



2025

Hen Harriers in the firing line

The illegal killing of Hen Harriers in the UK

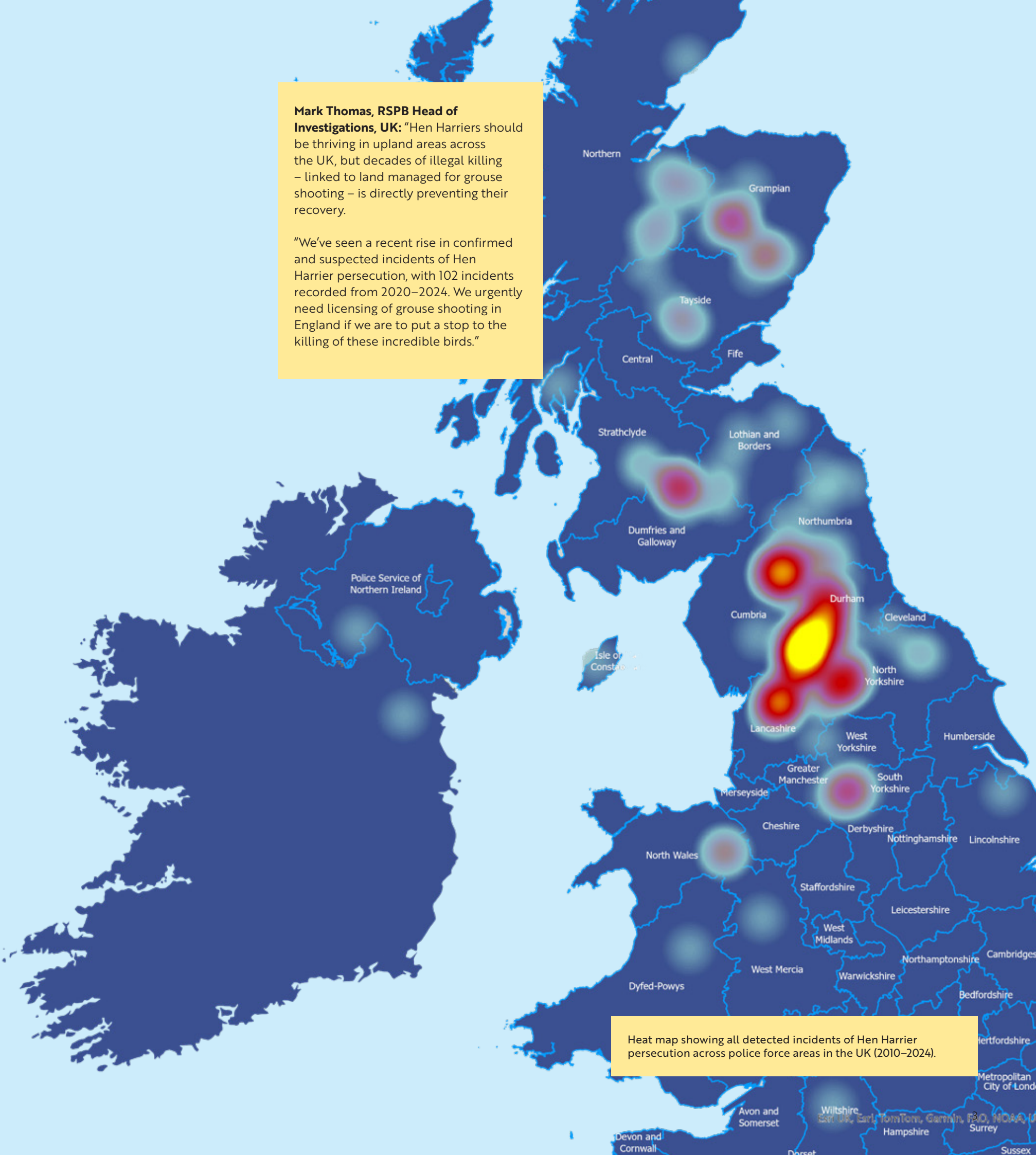


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Mark Thomas, RSPB Head of Investigations, UK: “Hen Harriers should be thriving in upland areas across the UK, but decades of illegal killing – linked to land managed for grouse shooting – is directly preventing their recovery.

“We’ve seen a recent rise in confirmed and suspected incidents of Hen Harrier persecution, with 102 incidents recorded from 2020–2024. We urgently need licensing of grouse shooting in England if we are to put a stop to the killing of these incredible birds.”



Heat map showing all detected incidents of Hen Harrier persecution across police force areas in the UK (2010–2024).

Summary

Despite having the highest level of protection under UK law and a designated species of high conservation concern, Hen Harriers are being illegally killed in the UK.

Hen Harriers are symbolic of the UK’s uplands and a key indicator species, reflecting the ecological health and biodiversity of these landscapes. Sadly, this species is being illegally killed in many parts of the UK’s uplands. These crimes are reducing their survival rate, suppressing population numbers, and hampering conservation efforts. The Hen Harrier is the most persecuted bird of prey in the UK today, relative to their national population size.

In the last five years, the number of confirmed and suspected Hen Harrier persecution incidents has increased with 102 recorded between 2020 and 2024. 89% of these incidents took place in northern England. 2023 was notably the worst year on record with 34 Hen Harriers confirmed to have been killed or disappearing under suspicious circumstances. The impact of these crimes is most evident in England with numbers recorded in 2024 representing only one tenth of the upper estimate of potential breeding pairs for England (323-340 pairs) as outlined by the [Joint Nature Conservation Committee Report](#) in 2011.

Recent peer-reviewed scientific research has revealed that persecution is having a devastating effect on the survival of this vulnerable species, reducing the average life expectancy of a Hen Harrier after fledging to just four months. For decades, intelligence and evidence has shown that the illegal killing of this rare and protected species is significantly linked to the grouse shooting industry in the UK.

In an effort to maximise Red Grouse numbers and increase the profitability of the shoot, some individuals illegally kill Hen Harriers and other birds of prey. Their aim is to remove any potential threat of predation to the grouse stocks and to prevent disturbance to the grouse on shoot days.

As these wildlife crimes occur in some of the most remote parts of the UK, detecting them and obtaining admissible evidence which links the offence directly to an individual is extremely difficult. As a result, those who kill Hen Harriers often do so with little fear of discovery or recrimination. To date, in the last 25 years only two individuals have been convicted for Hen Harrier persecution-related offences in the UK, both of which were in Scotland. As yet, no one has ever been convicted for targeting, injuring or killing a Hen Harrier in England.

Difficulties in detecting these crimes means that confirmed and suspected incidents of Hen Harrier persecution

represent only a fraction of the total number being killed. In the last five years these crimes have increased, with more incidents of Hen Harrier persecution being recorded than ever before.

Confirmed incidents include the shooting, trapping and mutilation of Hen Harriers, the killing of chicks and the destruction of nests and eggs. Suspected incidents involve the disappearance of breeding male Hen Harriers while foraging away from their nest site, often resulting in nest failure, and the suspicious disappearance of satellite tagged Hen Harriers. In these cases, the bird’s satellite tag suddenly stops transmitting without sign of malfunction. Despite extensive efforts neither the bird’s body nor its tag is ever found, strongly suggesting human interference.

As only a small proportion of incidents are detected, and as satellite tagged birds represent only a small proportion of the population, these figures represent the tip of the iceberg. The true scale of these crimes is likely to be considerably higher.

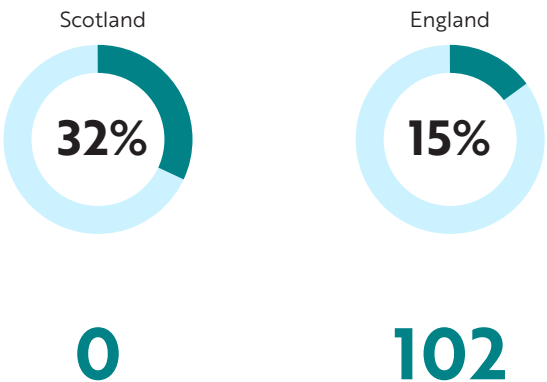
This report outlines the status of Hen Harriers in the UK, assesses the ongoing threats posed by illegal persecution, and highlights the need for greater regulation of grouse shooting across the UK to effectively prevent these crimes. Without urgent legislative change in England, the future of the Hen Harrier in the UK remains an uncertain one.



A sub-adult male and adult male Hen Harrier at a wintering roost site

Graham Catley

The fraction of breeding Hen Harriers recorded in the 2023 Hen Harrier survey relative to the total number of pairs which could potentially breed in Scotland and England as [published by the JNCC](#) (2011)



People have been convicted of Hen Harrier persecution-related offences in England.

121 days

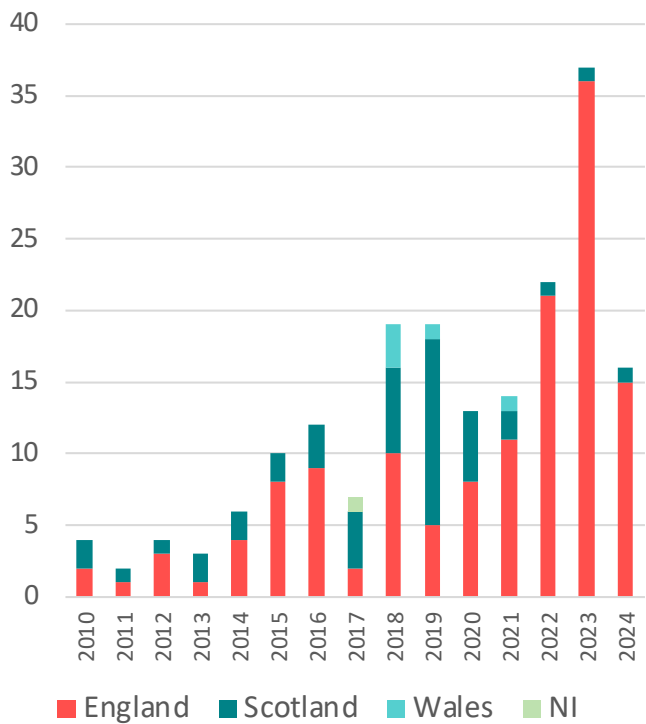
Is the average life expectancy of young Hen Harriers in the UK.

Confirmed and suspected incidents of Hen Harrier persecution have been recorded in the UK in the last five years (2020–24).

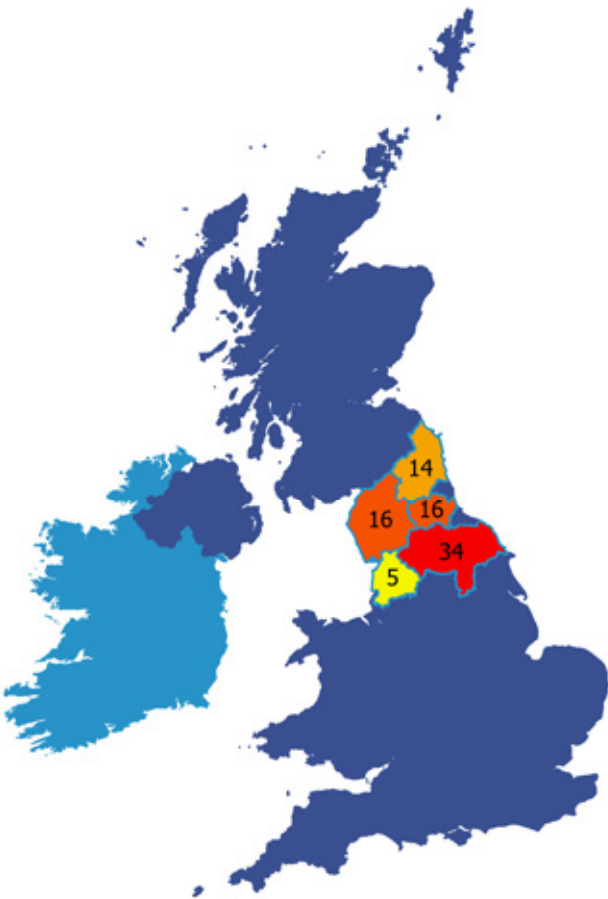
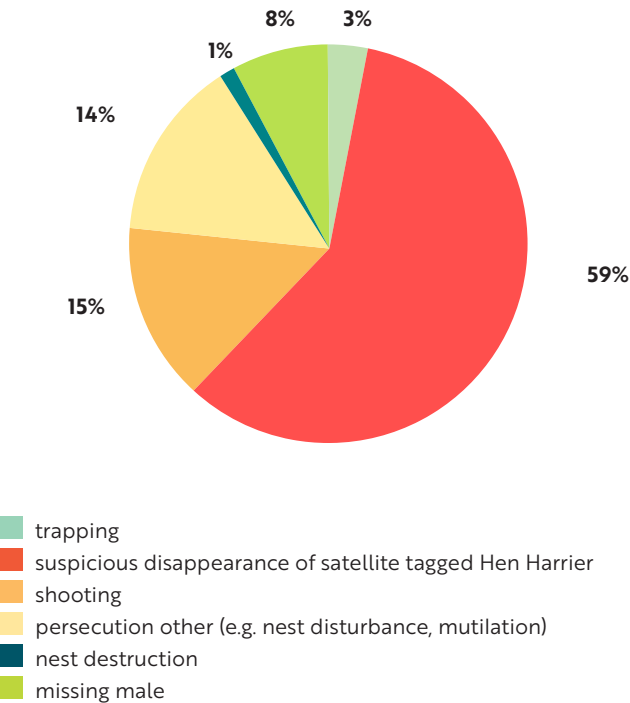
10x

Hen Harriers are ten times more likely to die or disappear when on grouse moors.

Total number of confirmed and suspected Hen Harrier persecution incidents in the UK (2010–2024)



Confirmed and suspected Hen Harrier persecution incidents in the UK by type (2010–2024)



The five UK counties with the highest number of confirmed and suspected cases of Hen Harrier persecution (2020–24): North Yorkshire (34), Northumberland (14), County Durham (16), Cumbria (16), Lancashire (5).

Background

Hen Harriers are ground nesting birds which breed almost exclusively in the uplands of the UK.

RSPB investigations

Hen Harriers are an iconic species of the UK's uplands and a key indicator of a healthy ecosystem.

Breeding

Male Hen Harriers have striking pale blue-grey plumage with contrasting black wing tips, earning them the nickname *ghost of the moor*. To attract one or more females, in early spring the male performs a remarkable breeding display involving a series of undulating aerial acrobatics, which is known as *sky-dancing*.

Once paired both the male and female will engage in coordinated food-pass displays, with the male calling the female off the nest to then drop food to her in mid-air.

The female only has one opportunity to breed each year and typically lays a single clutch of four to five eggs in late spring. Most Hen Harriers are ready to breed at two years old and they often return to the same breeding site year-on-year.

History

Until the early 1800s Hen Harriers were relatively common and widespread across the UK. In the early 19th Century, numbers declined dramatically due to habitat loss and an increase in persecution – a consequence of the growing popularity of gamebird shooting during the Victorian era.

As the commercial value of this sport boomed, the drive to maximise the number of gamebirds available to be shot accelerated, resulting in all potential predators being targeted and killed. By the end of the 19th century, this pressure, along with a growing interest in egg and skin collecting, resulted in Hen Harriers becoming extinct in mainland Britain. Small populations continued to breed and survive at the very edge of their range on Orkney and in parts of the Western Isles of Scotland.

After the Second World War, Hen Harrier numbers slowly began to recover, associated with a reduction in persecution as a result of the less intensive management of grouse moors during this period.

Gradually, Hen Harriers began recolonising upland areas and re-establishing breeding populations across the UK. This revival, however, faltered in the latter part of the 20th Century, as Hen Harriers were once more the target of persecution associated with intensively managed grouse moors.

Legal and conservation status in the UK

In 1954 full legal protection for Hen Harriers was introduced under the Protection of Birds Act. This legislation was built on in 1981 under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Due to their vulnerability, under this legislation Hen Harriers were designated as a Schedule 1 species, giving them the highest level of legal protection afforded to any wild bird species in the UK.

Currently, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) and the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, **throughout the UK it is an offence to: kill, injure, or take a Hen Harrier and to intentionally or recklessly disturb them when nest building, or on or near a nest containing eggs or young. It is also an offence to disturb dependant young.** In Scotland Hen Harriers have been awarded an extra level of protection, making it also an offence to **intentionally or recklessly harass Hen Harriers year round.** Due to their historical declines the Hen Harrier is Red listed as a Bird of Conservation Concern. They are also classified as Endangered on the IUCN Regional Red List for Great Britain.

Persecution

Hen Harriers are the most persecuted birds of prey in the UK relative to their population size.

National surveys and recent scientific studies show that illegal persecution is suppressing Hen Harrier numbers to unnaturally low levels in Scotland and England, directly impeding their recovery.

Decades of evidence – including confirmed and suspected persecution incidents, police investigations and intelligence – has revealed that the targeting and illegal killing of Hen Harriers is almost exclusively associated with land managed for grouse shooting in the UK's uplands.

Many of the offences occur in areas that are designated as National Parks and National Landscapes. Most of these crimes involve Hen Harriers being shot (with a shotgun) or trapped in illegally set spring traps, with the majority of these incidents taking place on or near land managed for grouse shooting.

In addition to trapping and shooting incidents, the RSPB Investigations team has also recorded several other types of persecution offences involving Hen Harriers, including disturbance during the breeding season and at winter roost sites, the destruction of nests and eggs and the killing of chicks in the nest.

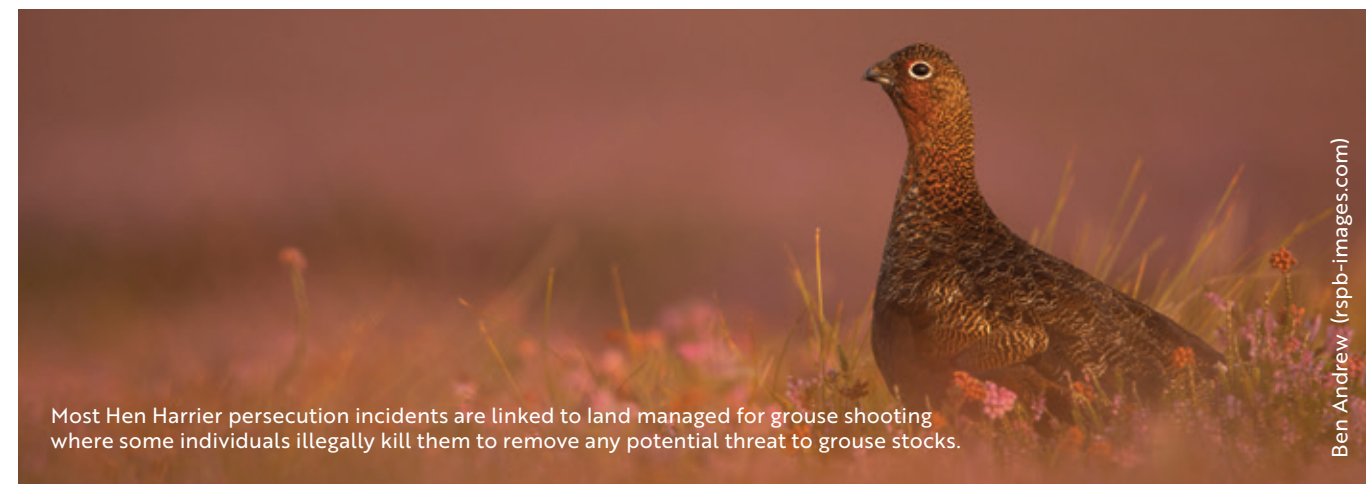
Since the mid-1990s an intensification of land management for grouse shooting has been seen across vast areas of the UK's uplands.

The profitability of these businesses relies heavily on the number of grouse available to be shot. Evidence shows that some individuals on some grouse shooting estates will attempt to maximise grouse stock by illegally targeting and killing birds of prey, including Hen Harriers, to remove any potential threat of predation.

A significant proportion of recorded persecution incidents have taken place on land managed for grouse shooting in the uplands of northern England, particularly in iconic protected landscapes like the Yorkshire Dales National Park and the North Pennines National Landscape.

Between 2020 and 2024, 102 confirmed or suspected Hen Harrier persecution incidents were recorded in the UK, involving 94 Hen Harriers. 89% of these incidents occurred in northern England.

This figure only includes incidents which have been detected, with a significant proportion of these involving satellite tagged birds. As many of these crimes are undetected and unreported and most Hen Harriers are not fitted with satellite tags, the total number of Hen Harriers being illegally killed is likely to be significantly greater.



Most Hen Harrier persecution incidents are linked to land managed for grouse shooting where some individuals illegally kill them to remove any potential threat to grouse stocks.

Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

Detecting crimes and enforcing the law

For more than 30 years, the RSPB Investigations team has been at the forefront of detecting and investigating Hen Harrier persecution across the UK.

The Investigations team works closely with police forces and the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU), sharing information and supporting investigations, and maintains the only long-term data set of Hen Harrier persecution incidents in the UK.

The Investigations team continuously monitor the satellite tag data and alert the NWCU and police if anomalies suggest a persecution incident has taken place. Data from Hen Harrier satellite tags has exposed a significant number of suspected crimes and highlighted problem areas and incidents which would otherwise have gone unseen.

As these crimes are taking place in some of the UK's most inaccessible and isolated areas, detecting them and enforcing the law is extremely difficult. If a crime is detected, criminal prosecutions can only proceed if there is substantive evidence linking an individual directly to the offence (e.g. an eye-witness account, covert footage or forensic evidence).

Unfortunately, those killing Hen Harriers will go to great lengths to prevent their crimes from being detected, killing Hen Harriers in unpopulated and remote areas, whilst wearing balaclavas or face masks to conceal their identity. Criminals will often destroy evidence to reduce the risk of detection and potentially throw suspicion elsewhere by, for example, relocating the body of a dead satellite tagged Hen Harrier or its tag.

The low probability of these crimes being detected, and the low likelihood that the person responsible will be identified, has enabled a climate of impunity to develop in many upland areas of the UK, with these

crimes being committed with little fear of detection or consequence.

To date, in the UK only two individuals have ever been prosecuted for offences relating to the persecution of a Hen Harrier. Both of these incidents took place in Scotland.

In 2001, a [gamekeeper admitted to shooting a Hen Harrier on a grouse shooting estate](#) in Moray, Scotland and in 2003, another [gamekeeper was seen aiming a gun at a Hen Harrier](#) in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. In both instances, covert video evidence gathered by RSPB Investigations was fundamental to charges being brought and the successful prosecutions. In 2013, the RSPB captured covert footage of [an individual shooting a Hen Harrier on a grouse moor](#) in Scotland. However, despite the evidence – gathered in similar circumstances to the previous cases – charges against the gamekeeper were dropped by the Crown Office due to concerns about evidence.

In response to a sudden increase in suspected and confirmed incidents of Hen Harrier persecution in recent years, in 2024 the National Wildlife Crime Unit established the Hen Harrier Task Force to tackle these crimes in northern England.

An adult male Hen Harrier, also known as "the ghost of the moor"



Despite dozens of Hen Harrier persecution incidents in northern England no one has ever been prosecuted.

The role of satellite tagging in tracking persecution

Since 2014, the RSPB alongside other conservation organisations, including Natural England, has been fitting solar-powered satellite tags to Hen Harriers.

Transmitting near real-time data, these devices have provided new insights into birds movements and survival. This data has not only helped researchers understand Hen Harrier dispersal – revealing previously unrecorded roosting, breeding and foraging sites – but has also shone a light on the issue of Hen Harrier persecution in the UK’s uplands.

This technology has highlighted many confirmed and suspected incidents of persecution, which otherwise would have gone undetected and provided crucial data which has revealed the impact of persecution on Hen Harrier survival. Analysis of satellite tag data has exposed overwhelming evidence linking these crimes with land managed for grouse shooting.



Scientific studies have shown that satellite tags typically have low failure rates of around 2–3% (Whitfield and Fielding 2017, Ewing et al. 2023). If a tag malfunctions, it can be easily identified by irregular data patterns. As a tag begins to reach the end of its operational life (typically after four to five years) data received will clearly show a gradual battery depletion.

When a satellite tagged Hen Harrier dies of natural causes, such as disease or predation, the tag invariably continues to transmit, giving the location of the body and tag. In these instances, the remains of the Hen Harrier and tag are recovered and sent for post-mortem and forensic testing to establish the cause of death.

Since 2010, in the UK a total of 112 satellite tagged Hen Harriers have suspiciously disappeared, the majority of these tags sending their last transmission on, or near, land managed for grouse shooting. In all of these cases the bird's body and tag were not recovered, despite extensive police-led searches at the last point of transmission. In these cases it is highly likely that these tags have been interfered with by humans and that the Hen Harrier has been illegally killed.

Will Hayward, Senior Investigations Officer:
“Martha was fitted with a satellite tag before she left her nest in Aberdeenshire in 2022. Her tag data showed that she spent her first year travelling around upland areas in Scotland. We’d hoped she’d settle in a safe spot, reach maturity and go on to rear young of her own.

“Sadly, in August 2023, within days of crossing the border from Scotland into northern England, transmissions from Martha’s tag suddenly stopped whilst she was on a grouse moor in the North Pennines. Although we never found her body, it’s highly likely that she was illegally killed.

“Martha was one of three RSPB satellite tagged Hen Harriers to suspiciously disappear on grouse moors in Northern England in 2023 within days of 12th August – the start of the grouse shooting season in the UK.”

The sudden disappearance of Scottish Hen Harriers that disperse into northern England is a significant concern. Since 2017, 12 Hen Harriers that were fitted with satellite tags before leaving their nests in Scotland have disappeared in northern England. The majority of these birds' satellite tags sent their final transmission from land managed for grouse shooting.

Persecution hotspots
Hen Harriers can be highly mobile. Some birds travel significant distances each year from their breeding grounds in the uplands at the end of the summer to their wintering sites, and back again the following year. Satellite tag data has revealed that some Hen Harriers spend their winter in mainland Europe, flying to France, Spain and Portugal, with some recorded to have travelled more than 1,550 kilometres. Within a few weeks of fledging the nest, young Hen Harriers will disperse from the breeding area in search of a suitable site to settle and spend the winter months.

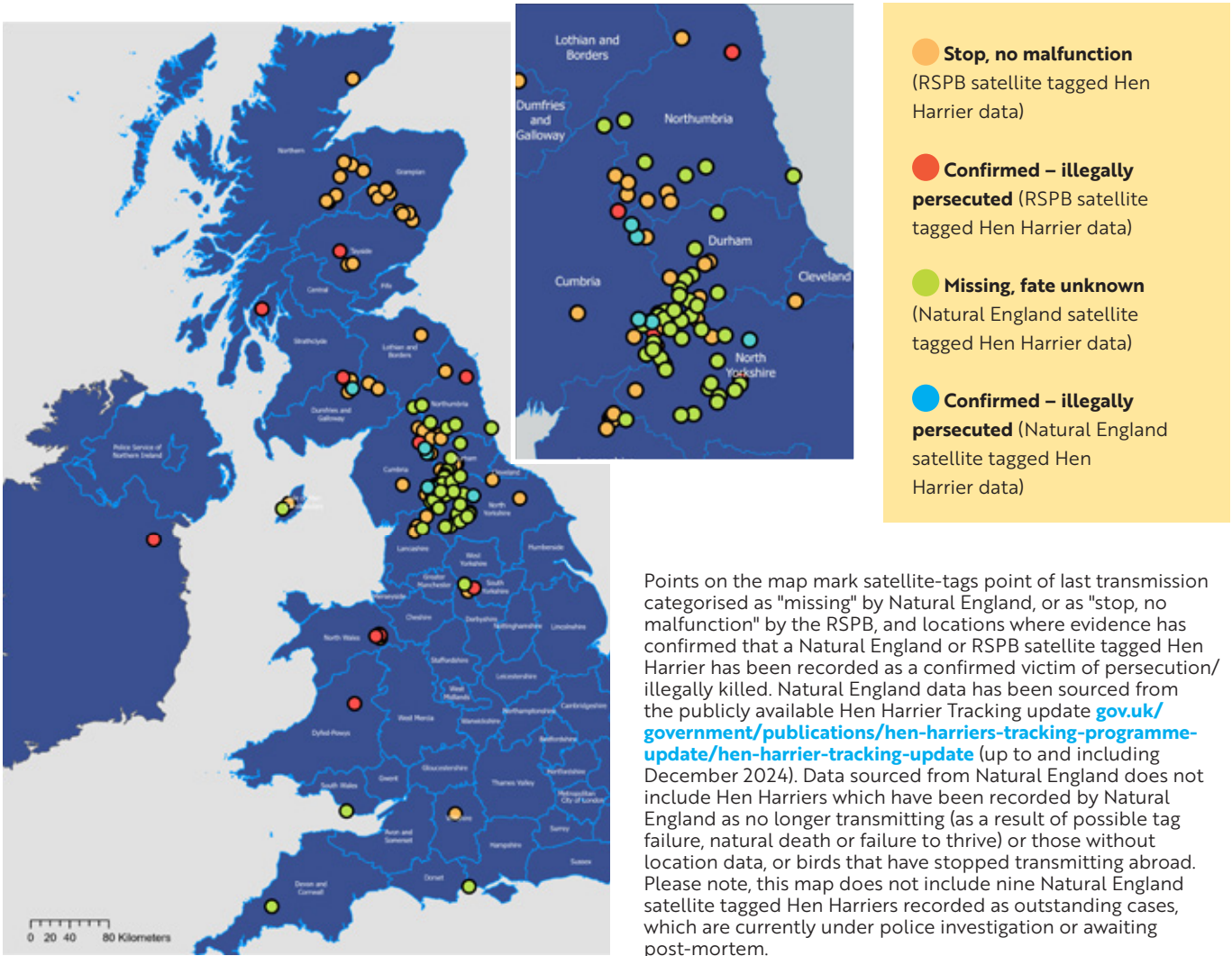
This dispersal is an integral part of this species’ life strategy and unfortunately makes them highly vulnerable to persecution. Many Hen Harriers cross or settle in areas of land where they are perceived as a threat to gamebird stock, and are then at risk of being persecuted. Satellite tag data has shown that, when free from persecution, Hen Harriers can live long lives. One tagged female in Scotland survived to eight years of age, and the British Trust for Ornithology ringing recovery data documented a Hen Harrier surviving to 15 years of age.

In Scotland, multiple satellite tagged Hen Harriers have suspiciously disappeared or been confirmed as victims of persecution. The majority of these incidents have taken

place on grouse moors in or adjacent to the Cairngorms National Park, the Angus Glens, South Lanarkshire and Highland Perthshire.

Between 2018 and 2024, four satellite tagged Hen Harriers are suspected to have been persecuted in north Wales, all sending their last transmission on or near Ruabon Moor. This is the only area managed intensively for grouse shooting in Wales, however there is no direct evidence as to who may have been involved.

All confirmed and suspected persecution incidents in northern England have occurred on or near grouse moors, many within designated protected landscapes including: the Yorkshire Dales National Park, Northumberland National Park, North York Moors National Park, The Lake District National Park, Peak District National Park, Nidderdale National Landscape, Forest of Bowland National Landscape and North Pennines National Landscape. Swaledale in the Yorkshire Dales National Park is statistically the worst location in England with three Hen Harriers confirmed to have been illegally killed in this area and 14 more satellite tagged birds suspiciously disappearing between 2016 and 2023.



Points on the map mark satellite-tags point of last transmission categorised as "missing" by Natural England, or as "stop, no malfunction" by the RSPB, and locations where evidence has confirmed that a Natural England or RSPB satellite tagged Hen Harrier has been recorded as a confirmed victim of persecution/ illegally killed. Natural England data has been sourced from the publicly available Hen Harrier Tracking update gov.uk/government/publications/hen-harriers-tracking-programme-update/hen-harrier-tracking-update (up to and including December 2024). Data sourced from Natural England does not include Hen Harriers which have been recorded by Natural England as no longer transmitting (as a result of possible tag failure, natural death or failure to thrive) or those without location data, or birds that have stopped transmitting abroad. Please note, this map does not include nine Natural England satellite tagged Hen Harriers recorded as outstanding cases, which are currently under police investigation or awaiting post-mortem.

Safe havens

Certain upland areas managed for conservation have become crucial safe havens for breeding Hen Harriers. These areas are designated protected landscapes, largely managed for the benefit of wildlife. Unfortunately, when Hen Harriers leave these areas, either whilst foraging for food (travelling up to 10 kilometres away from their nest) or dispersing after the breeding season, they run the risk of being illegally killed.

Parts of the Forest of Bowland are key breeding sites for Hen Harriers in northern England. Despite continued successes, including 39 chicks fledging in 2022, the risks these birds face when they leave the safety of this land is evident. Between 2020 and 2024, almost a third (12 of a total of 37) of all Hen Harriers fitted with satellite tags in the Forest of Bowland have either been confirmed, or suspected to have been, illegally killed.

At RSPB Geltsdale nature reserve in the North Pennines, despite round-the-clock nest protection, since 2020, eight breeding males are suspected to have been persecuted whilst foraging off the reserve. Also in 2023, a satellite tagged male Hen Harrier was found shot dead on a neighbouring grouse moor, prompting a police investigation and widespread national media interest (see case study 5 on page 14).



In 2024, at RSPB Geltsdale no persecution incidents were recorded. That same year, eight chicks successfully fledged – the highest number since the 1990s. Sadly, in May 2025, two male Hen Harriers, which were actively provisioning nests on the reserve, suddenly disappeared within days of each other, pointing to yet more illegal killing.

The National Trust for Scotland's Mar Lodge Estate in the Cairngorms in Scotland has also become a key site for Hen Harriers, with 32 chicks fledging in 2023. Since 2016, however, over a third (nine of 23) Hen Harriers fitted with satellite tags have disappeared. All tags sent their final transmissions from land managed for grouse shooting in Aberdeenshire, the Highlands, Angus and Northumberland.

In southern Scotland, in 2024 eight Hen Harriers fledged from the recently established Tarras Valley Nature Reserve. Three of the young birds were fitted with satellite tags. In January 2025 one disappeared. The satellite tag sent its final transmission from a grouse moor in Durham.

Evidence

Case Studies

The following case studies include a number of confirmed Hen Harrier persecution incidents which have happened in the UK. The majority of these incidents involve the illegal killing of satellite tagged Hen Harriers. In every case evidence has confirmed that a crime was committed, which has led to the initiation of a police investigation. To date, no one has been convicted in connection with any of these crimes.

1. Four Hen Harrier chicks stamped on in the nest – North Yorkshire, England (2022)

In 2022, Natural England set up a motion-activated camera on the nest of a satellite tagged female Hen Harrier, known as Susie, to monitor its progress. The nest was located on one of several grouse shooting estates on Whernside in the Yorkshire Dales. The satellite tag data showed Susie regularly visited the nest until 20 June when she was suddenly located over 30 kilometres away, abandoning her chicks. Natural England field workers visited the nest site and found all the chicks dead.

The camera footage showed that on 15 June all of Susie's chicks were alive and in good health. At 9.59pm that evening the camera footage was obscured by a prolonged flash of light. The following morning the camera was activated again, showing Susie attempting to feed her dead chicks in the nest. She remained in the area with her dead chicks for five days before finally abandoning them.

Post-mortem analysis revealed that the chicks, aged eight to 12-days-old, had multiple fractures and broken bones. One of the chick's skulls had been crushed. North Yorkshire Police concluded that someone had visited the nest under the cover of darkness and deliberately stamped on the chicks to kill them.



They hypothesised that the white-out on the nest camera was likely to have been caused by a lamp or object being placed in front of the camera. To learn more about this incident listen to [The Guardian's podcast Killing the Skydancer](#). Sadly, two years after this incident Susie's body was recovered in Northumberland on 12 February 2024. Susie's death is part of an ongoing police investigation.

2. Satellite tagged Hen Harrier decapitated – Cumbria/North Yorkshire border, England (2022)

In April 2022, satellite tag data from a male Hen Harrier called Free indicated he was no longer at his roost site on a moorland around Birkdale, near the border of Yorkshire and Cumbria. Free's remains and tag were found on a hillside near Outhgill by the police and Natural England. His head had been removed, along with one of his legs.

A blog by Natural England stated: "The post-mortem examination concluded that Free's leg had been torn off while he was alive, and that the cause of death was the head being twisted and pulled off while the body was held tightly. These injuries would be consistent with Free being killed by human hands. There were no other signs of damage from any animal, and Free had not been shot."



3. Hen Harrier caught in a spring trap – South Lanarkshire, Scotland (2019)

An untagged adult male Hen Harrier was found alive, but critically injured, on a grouse moor in South Lanarkshire, Scotland. He was found by members of the Scottish Raptor Study Group, caught in an illegal spring trap which had been set next to its nest. Another spring trap was found set on the Harrier’s nest beside two eggs.

When the Hen Harrier was found its leg was almost completely severed from its body. Due to the severity of the injuries the Hen Harrier had to be euthanised.

Watch [Chris Packham’s YouTube video](#) to learn more about this incident. On this same estate, in 2016, a two-year-old satellite tagged Hen Harrier called Chance, who had wintered in France over the previous two years, suspiciously disappeared, presumed killed, just a few miles away.

Also, in 2020 a satellite tagged Hen Harrier, known as Silver disappeared while nesting on this estate. A fresh shotgun cartridge was found close to the nest site.

4. Satellite tag removed and fitted to a crow – County Durham and North Yorkshire, England (2021)

A one-year-old Natural England satellite tagged Hen Harrier, known as Asta, had been roosting on a grouse moor in the north Pennines.

Her satellite tag data showed that she suddenly moved to another location in North Yorkshire, and then stopped moving. Fieldworkers carried out a land search found her satellite tag harnessed to a dead Carrion Crow. [Natural England stated in their blog](#):



"We know that Asta must have died before or soon after her tag was removed because the harness straps were not cut or broken and there would have been no way to remove the harness intact from a live bird without severe injury."

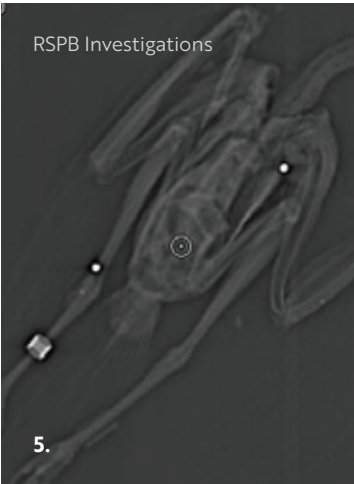
We do not know how the tag came to be fitted to a crow, how the crow was obtained, or how or exactly when it died. However, the tag transmissions do not show a long period of inactivity before or during the change of location, so our interpretation is that the tag was fitted to a live crow soon after Asta’s death, and this crow was released alive, in the Arrathorne area (North Yorkshire)."

5. Male Hen Harrier breeding on RSPB Geltsdale found shot on neighbouring moor – Cumbria, England (2023)

A male satellite tagged Hen Harrier known as Dagda was provisioning a female on a nest at RSPB Geltsdale nature reserve. In early April, RSPB staff who were monitoring the nest noticed what looked like shot damage to his tail. Just weeks later, in early May, Dagda’s satellite tag data showed that he had travelled 3km onto neighbouring land and was dead. Dagda’s body and tag were recovered by the Police.

The post-mortem revealed that there were two shotgun pellets and two puncture wounds, causing haemorrhage in his leg, abdomen, and breast, rendering him incapable of powered flight, which resulted in him dying almost instantly. The post-mortem also revealed a historic shot wound in his chest and confirmed that the broken feathers in his tail were consistent with shotgun damage.

Dagda had been shot on at least two occasions, the last being fatal. Although a suspect was interviewed, no one has been charged with the illegal killing of this young Hen Harrier. This case featured on Channel 4 News. [youtube.com/watch?v=QH3baLKaKAw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QH3baLKaKAw)



6. Satellite tag cut off, bird never found – South Yorkshire, England (2022)

The satellite tag data of a Hen Harrier called Anu showed that she was roosting at Upper Midhope in the Peak District National Park, South Yorkshire, on land managed for grouse shooting. At night Hen Harriers typically roost in reedbeds or rushes on the ground, flying in at dusk and remaining inactive throughout the night until dawn.

Tracking data from Anu’s tag showed that she had moved 9km away from her roost site during the night. Police and RSPB Investigations officers conducted extensive searches and found the satellite tag and harness but found no trace of her body.

Forensic analysis of the tag confirmed that it had been intentionally cut, indicating that Anu had been persecuted. You can learn more about this case in this [Raptor Persecution blog](#).



8. Case ongoing

An incident which took place in October 2024 in northern England, involving a Hen Harrier at a roost site, is currently under investigation by North Yorkshire Police. An individual has been charged with offences in connection with the incident based on covert footage gathered by the RSPB Investigation team, which featured on Channel 4 News. [youtube.com/watch?v=VKVU6gO7djA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKVU6gO7djA)



7. Hen Harrier found dead with spring trap attached to leg – Perthshire, Scotland (2019)

A one-year-old Hen Harrier, named Rannoch was found dead with a spring trap attached to her leg by the RSPB Investigations team on a grouse moor in Strathbraan, Perthshire. The post-mortem stated:

"The bird was trapped by the left leg in a spring trap at time of death. Death will have been due to a combination of shock and blood loss if it died quickly, or to exposure and dehydration/starvation if it died slowly. Either way the bird will have experienced significant unnecessary suffering."

The estate had a **General Licence restriction imposed** on it by NatureScot (Scotland's nature agency) in response to this crime. No one was prosecuted.

Impact

National Hen Harrier population trends

Between 1988 and 1989, as a result of growing conservation concern for the Hen Harrier in the UK, the first national breeding Hen Harrier survey was conducted across the UK. Since then, the survey has been repeated every six to 10 years, enabling long term trends to be determined.

Over the last 34 to 35 years in Scotland and England the number of breeding pairs of Hen Harriers has been significantly lower than the potential numbers of pairs that available habitat could support (as set out in the JNCC report in 2011).



Hen Harrier numbers in England

Over the last 15 years Hen Harrier numbers in England have fluctuated considerably, remaining far below the 323–340 number of breeding pairs which could be supported in England. The species hovered on the brink of extinction in England in the early 2010s when only two pairs bred successfully in 2012 and none at all in 2013. Four breeding pairs were recorded during the 2016 Hen Harrier survey.

In 2023, results from the national Hen Harrier survey showed a notable increase in the numbers of breeding Hen Harriers in England compared to 2016, with a total of 50 territorial pairs being recorded, resulting in the successful fledging of 141 chicks (Kelly et al., 2024).

Although encouraging, as highlighted in the [RSPB Birdcrime Report 2023](#), shortly after the Hen Harrier survey period in 2023 there was a notable increase in suspected persecution

incidents in northern England. A total of 32 Hen Harriers were confirmed or suspected to have been persecuted in northern England that year.

The breeding success of Hen Harriers in England in 2024, as reported by [Natural England](#), showed a downturn in comparison to the figures recorded during 2023. There was a 43% decline in the number of chicks fledging in 2024 when compared to 2023 figures, and the number of breeding females recorded in 2024 dropped from 50 in 2023 to 34 in 2024 – a 32% fall.

Several factors have been cited as possibly contributing to the decline in Hen Harrier breeding success in England in 2024, including poor weather potentially impacting prey availability. However, success varied across many sites in northern England, suggesting other pressures could have contributed to this decline. At RSPB Geltsdale, and in the Forest of Bowland, where persecution is minimised through

conservation efforts (including nest protection and monitoring), breeding pairs were stable or higher than numbers recorded in 2023. In 2024, eight Hen Harrier chicks fledged from RSPB Geltsdale, the highest number recorded since the 1990s. In the Forest of Bowland the number of nesting attempts in 2024 matched those recorded in 2023 but with lower productivity.

The most significant declines in Hen Harrier breeding in England in 2024 were observed in the North Pennines and the Yorkshire Dales, with decreases of 67% and 73%, respectively, compared to 2023. Both regions are intensively managed for grouse shooting and have been linked to several confirmed and suspected Hen Harrier persecution incidents in recent years.

Hen Harrier numbers in Scotland

Results from the 2023 Hen Harrier survey showed that three-quarters of the UK’s Hen Harrier population bred in Scotland, with most populations concentrated in the west Highlands, Hebrides and Orkney. Although this gives some cause for optimism, the Scottish population represents less than a third of its potential with 16% fewer birds than 20 years ago. The population remains low on parts of the Scottish mainland, as a direct result of persecution. The number of Hen Harriers breeding on Scottish grouse moors continues to decline, with successful breeding attempts in these areas being sporadic and rare.

Hen Harrier numbers in Wales

40 territorial pairs were recorded in Wales in 2023, up from 35 in 2016. More than half of the Hen Harrier pairs recorded were located in two Special Protected Areas (SPAs) designated for breeding harriers, Berwyn in north-east Wales and Migneint-Arenig-Dduallt in the north-west.

Hen Harrier numbers in Northern Ireland

Only 34 territorial pairs of Hen Harriers were recorded in Northern Ireland in 2023, a 26% decline since 2016, linked to habitat loss, habitat degradation and disturbance. This trend mirrors a 33% drop in breeding Hen Harriers reported in the Republic of Ireland in 2022.

Nesting attempts in areas of the uplands of England	2022	2023	2024
Bowland	18	11	11
North Pennines	7	11	4
Northumberland	9	17	15
Peak District	5	0	0
Yorkshire Dales and Nidderdale	10	15	4
Total	49	54	34

Above: Total number of Hen Harrier nesting attempts in areas of the uplands in northern England 2022–2024. This data was sourced from [Natural England’s blog: Drop in number of nesting Hen Harriers in 2024](#) .

Hen Harrier survival

The impact of persecution on the survival of Hen Harriers in the UK has most recently been studied using data from satellite tagged birds. In 2019, a peer reviewed paper using Natural England satellite tag data ([Murgatroyd et al., 2019](#)) revealed that Hen Harriers were 10 times more likely to die or disappear within areas predominantly covered by grouse moor, citing persecution as the only feasible explanation.

Another scientific study, using RSPB satellite tag data, published in 2023, also highlighted low survival rates of Hen Harriers on land managed for grouse shooting ([Ewing et al., 2023](#)). The paper revealed that the median lifespan of Hen Harriers after tagging was 121 days – less than four months. The study also found that illegal persecution accounted for between 27–43% all mortality in first-year birds and 75% of sub-adult (1–2 years) mortality. In addition, analysis of the satellite tag data revealed that the mortality of Hen Harriers peaked around the shooting season and during breeding territory establishment.

Conservation initiatives

For many years, governments and conservation organisations have developed schemes to try to tackle the issue and impact of persecution and assist in the recovery of the Hen Harrier population in the UK.

Operation Artemis (2004)

When Operation Artemis was launched, it marked the first UK-wide initiative aimed at tackling wildlife crime—specifically, the relentless persecution of the Hen Harrier. In a coordinated UK-wide effort, police officers visited conservation organisations, upland Protected Landscape managers, and identified grouse moor owners, agents, and head gamekeepers. These meetings were not just about awareness—they were serious interventions. Officers outlined the severity of the problem, detailed the legislation protecting Hen Harriers, and made clear the potential consequences of breaking the law. They also extended a call for collaboration, urging those involved to work alongside Natural England and law enforcement to stop the killings.

Operation Artemis was the most transparent wildlife crime operation ever conducted in the UK. Yet, despite the opportunity for cooperation, not a single grouse moor owner chose to support the scheme and its wider aims.

Langholm Moor Demonstration Project (LMDP 2008–2017)

The Langholm Moor Demonstration Project (LMDP), which ran from 2008–2017, was a collaborative partnership between Buccleuch (formerly Buccleuch Estates), Scottish Natural Heritage, the RSPB, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and Natural England. The primary aim of the project was to restore Langholm Moor as a legally and sustainably managed driven grouse moor while achieving conservation goals, including habitat recovery and the protection of Hen Harriers. The project employed methods such as diversionary feeding, predator control, reduced grazing, and heather reseeded.

Over 10 years, the project successfully reversed heather loss, boosted bird populations, and maintained Hen Harrier numbers without illegal practices. Although grouse densities increased five-fold, and were at population levels considered by many to allow driven grouse shooting, this activity did not proceed.

The project highlighted that sustainable management could deliver ecological recovery without illegal raptor persecution.

It also underlined that modest shooting targets could co-exist with public environmental benefits. The findings of the LMDP offers a vital model for reforming grouse moor management toward more ecologically responsible practices and a shift away from unsustainable intensification.

Hen Harrier LIFE Project (2014–2019)

The Hen Harrier Life Project was funded by the European Union's LIFE Programme, and co-funded by Lush, Scottish and Southern Energy, National Heritage Lottery Fund and a range of small donors. Led by the RSPB in partnership with the Northern England Raptor Forum and the Scottish Raptor Study Group, the aim of the project was to assist in the population recovery of Hen Harriers, especially in areas where they were most threatened. The project focused on seven Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in southern and eastern Scotland and northern England. More than 100 satellite tags were fitted to Hen Harriers, enabling their movements and survival to be monitored. The project carried out a range of activities including protecting birds at nest and roost sites, tracking and investigating persecution using satellite tag data, advocating sustainable land management practices, and raising public awareness. The project has influenced several subsequent conservation efforts and helped to highlight the issue of persecution and the role that satellite tagging plays in exposing these crimes.

Partnership for Action Against Wildlife (PAW) Scotland Heads-up for Hen Harriers project (2015)

The Heads Up for Harriers project, led by Nature Scot, aimed to improve Hen Harrier conservation in Scotland by understanding and addressing nest failures. Through the monitoring of nests using trail cameras, survival and productivity was monitored. All findings of the project were [published in a report](#) in 2020, concluding that breeding

success was likely to be highest on estates with no game shooting interests, where the male parent bird is in adult plumage and there is an abundance of passerine prey. Small to medium birds were found to be the primary prey, with Meadow Pipits accounting for 77% of bird prey items.

Defra Hen Harrier Action Plan (2016)

In 2016, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) published the Joint Hen Harrier Action Plan, which set out six actions to increase Hen Harrier populations in England:

1. Monitoring of populations in England and the UK
2. Diversionary feeding
3. To work with the Raptor Persecution Priority Delivery Group to analyse monitoring information and build an intelligence picture.
4. Nest and winter roost protection
5. Southern reintroduction
6. Trialling a Brood Management Scheme

Whilst the first four of these actions gained support from all stakeholders, the trialling of a brood management scheme did not and was strongly opposed by some, including the RSPB.

Brood management involves removing eggs or chicks from some Hen Harrier nests on grouse moors, with the chicks reared in captivity and the fledged young returned to the wild.

The initial five-year trial was launched in 2018, being subsequently extended to the end of the 2024 breeding season. Between 2019 and 2023 (no broods were managed in 2018 or 2024) the trial saw the removal of broods from 15 Hen Harrier nests, with 58 fledged young subsequently released.

England's Hen Harrier breeding population increased substantially during the trial, to a peak of 54 breeding attempts in 2023, before a drop to 34 breeding attempts in 2024.

It appears clear that brood management has played a role in this increase, which is likely to be down to birds being either more likely to survive or to settle and breed. Significantly, however, the illegal killing of Hen Harriers also reached record levels during the trial.

The principle of brood management is that by controlling the density of nesting Hen Harriers on grouse moors, the predation pressure on

grouse will decrease. In turn, this will lead to an attitude change in grouse moor owners and managers who will become more tolerant of this magnificent bird of prey, and as a result the illegal killing of Hen Harriers should decrease. In 2023 alone, 34 Hen Harriers were confirmed or suspected to have been persecuted, the highest total on record. This is highly likely to be just the tip of iceberg, with many more birds being killed. Additionally, of the 58 brood managed young that were subsequently released into the wild, it is believed that a significant number have since been killed or disappeared under suspicious circumstances.

The RSPB has consistently maintained its opposition to brood management, believing that the only way to see meaningful Hen Harrier recovery is the ending of illegal persecution. Fundamentally, brood management is about forcing Hen Harriers to fit in with driven grouse shooting, rather than the other way round, and often involves the management of nesting birds within Special Protection Areas (SPAs) that have been specifically designated for their protection.

Natural England have now released the initial results and conclusions of their review, though only the BTO population modelling report has been published to date. The findings show that, despite a rise in nesting Hen Harriers, the illegal killing of the birds has continued, reinforcing the RSPB's view that brood management should have no place in the future of Hen Harrier conservation.

In addition, Natural England also shared an update concluding that they would not approve a recent licence application. Although this is welcomed and promising news, the long-term future of brood management remains unclear. Natural England states that decisions on whether to issue future licences for Hen Harrier brood management will be based on evidence collected by the review.

Hen Harrier Task Force – National Wildlife Crime Unit (2024)

Launched in 2024 by the UK NWCU, the task force was set up to tackle Hen Harrier persecution with a particular focus on grouse moors in northern England. Supported by seven police forces, the task force aims to detect, deter and disrupt these types of wildlife crimes to give better protection to Hen Harriers through greater community engagement, focussed enforcement efforts and partnership working.

A time for change

The continued illegal killing of Hen Harriers in the UK is a serious issue that must be urgently addressed. Decades of evidence has shown that voluntary self-regulation by the shooting industry has failed to stop these crimes, making it imperative for governments to intervene and implement effective measures. With these crimes on the rise, the need for decisive legislative change is urgent.

In 2021, the UK Government commissioned the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to assess its approach to tackling wildlife crime. A key recommendation from their assessment was the regulation of gamebird shooting through a licensing system. So far, this recommendation has not been progressed in Westminster.

Last year the Scottish Government took this progressive step, introducing licensing for grouse shooting under the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Act 2024. Now, in Scotland all grouse shooting must be licensed. If evidence suggests a bird of prey has been persecuted, based on a civil as opposed to criminal burden of proof, the licence to shoot grouse can be revoked.

Although it is still early days in its introduction, this licensing system has already fostered more constructive engagement between many shooting estates and conservation bodies. This proportionate approach respects the rights of those in the grouse shooting industry who adhere to good practice, penalising only those deliberately committing these crimes.

**Katie-jo Luxton,
RSPB Global Conservation Director:**

“Some parties call for a ban on the whole activity of grouse shooting for sport and whilst we can see the attraction of what might sound like a simple fix for this long overdue problem, the RSPB is concerned this could further polarise views in rural communities.

We are therefore making the case for robust licensing as our first port of call to solve this problem, enabling law abiding shoots to operate successfully whilst clamping down on those linked to illegal practices. Using the learning from Scotland we think plans for licensing in England could be brought forward rapidly, to stop the persecution of Hen Harriers and protect our vital uplands.”



A Hen Harrier quartering above the moor searching for prey.

How you can help

Protecting Hen Harriers requires collective action — from policymakers, land managers, conservationists, and the public. While enforcement agencies and NGOs play a crucial role, your support can directly influence the future of this vulnerable species.

Take action: call for stronger regulation of grouse shooting

Current protective legislation is failing to prevent the illegal persecution of Hen Harriers across the UK. The RSPB is calling for the introduction of a robust licensing system for grouse moor management to be introduced across the UK to put an end to the illegal killing of this rare and vulnerable species.

Add your voice to the growing call for reform by supporting our e-action campaign. Together, we can push for change that ensures upland landscapes work for both wildlife and people.

Take action now, visit: rspb.org.uk/no-moor-crime

Or, scan the QR code:



Report a crime

If you witness or suspect a crime against any bird of prey, please report it. Your information could help bring offenders to justice and prevent future crimes. Visit the RSPB's report a crime webpage to find out more. rspb.org.uk/reportcrimes



C. Dickinson

Links and further reading

Birdcrime 2023: a 15-year summary of illegal killing of birds of prey the UK, and links to previous Birdcrime reports 2018–2022 rspb.org.uk/birdcrime

RSPB Investigations – How to report crimes against wild birds rspb.org.uk/report-crimes

Hen Harrier Map Hub rspbeu.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/8377efb6ca064cfa91750b263af1f2f

Raptor persecution Map Hub arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/0f04dd3b78e544d9a6175b7435ba0f8c

Natural England Hen Harrier tracking update gov.uk/government/publications/hen-harriers-tracking-programme-update/hen-harrier-tracking-update

Raptor Persecution UK – raptorpersecutionuk.org

Hen Harrier Action – wildlife charity – henharrierday.uk

Ewing et al, (2023). Illegal killing associated with gamebird management accounts for up to three-quarters of annual mortality in Hen Harriers *Circus cyaneus*, ScienceDirect sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320723001738

Murgatroyd et al, (2019). Patterns of satellite tagged hen harrier disappearances suggest widespread illegal killing on British grouse moors | Nature Communications nature.com/articles/s41467-019-09044-w

Kelly et al., (2025) The status of breeding Hen Harriers *Circus cyaneus* in the UK and Isle of Man in 2023, Bird Study tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00063657.2024.2446373

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC): Wildlife and Forest Crime Analytic Toolkit Report (2021) unodc.org/documents/Wildlife/UK_Toolkit_Report.pdf

A Conservation Framework for Hen Harriers in the United Kingdom - JNCC Report No. 441 (2011) data.jncc.gov.uk/data/0708d38a-099c-45e8-9e96-73647cab3a97/JNCC-Report-441-FINAL-WEB.pdf

Hen Harrier Birdfacts (British Trust for Ornithology) bto.org/understanding-birds/birdfacts/hen-harrier

Hen Harrier LIFE Project – RSPB (2014–2019) rspb.org.uk/helping-nature/what-we-do/protecting-species-and-habitats/projects/life-and-hen-harriers

Killing the Skydancer, Guardian Podcast (2023) theguardian.com/environment/audio/2023/aug/15/killing-the-skydancer-episode-one-susies-chicks

Man denies trying to kill hen harrier on North Yorkshire moorland – BBC News (2025) bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y6drd9r6lo

Channel 4 News feature (2024): Secret filming uncovers the illegal killings of rare birds in England www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKVU6gO7dJA

Channel 4 News feature (2023). RSPB: Two-thirds of confirmed illegal killings of birds of prey last year linked to shooting estates youtube.com/watch?v=QH3baLKAKAw

Perthshire estate sanctioned after "clear evidence" of wildlife crime - BBC News (2022) bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-tayside-central-60128161

Hen harrier goes "missing" from a Peak District grouse moor – police confirm his satellite tag had been deliberately cut off – Raptor Persecution UK (2021) raptorpersecutionuk.org/2023/03/17/hen-harrier-goes-missing-from-a-peak-district-grouse-moor-police-confirm-his-satellite-tag-had-been-deliberately-cut-off/

Hen Harrier Suffers Savage Brutality – Chris Packham YouTube Channel (2019) youtube.com/watch?v=Q6NISg9pkYw

Alleged illegal killing of a protected Hen Harrier – RSPB via Rare Bird Alert UK (2017) rarebirdalert.co.uk/v2/Content/RSPB-Alleged-illegal-killing-of-a-protected-Hen-Harrier.aspx?s_id=562457172

"Armed man used hen harrier decoy" on National Trust land – BBC News (2016) bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-36141199

Former gamekeeper fined for aiming gun at protected bird. Wildlife Guardian (2006) wildlifeguardian.co.uk/news/shooting/former-gamekeeper-fined-aiming-gun-protected-bird/

Keeper fined over rare bird death (2001) BBC News, UK news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1352092.stm

Relief as Natural England decides not to approve Hen Harrier brood management licence – RSPB (2025) rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/hen-harrier-brood-management-licence-update

Conclusion of Hen Harrier Brood Management Trial (updated) – Natural England blog (2025) naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2025/04/14/conclusion-of-hen-harrier-brood-management-trial/

Eagles and other rare wildlife to benefit from landmark legislation in Scotland. Could England follow suit? – RSPB (2024) rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/wildlife-to-benefit-from-legislation

Drop in numbers of nesting hen harriers in 2024 – Natural England (2024) naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2024/09/16/drop-in-numbers-of-nesting-hen-harriers-in-2024/

The death of Free, a Natural England tagged hen harrier – Natural England (2023) naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2023/05/05/the-death-of-free-a-natural-england-tagged-hen-harrier/

The death of Asta, a Natural England-tagged hen harrier – Natural England (2022) naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2022/09/22/the-death-of-asta-a-natural-england-tagged-hen-harrier/

Study suggesting widespread illegal killing of hen harriers on English grouse moors published - GOV.UK (2019) gov.uk/government/news/study-suggesting-widespread-illegal-killing-of-hen-harriers-on-english-grouse-moors-published

Although Hen Harriers are among the rarest birds in the UK and are afforded the highest level of legal protection, they continue to be illegally killed in significant numbers across the UK's uplands.

Between 2020 and 2024, there have been 102 confirmed or suspected cases of Hen Harrier persecution in the UK. Incident data reveals that most of these crimes occur on or near land managed for grouse shooting.

Scientific studies have consistently shown that persecution is the main factor preventing the recovery of Hen Harriers across the UK, with the impact most pronounced in northern England, where an increase in Hen Harrier persecution has been recorded in recent years.

Stronger regulation of the grouse shooting industry is urgently needed to tackle these crimes effectively and to ensure the future safety and recovery of this vulnerable, red-listed species.



Stay connected

Keep up to date with the latest thinking, news, events, and information from the RSPB in your local community.



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