

NExCO and Board CEO Briefing

Date, timing and location of meeting:	14 February 2023
Meeting to which briefing relates:	Board meeting and field visit to Swinton Estate
Briefing provided by:	████████████████████ (signed off █████ 10 Feb 2023)

Purpose of the visit:

- familiarisation for NE leaders with northern hen harrier fieldwork
- relationship building with Moorland Association, including informal meeting with ██████████
██████ (Chair) and ██████████ (Director)

LOCATION: Nidderdale, North Yorkshire, including the Swinton Estate, Rippon HG4 4JH
Nearest station = Thirsk, 25 min drive away (minibus pickup from Thirsk at 1pm)

NE contacts : ██████████ (Director Operations) ██████████
████████████████████ (Hen Harrier Project Officer) ██████████
████████████████████ (Hen Harrier fieldworker) ██████████

DRAFT ITINERARY

09:30 -10:00	████████████████████ and ██████████ meet with ██████████ at Swinton to go through itinerary and recce potential watch points.
13:00	Group travel from Harrogate train station in 14-seater minibus to Swinton Estate
13:30	Welcome introduction by ██████████/NE HH action plan (including light refreshments/comfort break). With input from ██████████ (NE), ██████████ (NE), and ██████████ (Moorland Association)
14:00 – 16:45	Depending on numbers attending, split into two groups (one with 4x4 safari experience with good view of HH coming into roost) and the other in the bird hide watching the HH come into roost. Return to main building for comfort break.
17:00	Leave estate for Harrogate hotel, (c45mins journey)
18:30	Guests due to arrive for workshop discussions
19:30	Dinner

COMING PREPARED

- You must read and follow the risk assessment at annex 1: any personal concerns please contact JH
- Warm clothing, waterproofs advised (check forecast), wellies or walking boots for short walks
- Equipment – binoculars

KEY MESSAGES

- NE Exec and Board value the work of our staff and the estates and land managers they work with – we recognise this is difficult work
- Reducing hen harrier persecution remains our top priority and we are looking for ways to increase detection and prosecution of offences – we might explore whether MA are up for this and how
- We are proud of the partnerships we are working with, including on brood management, and there are really positive results emerging
- Natural England will be guided by the evidence in our decisions on the future of brood management, southern reintroduction and diversionary feeding, and will be open about the evidence behind our decisions.

BACKGROUND

Our field team of northern England Hen Harrier field workers is [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. Over many years they have built relationships with upland estates, especially grouse moors, to enable access to monitor hen harriers throughout the year, tag young birds (originally with radio tags, now satellite).

Working with Swinton Estate. Natural England HH staff have worked closely with [REDACTED] and the Swinton Estates Head Gamekeeper since 2012. Access to the estate is unconditional and we have been given keys to locked gates to enable use of the tracks (as with many other sporting estates across the English uplands). This is essential should access be required quickly to a remote area to ground-truth satellite fixes or check on breeding birds.

Our monitoring work consists of long hours watching over suitable breeding habitat in the spring and monitoring the series of roosts across the estate between October and March. However, our presence is reducing each year because of the appetite to help conserve hen harriers and the other moorland fauna and flora, and the knowledge gained by the estate managers since HH returned to breed again successfully in 2018. We are in regularly contact with the gamekeepers at Swinton and *vice versa*; they let us know when hen harriers are about and where they think they are about to settle or roosting. The estate has shown it is prepared to adopt DF and in recent years fledged 28 young hen harriers.

In 2018 we mentioned to [REDACTED] that the area was becoming more popular with bird watchers, and many are travelling long distances to see the birds. This prompted the decision to build a bird hide overlooking one of the key roosts on the estate. In the winter of 2019/2020, 16 birds were recorded using the Swinton “Druids Roost” in one evening, including two NE satellite tagged birds. To put this into context, Salisbury Plain, one of only two SPAs for wintering hen harriers in England hosted a maximum of 13 birds spread across several roosts.

Brood Management Trial

In 2019, the hen harrier breeding attempt at Swinton acted as the trigger nest to enable 5 chicks to be taken from an adjoining estate. In 2020 (4 chicks) and 2021 (4 chicks) Swinton hosted both trigger and intervention nests resulting in 8 young harriers being successfully reared in captivity and released. Brood management has occurred at other sites since then.

NE field staff's role in BM

- assist in the finding and plotting the location of the breeding attempts
- assessing the stage in the breeding cycle to ensure chicks are taken at the correct age
- fitting satellite transmitters, downloading, collating and interpreting satellite data
- fieldwork to ground-truth satellite fixes and increase our knowledge of survivability, habitat use and dispersal ecology.

Elephant traps & tricky issues

Future of brood management – NE Board has taken the in-principle decision to continue participation in brood management on a scientific trial basis. The MA is the principal partner in the trial, promoting participation by estates, organising and funding release facilities and enabling access for our fieldworkers to tag and monitor chicks. Along with all our brood management partners, they are rightly proud of the success so far and are clear that an estate's appetite for tolerating or welcoming breeding hen harriers is directly related to the availability of brood management as a 'pressure valve' to avoid a build-up of breeding harriers. The MA has supported the proposal of extending the trial but is clear that this should lead to the eventual wider availability of the technique as a practical and affordable tool.

Principles agreed by NE Board, and potential MA responses. NE Board has agreed *six principles* to guide us in taking forward our Hen Harrier work, and these have recently been shared with the brood management partners. No strong reactions have been received so far, but some will not be welcomed by all stakeholders including MA, who are likely to probe at this meeting.

1. *Hen harrier recovery must continue to be a funding and policy priority for Defra and us, and partners and lead organisations must maintain commitment to their actions if ours are to remain meaningful.*

The HH Plan has not been given a high profile by Defra in recent years though they remain committed to an independent evaluation, which we believe is important to keep all delivery partners accountable and committed.

2. *Natural England resources will continue to be directed towards science, monitoring, enforcement, and conservation management. We will be clear that the costs of hen harrier management to benefit businesses must be borne by those businesses.*

NE's hen harrier recovery work in support of the trial and wider monitoring is in the £100ks annually. Brood management is expensive and MA will push for government funding for brood management portraying it more as a conservation effort, rather than a mechanism to enable its members to meet their legal requirements. NE's hen harrier recovery work in support of the trial and wider monitoring is in the £100ks annually. MA has requested funding from us, but we will limit this to scientific support (e.g. provision of some tags and monitoring). MA has also asked if an Upland NNR (Moorhouse or Ingleborough) could be used as a fixed release site – [REDACTED] judgement is that this represents too great a risk to the 'NNR-brand' as a whole and individual sites

as long as illegal persecution remains a real threat to any hen harrier nest: additionally the MA should have sufficient contacts with access to vast tracts of suitable land if a long term commitment to hen harrier recovery is their goal.

3. *Our overarching principle is that our focus on hen harrier conservation must lead towards population recovery in both the uplands and lowlands of England. Whilst the acceptance and welcome of hen harriers in some parts of the uplands is welcome, we will be clear that we expect significantly more recovery here.*

MA is likely to question both licensing decisions on release sites (which require release of brood managed birds back to the Special Protection Area from which they were taken), and on the overall aims of recovery ('how many do you need')? Any suggestion that hen harriers are approaching recovered in the uplands ignores the fact of continued illegal persecution, and large gaps in suitable range. Nevertheless, it is right to say that hen harriers now breed successfully on several managed grouse moors.

4. *We will continue to seek opportunities to build consensus and cooperation between all parties working for hen harrier conservation regardless of whether they sign up to Defra's plan. This includes building a clearer picture of what hen harrier recovery means (e.g., through the national hen harrier population census planned for 2023) linked to success criteria for the actions under the plan, especially brood management.*

The Defra hen harrier six-point plan was published without agreement between all the parties that drew it up and there remains mistrust between estates and the other main actors in hen harrier conservation particularly with respect to persecution.

5. *Persecution remains a serious issue and needs more focus and action from the Police, businesses, landowners, and game-rearing interests. Hen harrier recovery (and perceived conflicts) must be seen in the context of nature recovery more widely, including of raptors and other avian predators across our uplands.*

Whilst MA has issued a joint statement with other game management organisations condemning illegal persecution, we think it could do more to condemning incidents. We have also to recognise though that considerable pressure must be being applied 'behind the scenes' to have achieved the recovery seen so far, and that The Swinton Estate can reasonably said to be welcoming harriers. Raptors generally are increasing in the uplands though persecution continues. But as raptors such as red kites, peregrines and buzzards become more accepted and frequent in the uplands, this must challenge the notion that 'a single harrier flight can ruin a shoot'.

6. *We will monitor developments internationally on hen harrier conservation to inform our practical approaches and policy advice to government, in particular the effectiveness of grouse moor licensing in Scotland, and nest protection measures in lowland agricultural habitats in continental Europe.*

NE has not taken a position or been asked by Defra for advice on the potential of licensing of grouse moors to reduce persecution and this does not form part of the six-point plan. Its introduction in Scotland however, means the issue will continue to be raised.

Some articles which give further perspectives (optional reading)

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-62676688>

██████████' blog on breeding success following brood management trials [More than 100 hen harriers fledge in England for the first time in over 100 years. - Natural England \(blog.gov.uk\)](#)

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

██████████' blog on [Establishing a conservation breeding programme for hen harriers in southern England - Natural England \(blog.gov.uk\)](#)

██████████' blog on recent persecution [The death of Asta, a Natural England-tagged hen harrier - Natural England \(blog.gov.uk\)](#)

[**Guardian article on our work with Swinton**](#)

NE upland specialists' article in *Ibis – international journal of avian science* and associated [blog \(what future for the British uplands?\)](#) challenging the view that cessation of grouse moor management would see these areas turned over to ecologically more damaging sheep-rearing or afforestation. Cotrary

[National Geographic article on reports of raptor killings soaring during the U.K.'s lockdown](#)

ANNEX RISK ASSESSMENT

Main risks and mitigating actions

Risk	Assessment	Action	Who
Travel to Thirsk	Arrival by train	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual RA based on travel timings and method Contact organisers if train delayed 	All
Minibus to Swinton	Professional driver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use seatbelts 	All
Off-road tracks on estate	Short (10 min) walk to hide/viewpoint 4x4 option available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ██████████ & local staff to provide suitable vehicles (4x4) ██████ to judge local weather conditions and communicate any changes (call off if extreme – unlikely) Any participants with muscular-skeletal or any other concerns related to travel in 4x4s to contact ██████ or ██████ to discuss and make individual risk assessment 	SM SM All
Covid 19	Transmission when traveling together; transmission in public areas and touch points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respect others' requests on masks and open windows as appropriate when vehicle sharing Carry and use personal sanitiser as appropriate Follow onsite guidance at Swinton 	All
Biosecurity	Avian Flu Other diseases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encountering dead birds unlikely but do not touch & contact APHA hotline if necessary. Follow all other on-site advice on the day 	All SM
Slips, trips and falls	estate tracks, short muddy walk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stout footwear (walking boots or grippy wellies) 	All
Effects of weather – cold and/or wet	Be prepared for cold and wet, noting that only short walks are planned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal judgement on clothing, but layers, fleece and waterproofs recommended 	All