

Gamekeepers: conservation and wildlife

Executive summary

The
NATIONAL
GAMEKEEPERS'
Organisation

Keeping the Balance™



Game & Wildlife
CONSERVATION TRUST

Executive summary

Those surveyed manage more than
1,625,000

hectares of land across England, Scotland and Wales which is about 65% of the area covered by the terrestrial protected areas.*

Provision of cover crops – supporting wildlife

90% of lowland gamekeepers plant game cover crops which has huge benefits for other wildlife.

81% of lowland shoots plant game cover that is not in a stewardship programme and **57%** of lowland shoots surveyed plant wild bird cover that was not in a stewardship scheme. These figures all show an increase since a similar conservation survey undertaken in 2011.*

Helping farmland birds

98% of gamekeepers provide supplementary food, providing grain for farmland birds during early spring known as the 'hungry gap'. **23,426 tonnes** of supplementary food were supplied by respondents during the shooting season, with **4,309 tonnes** provided after the shooting season where there are fewer gamebirds on the ground.

Managing our uplands – rewetting

17% of those surveyed manage heather moorland, with over four-fifths of those reporting some form of heather canopy management. Many gamekeepers are 'rewetting' moorland to counteract post-war drainage for grazing and other purposes. Within this survey, **over a third of those with heather moorland undertook moorland rewetting in the last five years.**

Tree planting and woodland management

Woodland planting and management are common on shoots with

71% of respondents planting trees in the last 10 years, with **47.3ha (± 11.4)** planted on average. Of the 680 shoots that planted trees, **45%** reported shooting as a reason, a quarter reported conservation and nearly a fifth commercial forestry. Almost 30% of the respondents gave other reasons that did not fit into one of the categories – for example amenity, climate change, landscape etc.

*The total area surveyed was 1,625,216 hectares (ha), with 36 (3.8%) of respondents not specifying the area that they managed. To put this area into context, it is roughly 65% of the area covered by the terrestrial protected areas of England, Scotland and Wales as at 31 May 2019 (SSSI, MCZ, NCMPA, NNR, Ramsar, SAC and SPA site designations – a total of 2,489,000ha, Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) 2019 www.jncc.gov.uk/our-work/uk-biodiversity-indicators-2019/).





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Foreword

by Liam Bell, Chairman, National Gamekeepers' Organisation and Alex Hogg, Chairman, Scottish Gamekeepers Association

Gamekeepers are bastions of our countryside. Their management of huge swathes of our natural environment by establishing and maintaining habitats, delivers great benefits for our songbirds, woodland plants, moorland wildlife and butterfly species. Sustainable shooting provides the incentive.

Research over the years has identified some of the effects – both positive and negative – of this activity, with properly conducted game management achieving a net positive impact on the environment.

The National Gamekeepers' Organisation, the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) and the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) came together in 2019 to find out exactly what happens on the land managed by keepers.

This new report is a representative sample of the work carried out by gamekeepers across the UK and shows the sheer volume of conservation work that is undertaken. The investment in these habitats and the area of land managed by keepers is eye-opening to those who are unaware of their impact.

The joint projects involving gamekeepers, conservation charities and wildlife bodies highlighted in the report show how working together can make a real difference to our most precious habitats and species by increasing numbers of curlew and other red-listed birds, and keeping our woodland fauna at sustainable levels.

Gamekeepers add a richness to our countryside. They simply live and breathe the areas they look after and should be lauded for truly understanding the fine balance needed when juggling the management demands placed on our delicate countryside.

Report highlights

1,625,216 hectares surveyed

60.3% of gamekeepers are in an environmental stewardship scheme

Over a third have environmental designations on land they manage

1 ha the average area of wild bird cover planted for songbirds not in a Stewardship agreement



98% carry on providing supplementary food through the hungry gap after the shooting season

23,426 tonnes of supplementary food are provided during the shooting season across the survey area

4,309 tonnes of supplementary food are provided after the season across the survey area

59 feeders per shoot

95.9% of gamekeepers manage their woodland

192,051 hectares of woodland are managed across the survey area

71% of gamekeepers have planted trees since the last conservation survey in 2011, with a quarter citing conservation as the reason for planting

45% reported shooting as a reason for planting trees



37.6% of gamekeepers managing moorland have undertaken rewetting in the last five years

90% report blocking grips as the method by which they are rewetting the moorland



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Balancing woodland and deer

Chris Rogers is the estate deer manager at Euston Estate, near Thetford.

Chris Rogers has been a full-time deer stalker/keeper since 2001 and trained at Sparsholt College. Based in East Anglia, he has been on the Euston Estate near Thetford for the last 14 years.

The Thetford area contains some of the highest deer densities in the country. Red, fallow, roe and muntjac are all present in the Breckland. The major impact that deer have in the area is damage to woodland habitat and commercial forestry.

The team at Euston work closely with Natural England who survey the deer impacts in the SSSI woodland every few years. The team has established a number of enclosure areas that exclude deer, as a quick and easy way to monitor the impacts that deer have in woodland.

The largest block of woodland was a traditional hazel coppice where the practice of coppicing has been re-started. **It provides nesting habitat for woodland birds and small mammals, in addition to providing traditional materials for roof thatching.**

Chris and his team face a tricky balancing act as the deer have an aesthetic as well as a commercial value to the estate, while trying to limit the impact they have on the ground. Despite the high deer numbers, they are an asset and are an essential part of the wildlife mix.



Moorland and tree regeneration

Mark Wood is head gamekeeper at Pitcarmick Estate, Perthshire

Pitcarmick's main sporting offering is stalking and fishing. Mark operates as a single-handed keeper, with some part-time assistance as required and management is now taking place to restore an area of moor for red grouse. **The estate carries SPA and SSSI designations for hen harrier, merlin and black grouse.** "We do lek counts every year and we now have 80 lekking males," says Mark. **"The estate has oak plantations and promotes native tree regeneration** but the black game are actually on the open hill, you barely see them in the regeneration."

Work to revive the moor has focused around targeted heather burning to break up continuous rank heather and predator control (mainly foxes and crows). **Mark manages the deer population and sheep are treated regularly as part of tick management,** with Louping Ill virus being an issue on the estate.

Since the moorland recovery work began, **curlew numbers have risen from one pair to four pairs.** "It is good to see the curlew and, on the estate, you used to see maybe two or three lapwing. **Now, we are starting to get flocks of 20-30.**" Although initially there were two young red grouse per covey, 3.5 to four young is now more usual as the work gradually begins to bears fruit.

In recent years, a harrier nest fell prey to raven predation but there are hopes that, if they can ascertain how Louping Ill virus is affecting the bottom of the food chain, harrier recovery can begin.



Helping threatened curlew in Yorkshire

Ian Sleightholm is head keeper at Bolton Castle Estate in Wensleydale, North Yorkshire.

Ian and his underkeeper Daniel Place, work with the estate team, comprising Tom Orde-Powlett the son of Lord and Lady Bolton, to ensure that curlew thrive on their estate. **Conservation efforts have been hugely successful and by providing a safe haven for curlew, numbers have soared by up to 1,000 overwintering birds.**

Ian, said: **"Helping curlew is our number one conservation task on the estate.** We have studied curlew closely on our managed moorland areas and estimate that we have 170-220 pairs of breeding curlews.

"We work with a range of partners including the RSPB, colour-ringing adults and chicks to keep track of them, the furthest afield being Roscarbery in County Cork. We have also been working on a trial with the **British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)** which included nest monitoring and developing a new method of surveying called 'Trapline Surveys'. This is showing really positive results and helps to identify areas where our curlew conservation practices are working."

Bolton Castle was singled out for the BTO study because it was already carrying out extensive conservation work for curlews. **Ian and his team also work with Natural England on hen harrier brood management, monitoring merlin numbers for the BTO and a forthcoming extensive programme of grip-blocking to help re-wet the moors.**



Collective effort for grey partridges

Will Pratt is gamekeeper at the Calmsden Manor Estate near Cirencester.

Will Pratt joined the Calmsden Manor Estate in 2014, six years after it won its first GWCT award for grey partridge conservation. **In five years, he has overseen the grey partridge spring pair count increase from seven pairs in 2014 to 53 pairs in 2019.** In 2018, Calmsden became the first ever double winner of the GWCT Cotswold Grey Partridge Trophy.

For the estate owners, Mark and Jane Tufnell, the project's success has been achieved by a collective effort across a range of estate departments. A comprehensive predator control program works alongside the **Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) options that were completely redesigned to provide maximum benefit for wildlife. Interlinking wildlife corridors across the estate were used to break up blocks of arable crops.** Supplementary feeding is also used throughout the year, helping to maintain a broad range of farmland bird species.

The grey partridge counts are submitted to the GWCT's Partridge Count Scheme that has more than 75 years' worth of data charting the fortunes of this much-loved bird and can monitor the progress of each individual site.

Wild game management is a roller coaster of emotion and the spring and autumn counts are eagerly awaited and dreaded with equal measure. The most rewarding feeling for the team is a progressive spring count followed by a good young-to-hen average after harvest.

