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Conservation research – upland birds

Large areas of the English uplands are designated under the EU Birds Directive as Special Protection Areas. The areas are selected on the basis that they contain a large proportion of important UK and European species. In England by far and away the biggest such area is the North Pennines (Figure 1). Most of this area is managed as grouse moor (dark mauve in the figure). 67 out of the 73 properties on the area shoot grouse and they employ some 149 gamekeepers.



Figure 1 North Pennines SPA. Area managed as grouse moor (dark mauve), other moorland including two nature reserves (light mauve).

While considerable effort goes into managing the habitat on these moors (heather burning and bracken control mostly), the gamekeepers are rigorous in their control of foxes, crows and stoats.

To test the significance of this predator control by game keepers we have just completed an eight year field experiment comparing study areas with and without predator control on some Ministry of Defence land near Otterburn. Our results, to be published later this year, clearly demonstrate

that where there is predator control some of these birds are on average three times as likely to rear young as on the areas without predator control (Figure 2).

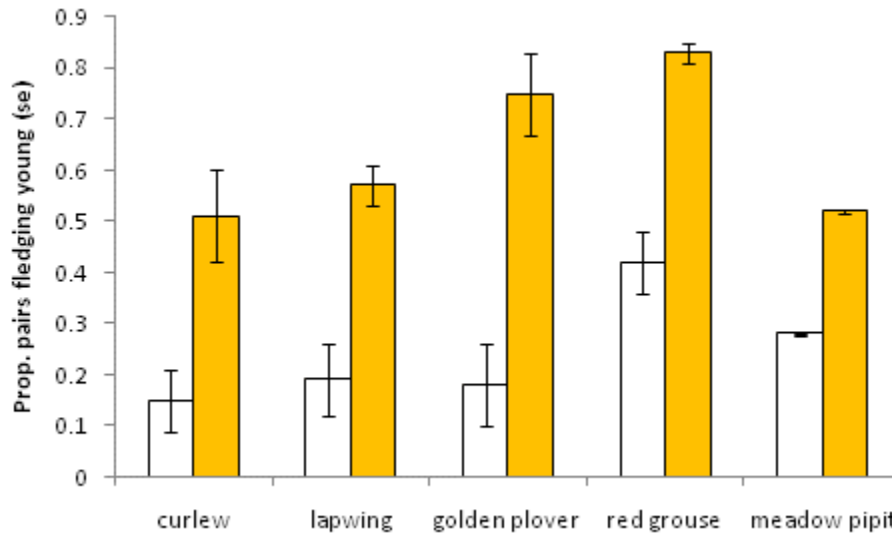


Figure 2. Breeding success of some ground nesting birds on experimental areas with (yellow) and without (white) predator control. Data from Fletcher, Jones & Baines – unpublished.

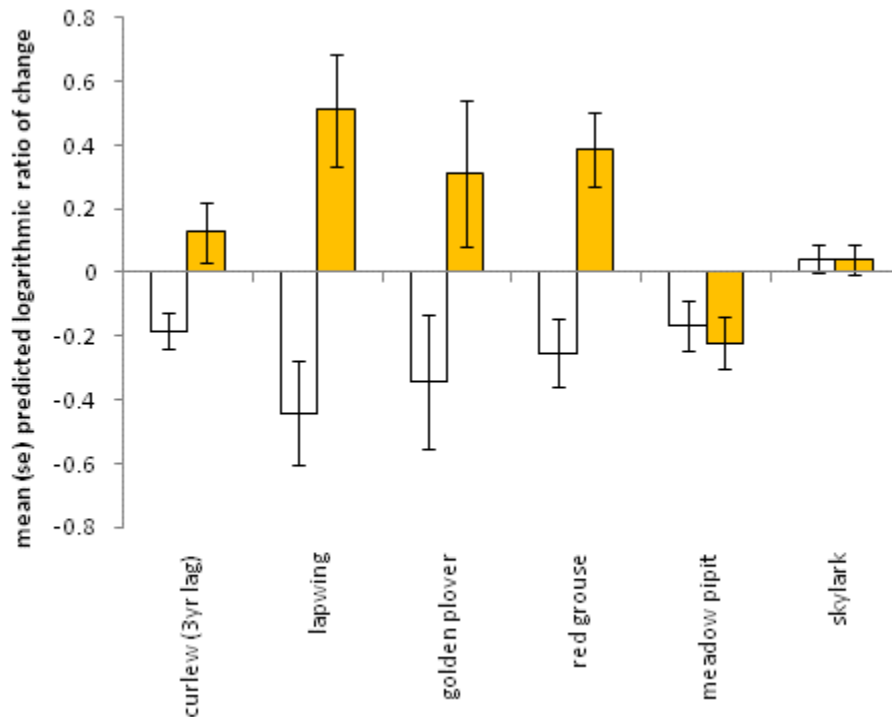


Figure 3. Average year to year changes in breeding numbers of birds on areas where predators were controlled (yellow) and where they were not (white). Data from Fletcher, Jones & Baines – unpublished.

These differences in breeding success will affect breeding numbers in later years. In the course of the experiment population changes for most species were positive where there was predator control, but negative where there was not (Figure 3).

The implication from this work is that the success of SPAs like the North Pennines actually depends on the work of the gamekeepers on the grouse moors, and not on any habitat conditions that may be stipulated and agreed by landowners with Natural England.

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