

Peak Nestwatch

End of Season Report 2010



In 2000, the Peak Nestwatch was established as a consortium of like minded partners interested in halting the decline in the breeding success of birds of prey in the Upper Derwent Valley.

From 1997, the South Peak Raptor Group field workers began to report an alarming reduction in the breeding success of birds of prey within the valley, particularly Peregrine and Goshawk. Previous Nestwatch reports concluded that this consistent and high failure rate could not be explained by natural causes alone. As a result, organisations made up of The National Trust, Severn Trent Water, Forestry Commission, The RSPB, Peak District National Park, South Yorkshire and Derbyshire Police Forces and the South Peak Raptor Group decided that a central coordination of the project was required. The intention was to keep all the partners informed and to raise awareness amongst the public and those within the valley.

For the past ten years the consistent and high failure rate could not be explained by purely natural causes and as with previous years the 2010 Nestwatch initiative was directed to try and stop any human persecution and attempt to halt the serious decline in the breeding success of the valley's breeding raptors. In 2010, it was decided that the partners would coordinate the project by requesting the South Peak Raptor Group to conduct a survey of birds of prey within the valley. Jack Street was appointed as fieldworker and central coordination of the project moved from Severn Trent to Geoff Mawson, a South Peak Raptor worker. The survey was funded by the National Trust, Severn Trent Water, the Forestry Commission and the Peak District National Park Authority.

The Raptor Group were asked to provide weekly email reports to the wider Nestwatch members during the early part of the season with this final report providing an outline of the resulting breeding success of birds of prey within the valley during 2010.



THE 2010 BREEDING SEASON

The following is a comprehensive summary for each species covered by the initiative:

Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

In 2009 the Goshawks in the valley produced young from two nests and hopes were high in 2010 for a continued improvement for this species. As with 2009 Dave Jones from the Forestry Commission and Chris Fry from Severn Trent were actively involved supporting Jack Street as part of their work programmes and linked with Jack Street to provide exclusion zones and cameras when nests were found within their areas.

Goshawks had a successful early start to their breeding with six, possibly seven, separate breeding sites located. Activity continued at three sites where birds went on to lay eggs and begin incubation. Two nests were in the lower part of the valley. Despite the early optimism four of the previously occupied sites failed to continue breeding and towards the end of the breeding cycle no Goshawks remained in those previously active sites.

The single Goshawk site remaining in the upper part of the valley had built a new nest and had an incubating female for the full incubation period but the three eggs failed to hatch. Evidence of intrusion was noted and evidence collected at the nest site and handed to the police.

A second Goshawk site in the lower part of the valley was using the same nest that had been successful during 2009. The female was incubating five eggs. On the day chicks were expected to be ringed the site was found to have been recently used as an impromptu camp site. The debris, makeshift tent and beer cans indicated quite a substantial disturbance during the latter part of the incubation period. Only one chick remained along with four addled eggs. This was the second time within the valley that an impromptu camp site below a Goshawk nest tree had interrupted and disturbed their breeding cycle.



**The three dead Goshawks
side by side with their rings removed.
(R. Frost).**

The third Goshawk site was also in a new nest away from previous nest sites. Hopes were high for this site and those hopes were realised with three young Goshawks successfully ringed and DNA samples taken. Unfortunately, some weeks later, Raptor workers checking the site after the young had fledged found all three young dead some 500m away from their nest tree. They were placed alongside each other with their rings removed. Despite analysis the cause of death couldn't be accurately determined. It was noted during the examination that BTO rings for Goshawks are made out of substantial metal and are no easy item to remove without damaging the legs of the bird. The rings had been removed without any damage to the birds' legs. The upbeat feeling at the perceived success of this site soon changed as the police put a disclosure notice of any discussion of events until they had chance to continue their investigations. The landowner was contacted and informed of what had happened later in the season when this ban was lifted.

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*

It is a long breeding season for many of our large raptors and as with the Goshawk the Peregrines within the Upper Derwent Valley were active at breeding sites from the beginning of the year. As a result raptor workers began recording their activities from January/ February. 2010 had a promising start for Peregrines with pairs watched at Alport, West End and Abbey Brook. Raptor workers were optimistic of successful breeding commencing at all three sites with real progress observed at West End with a pair chasing, food passed and copulating. This activity resulted in an exclusion zone being established around the nest site with enhanced security set up in the area. It was after this security was in place that the fate of the Peregrines within the Valley changed, with a breakdown of the breeding pairs with one Peregrine from each site missing.

Regular observations noted important differences as they took place. After a period at West End when there was only a single female Peregrine a new adult male appeared, possibly from the Alport site. Alport was left with a single bird with no bird present for extended periods. Abbey Brook had two Peregrines observed again but the female this time was in immature plumage. The two birds at this latter site remained throughout the year but it was clear that the first year bird was too young to breed.

The change in breeding circumstances left a single pair at West End. The behaviour of the “new” pair resulted in a nest scrape with four eggs laid. The security which was already in place continued and hopes were high for young being produced. Both parent Peregrines were attentive and telescope observations reported an incubating female throughout daytime watches. Concerns began to materialise as the expected hatch date came and went. The male bird’s behaviour and the female’s responses also indicated that the eggs had past their hatching times. After a safety period the nest site was examined closely for the first time. Three eggs were removed and found to be partly incubated and then incubation had terminated. In addition spall marks in the rock face near to the nest itself were deemed suspicious.



Previous early observations had noticed the “new” marks and thought them to be important but opinions from the distances observed ranged from identifying them as spall marks to possible lichen growth. Preliminary police forensics suggested that the spall marks were probably made by rifle bullets fired from a distance.

A summary of observations and dates when observations had been made were finalised to conclude a summary of noted activity at the site. To conclude, despite a promising start to 2010’s breeding season, only one of three pairs of Peregrines produced eggs and these failed to hatch due to suspicious human disturbance.

Buzzard. *Buteo buteo*

A feature of 2010's bird observations in the Upper Derwent Valley was the increasing number of Buzzards present in the valley. Up to eight were noted together throughout the breeding season but despite three early Buzzard nests no successful breeding was recorded.



Hen Harrier. *Circus cyaneus*

A single bird was seen in the valley but no breeding activity was noted by raptor workers.

Short-eared Owl. *Asio flammeus*

One pair produced young in the valley with a probable second pair also successful.

Observations on the upland reaches above the tree line are hampered by the time taken by raptor workers to walk and survey the high moorland.

It is a full day's walk to reach many of these sites to look for Short-eared Owl and Merlin.



Merlin. *Falco columbarius*

In 2010, three pairs of Merlin were active on the upper moorland with two sites having eight young ringed. The young produced by these Merlin gave raptor workers their main successful breeding records of birds of prey in the Derwent Valley during 2010.



In Conclusion

The Upper Derwent Valley has brilliant habitats in which to see birds of prey. The survey monitored early breeding of Peregrines, Goshawk and Buzzard with up to 14 sites established. The resultant success produced just four Goshawk chicks from two sites, three of which were later found dead after fledging, lying side by side, with their rings removed. In addition, no Ravens were observed to breed in 2010.

The suitable habitat found in the valley produces new raptors in the area year after year as young produced elsewhere out of the valley are drawn in to breed. The small successes of Merlin and Short-eared Owl give a glimpse of what might be, but, my report confirms that human disturbance, in whatever guise, is mainly responsible for the poor breeding success of large raptors in the Upper Derwent Valley. The best allies of the birds are the groups within the valley who requested this survey and make up the Nestwatch Scheme.

Dr. Geoff Mawson

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