

BLACK GROUSE *Tetrao tetrix* SPECIES ACTION PLAN

DESCRIPTION

In the Yorkshire Dales, black grouse require a mosaic of habitats along the moorland fringe including heather moorland, meadows, pastures and woodland edge. The male black grouse, known as blackcock, are almost entirely black but with white undertail feathers and the female, the greyhen, is a mottled orange-brown.

Males gather at traditional display sites or leks throughout the year, with a peak of activity during the spring usually around dawn. At these leks, the males spread out their lyre-shaped tail feathers and inflate their necks to make a loud bubbling call that can be heard up to two kilometres away. This display attracts females that visit the leks to mate, usually with a dominant male, before dispersing into the surrounding area to raise the young on their own.

LOCAL BIODIVERSITY IMPORTANCE

Black grouse populations have undergone a dramatic decline in numbers and range within the last 30 years. Nationally the population declined by 75% between 1986 and 1996 at an average rate of 12% per year. The national population of black grouse in 1995-96 was estimated at approximately 6,500 lekking males. The majority of these are found in Scotland although there are an estimated 800 males in northern England and 150 males in Wales. With the majority of the English population restricted to the North Pennines, the black grouse found within the Yorkshire Dales National Park are now at the southern edge of their English range.

The black grouse was once a widespread species, occurring across the whole of the National Park wherever there was suitable habitat along the moorland edge. Young conifer plantations also created habitats for black grouse although their suitability was only temporary. Widespread declines in both numbers and distribution has occurred since the mid-1970s. Recent survey work in 2002 located a minimum number of 78 displaying or lekking males in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, an increase from 47 located in 2000. The largest increases occurred at sites where specific habitat improvements and associated predator control had been implemented.

NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL BIODIVERSITY IMPORTANCE

The black grouse is protected under the Game Acts (close season: 11 December–19 Aug), Annex II/2 of the EC Habitats Directive and Appendix III of the Berne Convention. This species is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Species. Black grouse are on the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern.

CURRENT ISSUES, OPPORTUNITIES & THREATS

The main factor in the decline of black grouse is likely to have been inappropriate levels of grazing due to increased numbers of sheep in the uplands. This overgrazing has led to the loss of key food plants such as bilberry, heather and birch scrub and has also reduced the number of invertebrate prey items required by the chicks. Overgrazing and drainage of mires both destroy cotton grass, which is an important food source for black grouse

especially in the spring, and adversely affects the number of invertebrates resulting in the loss of suitable chick rearing habitats.

In the Yorkshire Dales, hay meadows provide important winter feeding areas for black grouse. The loss and decline of species rich hay meadows along the moorland edge reduces the availability of key food plants and a vital winter seed source. The relative lack of suitable scrub woodland in the

Yorkshire Dales, the preferred winter feeding habitat in other parts of the country, underlines the importance of hay meadows along the moorland fringe.

Predation may be limiting population growth in some areas of the country. Nationally crows and foxes have been identified as the main predators although research by the Game Conservancy Trust in the North Pennines indicates that locally stoats and possibly peregrines can be the main predators although it is not known whether this is the case in the Yorkshire Dales.

It is essential to ensure that there is no further decline in the population of black grouse in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Further fragmentation could lead to populations becoming too small and widely scattered to be viable.

Other threats to black grouse may include over-burning of moorlands resulting in the loss of key food plants. Recent indications are that collisions with fences and power lines may cause locally significant black grouse mortality.

Unsustainable levels of shooting may have, in the past, contributed to the decline of black grouse in some areas of the UK and possibly in the National Park. Within the National Park the majority, if not all, of the shooting estates have imposed a voluntary ban on the shooting of black grouse with many carrying out additional habitat management work. There are two shooting related issues that remain unquantified: (i) the accidental shooting of black grouse during red grouse, pheasant and partridge shoots and (ii) some small syndicates may still be targeting this species.

In northern England, The North Pennines Black Grouse Project was set up in 1997 to monitor and undertake research on black grouse populations in the north of England and to provide management advice to landowners and managers specifically for black grouse.

There are incentives for land managers to reduce grazing levels and to undertake a variety of management works available through agri-environmental schemes such as Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme and English Nature's Wildlife Enhancement Scheme. Monitoring work by the North Pennines Black Grouse Project has shown that management prescriptions available under these various schemes may contribute towards increased black grouse populations. Woodland Grant Schemes are administered by the Forestry Commission and are available for the planting and management of woodland. It is essential that all the appropriate habitats within black grouse areas are in positive conservation management including blanket bog, moorland, meadows, pastures and woodland.

In 2000 the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority mapped the core black grouse sites within the Park and determined the percentage of land within these areas that was in agri-

environment schemes. This process has identified two core black grouse zones within the National Park, of which, the 'northern' zone has 37% of the area covered by agri-environment schemes whilst the 'southern' zone has 50% of the area covered by agri-environment schemes. The majority of the black grouse are present in the 'northern' zone and occupy land that is owned or managed by a small number of estates and/or individual landowners.

There is a National BAP Working Group to advise and co-ordinate black grouse conservation in the UK. As the bulk of the UK black grouse population is in Scotland, there are a number of management and policy issues that are not directly related to conservation work in northern England. To resolve this, an English Black Grouse BAP Working Group has been established to examine the issues in an English context and to report these to, as well as receive recommendations from the UK Steering Group. It is essential that there is continued representation from an organisation, currently the YDNPA, on the English BAP Group so that issues relating to the Dales can be raised. It is equally important to ensure that any future changes in policy and/or management best practice can be received from the UK Group and disseminated to organisations and individuals that are involved in black grouse conservation within the National Park.

AIMS OF THE SPECIES ACTION PLAN

- To ensure that there is no further decline in the distribution and status of black grouse in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.
- To increase in the long term (20 years) the population and distribution of black grouse in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

OBJECTIVES

To achieve these aims we need to:

- Continue annual monitoring of black grouse populations in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.
- Promote appropriate habitat and conservation management within the core black grouse areas in the Yorkshire Dales National Park by 2010. This should include appropriate management of blanket bog, moorland, rough allotments, hay meadows, pastures and gill woodland habitats. Specific prescriptions or management recommendations will need to be updated in the light of any new policy or research findings.
- Promote appropriate habitat and conservation management in suitable black grouse areas outside the current core areas by 2020.

ACTIONS & TARGETS

To achieve these objectives the following actions should be carried out and the targets achieved within the time-scale given:

Actions	Target date	3 year cost £
Devise and implement a monitoring programme for black grouse populations in the Yorkshire Dales National Park	2002	Officer Time
Where appropriate, encourage landowners and managers, through the use of advice and management grants, to implement black grouse management into existing and new agri-environment schemes within the core black grouse areas. At least 60% of land in the northern core zone should be under appropriate agri-environment scheme management by 2007 and should represent the full range of habitats required by black grouse.	2007	Agri-environment Scheme Funding
Safeguard core black grouse habitat from inappropriate development through the planning process.	Ongoing	Officer Time
Encourage through the use of management grants and advice, appropriate species mix, planting density and positioning of fencing in all woodland management agreements and forest design plans in the core black grouse areas.	Ongoing	Existing Woodland Grant Schemes
Where appropriate, promote black grouse conservation to a wide range of audiences.	Ongoing	Officer Time
Ensure that there is continued representation (currently the YDNPA) from an organisation(s) involved with black grouse conservation in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.	Ongoing	Officer Time
Ensure that any developments in best practice for black grouse conservation are disseminated to the appropriate individuals and organisations.	Ongoing	No additional cost

WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ACTION PLAN?

Lead Agency	Key Partners
North Pennines Black Grouse Project/ Game Conservancy Trust	DEFRA/RDS Landowners and managers Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority English Nature Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Moorland Association Moorland Gamekeepers Association