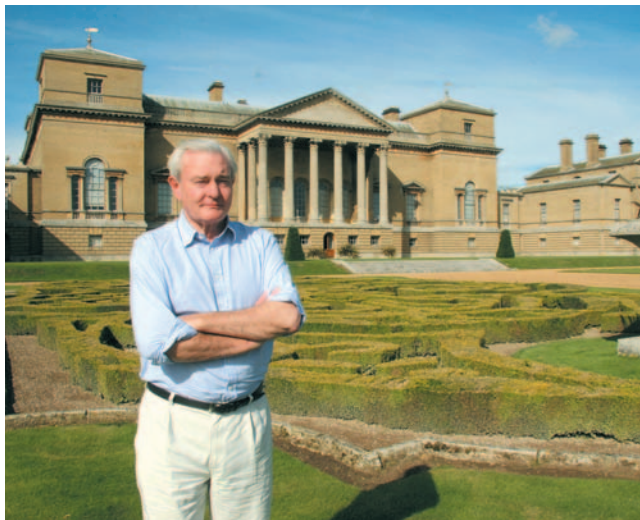
Lord Leicester shares his headkeeper's concerns. 'When it comes to predators, especially winged predators, it's a tragedy that the RSPB—which is the organisation that the Government listens to, they don't listen to shooters because they think that we have an axe to grind—has nailed its colours to the mast of raptor conservation, almost to the exclusion of anything else. I am certain that, although the RSPB deny it, the impact of 35,000 pairs of sparrowhawks nationwide, and the broods that they produce, has a devastating effect on songbirds and game birds. I worked out that something like 100 million little birds are killed each year by sparrowhawks, in addition to those that are killed by other birds of prey, plus the 77 million that are killed by cats.'

'I cannot believe that the RSPB can be so sure that 200 million or more little birds being taken out by these predators does not have an effect on the songbird population. It is a tragedy that RSPB refuse to accept that, in such a small and highly-populated country as the

UK, all species must be managed, including raptors. Instead, they advocate total conservation of raptors, without any regard for the rest of the bird population.'

Lord Leicester also worries what will happen if the Game Conservancy is unable to meet its BAP target of bolstering the UK's grey partridge population to 150,000 pairs by 2010. 'If the population of grey partridges continues to decline, because it is a BAP species Government

grouse moor, they had 22 pairs of hen harriers; now there are no grouse and only one pair of harriers. It is in the interests of raptor conservation not to allow their prey to decline. And of course, it won't only be the birds of prey that will suffer, it will be ground-nesting birds such as lapwings and curlews, as the foxes kill them too. If this blind protection of raptors continues, in the end nothing will have been achieved apart from the extinc-



**The Earl of Leicester: 'Like Mr Micawber, I hope something will turn up.'**

## 'Blind protection of raptors will achieve the extinction of one of our most iconic birds'

will turn to its advisers within the RSPB and the British Trust for Ornithology, and ask, "What shall we do?", and they will reply, "You must ban shooting", he says. 'If that happens there will be no incentive for any of us to continue to try to conserve the grey partridge. Gamekeepers will be made redundant, and within three years, instead of having 30 pairs of marsh harriers, we probably won't have any at all, because they are ground-nesting birds and the foxes will have killed them all.'

'At Langholm, before the experiment, when it was a thriving

tion of one of the most iconic birds of lowland Britain.'

Tackling raptor predation is a thorny issue, and emotions run high on either side of the debate. However, Simon Lester is so concerned by what he sees happening daily on the estate that he is calling for immediate action: 'We need an objective management system in the UK—as is already practised in other countries—where if a species is rare, it is given every protection, but if another species starts to impact on it, control measures are brought in until the balance has been restored.'

'I do not advocate the wholesale slaughter of birds of prey—there is room for everything. I enjoy watching harriers and other birds of prey. We also have a healthy population of barn owls here that we are very proud of; but action must be taken when one species comes to have such a negative impact on another.'

Running a wild bird shoot is expensive, and although some walked-up days are let at Holkham, the Game Department runs at a loss, which is another on-going pressure. 'It upsets me to think that we are getting to a point where, to run a shoot with nine gamekeepers and all the associated costs, will become unviable,' says Simon Lester. 'You could argue that it is already uneconomic now.'

Happily for the interests of the grey partridge, Lord Leicester is not about to cut the purse strings. 'Like Mr Micawber, I hope something will turn up,' he laughs. 'The wild bird shoot at Holkham, together with the farming, is part of the history of the estate. I would not wish to be the owner known to have let it all go. Holkham is still one of the best low-ground shoots in the country. In addition, I very much enjoy my shooting, we are lucky enough to be in beautiful country, and I cannot think of a day spent better than to be out with friends among the wild birds here.' This sentiment is much appreciated by Simon Lester. 'I am very lucky to work here with a team of dedicated keepers and a boss like Lord Leicester and his son, Viscount Coke, who both enjoy a modest day's sport because they are passionate about wild birds.'

Yet birds of prey may have the last word on the future of the wild grey partridge. Says Lord Leicester, 'If the raptor problem becomes so bad that we have to release more and more reared birds, to an extent that defeats the object of the shoot here. Nevertheless, as long as I can go on subsidising the wild grey partridges, I shall do so. The time may come when we will have to tighten our belts, but not yet.' □  
*See also The Corncrake, p68.*