

Grey Partridge Newsletter



MARCH 2022 | ISSUE 36 | THE GWCT SPRING UPDATE




INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 2022 Spring Partridge Count Newsletter. We are starting to feel that “spring is in the air”, with farmers getting on with spring farming chores and grey partridges starting to look for mates and setting up territories. I hope you all have had a go at counting your farmland birds, not just partridges, in the GWCT’s Big Farmland Bird Count, and are warmed up for the partridge pair count. In the middle of this newsletter, you will find the summary of the Autumn 2021 counts. In general, grey partridge chicks fared better in Scotland and parts of Northern England and worse in southeast England.

Please find information below on updates to the General Licences from Roger Draycott, GWCT’s Director of Advisory. On page 3, in a linked survey, we ask for the opinions of farmers with lots of brown hares. We want to learn

about their motivations and methods of managing hare numbers. Please let us know what you think. On the back page, Francis Buner reports on Wildlife Plots developed on Rotherfield during the NSR PARTRIDGE project, Defra endorsement for the plots and the chick-food insects they provide. There is a summary of recent Grey Partridge trophies on the back page – recognition of the hard conservation work done in support of grey partridges by those on the ground, turning words into birds.

Early reports of good numbers of grey partridges on areas with high levels of habitat provision give some hope of high overwinter survival resulting in more pairs. Good luck with your counts, we look forward to seeing your results. 


– Julie Ewald, *Head of GIS
Managing the GWCT’s Sussex Study*

DEFRA PUBLISHES UPDATED GENERAL LICENCES FOR WILD BIRD CONTROL IN ENGLAND

Defra has published updated General Licences for wild bird control in England effective from 1 January 2022 until 31 December 2023.

The licences GL40, GL41 and GL42 are very similar to the 2021 licences with only very minor, but helpful, changes.

GWCT’s Director of Advisory Roger Draycott welcomed the opportunity from Defra to provide feedback on draft licences late last year and noted that reissuing

licences for two years provides stability and clarity for licence users. He advises that it is essential for all land managers who operate under the licences, controlling birds to protect crops, livestock and wildlife, to be familiar with all the licence conditions, operating recommendations and any additional requirements or restrictions for their use on or near protected sites. He recommends that all licence users download copies of the relevant licences and read them carefully. GWCT offer a half-day course in best-practice corvid control which covers all relevant General Licence issues. For further details contact lherring@gwct.org.uk. 



Game & Wildlife
CONSERVATION TRUST
Partridge Count Scheme

gwct.org.uk/pcs

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

PAGE 1 – INTRODUCTION;
DEFRA PUBLISHES UPDATED
GENERAL LICENCES FOR WILD
BIRD CONTROL IN ENGLAND

PAGE 2 – PARTICIPATION;
SUMMER BREEDING SUCCESS
AND PRODUCTIVITY;
AUTUMN ABUNDANCE

PAGE 3 – HELP GWCT’S POLICY
TEAM PROVIDE INFORMATION TO
DEFRA ON BROWN HARE

PAGE 4 – REGIONAL NEWS;
WILDLIFE PLOTS, A NEW DEFRA-
ENDORSED HABITAT MEASURE

COURSES



BASIS CERTIFICATE IN GAME MANAGEMENT - LOWLAND

THURSDAY TO SATURDAY,
10-12 MAY 09:00
ALLERTON PROJECT, LEICESTER

PREDATION CONTROL LAW & BEST PRACTICE

DATES AND VENUES TBC

FOR MORE DETAILS
Contact our Advisory Service
on 01425 651013 or go to
www.gwct.org.uk/events




PARTICIPATION

Last spring saw an encouraging increase in the number of grey partridge pairs and their density recorded in the Partridge Count Scheme (PCS). While unusually dry weather prevailed for many in spring and early summer, these conditions did not continue throughout the summer for most PCS members. The second half of June, coinciding with peak chick hatch, witnessed some very cool and showery days across England, with some heavy downpours especially in the south-east.

This formed a north-west/south-east split across the country. In July, Storm Evert brought further heavy rain and strong winds to the south. August barely redeemed itself, with generally cooler dull conditions, especially for the south and east. As you will see, this weather had consequences for chick survival.

The PCS received 429 autumn counts by the time of going to press (see Table 1). This is a decline of 16% on the number returned in autumn of 2020, although the greatest proportion of this decline was from northern England. The area counted

overall declined by 18%, from 167,050 ha in 2020 to 137,020 ha, while the average area of each count decreased from 345 ha to 323 ha per site (-5%).

It is worth pointing out that it is important that farms of all sizes are represented in the PCS. Please do not think that the PCS is only for larger farms. Regardless of the size of your farm, we really encourage you to get involved in the spring count and tell us what you do for grey partridge conservation. After all – **'Every One Counts'**. 

SUMMER BREEDING SUCCESS AND PRODUCTIVITY

In total nearly 16,900 grey partridges (old and young birds) were counted. This equates to a drop of 9,400 birds (-36%) compared to autumn 2020, underlining the problems with chick survival in challenging conditions.

In the comments section on the returned 2021 autumn count forms, there were noticeably more reports of younger and late or second broods than expected in a typical year, and younger birds of second broods was something we too saw during our counts on the Sussex study area.

The young-to-old ratio (YtO), an easy way to measure breeding success, declined nationally by 12% from 2.6 in 2020 to 2.3 young birds for every adult. Despite this decline, 2.3 is the five-year average for YtO across the PCS. Nationwide, YtO remained above the threshold level of 1.6 that is needed to cover adult annual losses. It is at the regional level that differences emerged,

with declines in chick survival seen in eastern and southern England.

Three-quarters of counties exceeded the 1.6 YtO threshold (where there were sufficient numbers to calculate YtO), and 10% of counties achieved double that. While some counties in western and northern areas have few participating sites there does appear to be a regional trend of higher YtO in the northern half of the UK, suggesting an effect of the summer's weather on productivity, with more benign conditions in Scotland.

AUTUMN ABUNDANCE

Nationally, autumn bird density decreased 4% from an average of 19.9 to 19.2 birds per 100 ha. Most regions saw density increases, but eastern and especially northern England recorded declines in density, and it is their large contribution to the PCS that brought the national average down.

Although summer 2021 disappointed many, it could have been worse without the

second broods that are the result of grey partridge pairs' strong biological urge to produce young. The decrease in numbers should only be a 'stumble'. Nonetheless, the lack of small, slow-moving, soft-bodied insects that provide food for grey partridge chicks remains a major obstacle to grey partridge recovery. We need to create the habitats necessary for these insects before there will be substantial improvement in grey partridge autumn densities.


Climate change is likely to make summer downpours or possibly extended periods of rainfall a more likely occurrence. To address this, the structure of chick-food habitat needs not only to allow space for chicks to forage but also offer effective dry shelter. It is important that young broods in their first few weeks of life, when they are too large to be brooded by their parents but still vulnerable to cold and wet, have cover from inclement conditions. The Wildlife Plots described in the article on the back page offer a way forward. 

Table 1

Autumn densities and Young-to-Old ratios of grey partridges in 2020 and 2021, from contributors to the PCS.

Region	Number of sites		Young-to-Old ratio		Autumn density (birds per 100 ha)		Percentage change between years
	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021	Change %
Southern	91	87	2.5	2.1	11.9	20.1	69%
Eastern	146	125	2.4	1.9	19.7	18.1	-9%
Midlands	85	70	2.1	3.0	14.2	21.9	54%
Wales	2	2	1.5	2.3	7.3	11.9	63%*
Northern	118	76	3.0	3.1	34.3	22.7	-34%
Scotland	70	69	2.9	3.0	14.0	13.8	1%
N. Ireland	0	0	-	-	-	-	-
Overall	512	429	2.6	2.3	19.9	19.2	-3.5%

* Small sample size.

The number of sites includes all those that returned information, including zero counts. The Young-to-Old ratio is calculated from sites where at least one adult grey partridge was counted. The autumn density was calculated from sites that reported the area counted.

TO GET THE MOST FROM YOUR SPRING COUNT

- Wait until winter coveys have split and formed breeding pairs before attempting your count
- Count while crop growth is low to maximise observations
- Count in the few hours after dawn or before sunset when partridges are active and feeding out of cover
- Use a 4WD vehicle to increase coverage and act as a mobile hide
- Before returning the PCS count form, please read the instructions and complete it thoroughly

HELP YOUR WILD PARTRIDGES

Use our guides and fact sheets
gwct.org.uk/pcdownloads

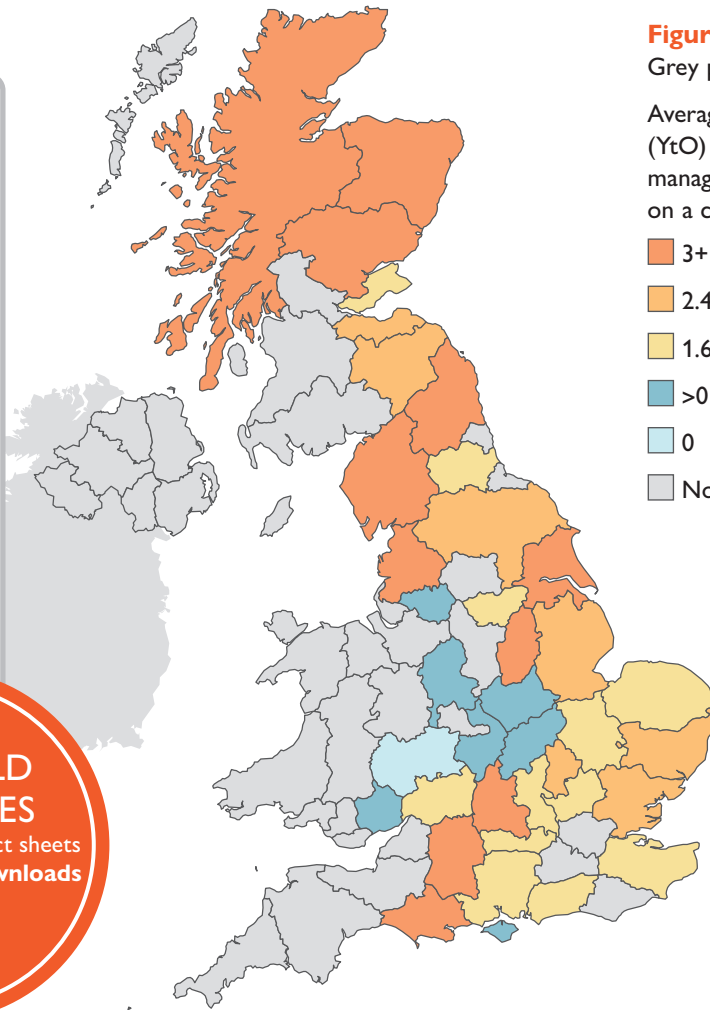


Figure 1

Grey partridge productivity.

Average Young-to-Old (YtO) ratio on land managed by PCS members on a county basis.

- 3+
- 2.4 to 3
- 1.6 to 2.4
- >0 to 1.6
- 0
- No results

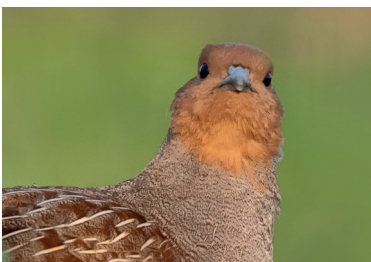
HELP GWCT'S POLICY TEAM PROVIDE INFORMATION TO DEFRA ON BROWN HARE

In its Action Plan for Animal Welfare, Government has stated that it is looking at legislation to introduce a closed season for brown hare. This, along with a Private Members Bill proposing a closed season from February to July, would mean that no control of hares could take place during this period, unless some form of licensing were introduced (as is proposed in the Private Members Bill).

We do not think that the licence proposal is workable as we cannot see how a Natural England official, remote from the

situation, can make a timely and accurate judgement on the immediate needs of farmers to protect their crops.

At present no government records are held on the extent to which hares are controlled and so Defra has no idea of the impact of its proposal and has no way of monitoring the outcome. In order for us to inform Defra/Natural England as to current usage of the open season, gauge current farmers' motivations and better assess future effects of the proposed Bill we are asking farmers in areas where brown hares are abundant to answer this short questionnaire - www.gwct.org.uk/brownharesurvey. All answers will be kept strictly confidential. We appreciate your help and support. 🐇



JOIN THE PARTRIDGE COUNT SCHEME

If you're a farmer, landowner, game manager or land manager, or know someone who is and wants to help their wild grey partridges, please join the scheme. For more details and to sign up visit: www.gwct.org.uk/partridge

REGIONAL NEWS

CONGRATULATIONS TO JULIAN ROMNEY, LIFE FELLOW

Lord Julian Romney was presented with a GWCT Life Fellowship in 2021. Julian founded the Norfolk Partridge Group in the 1980s (the first farmer-led bird conservation group that we are aware of) and then chaired that group for 25 years. The Norfolk Partridge Group was the model that GWCT used to develop our national network of regional grey partridge groups in the 2000s. Few landowners have done more to promote wild grey partridge conservation than Julian, who has always advocated sustainable game management and led by example at Gayton Estate in Norfolk.

NORFOLK

The Mills & Reeve Norfolk Partridge Award for 2021 was presented to Nick Zoll from the Burnham Thorpe Syndicate in north Norfolk. A very successful programme of habitat provision and thoughtful management has led to a significant recovery of the wild partridge population. The award was presented in September 2021 during a tour of Houghton Estate.



Tom Dolman (Gamekeeper) and Nick Zoll from the Burnham Thorpe Syndicate.

EAST ANGLIAN PARTRIDGE TROPHY

The 2021 winners of the East Anglian Partridge Trophy were Brian and Patrick Barker of Lodge Farm Westhorpe, Suffolk who have achieved significant success over the past 10 years not only with grey partridge conservation but also with recovery of farmland biodiversity through a network of well-managed habitat. They are also very effective and enthusiastic communicators of farmland wildlife conservation to the farming sector and the general public. The award was presented at a very well-attended tour of Lodge Farm in September 2021.



WILDLIFE PLOTS, A NEW DEFRA-ENDORSED HABITAT MEASURE

by Francis Buner,
Head of NSR PARTRIDGE

The PARTRIDGE flower mix (PARTRIDGEmix), provided through Wildlife Plots, is the NSR PARTRIDGE project's main habitat measure to help turn around the dismal fate of our beloved greys. The measure is comparable in some ways to the UK's Wild Bird Seed Mix (WBM), just better! Although WBM is brilliant at providing winter cover and food for greys and other farmland wildlife it does not deliver maximum potential for nesting and brood-rearing, particularly because of how it is currently managed. WBMs are often bare wastelands, with mixes planted too late to produce useful cover for nesting partridges or insect-rich habitat for chicks.

The secret is to invest in better and more diverse seed mixes and manage this investment to maximise habitat for grey partridges year-round. This starts with a sterile seedbed, essential to ensure habitat diversity that may last up to ten years. At Rotherfield we developed our advanced mix with Oakbank - Kings offer a similar one. The Wildlife Plot established with this mix will then provide annual and perennial cover from year two after establishment. This is achieved by rotational management (cut and cultivate), without re-sowing as the native plants re-seed themselves. The advanced PARTRIDGEmix consists of almost 30 species of plants; 19 of these are native to Britain. Non-natives are included to provide first-year winter cover and seed food (such as sunflowers, millet, and perennial rye). The PARTRIDGEmix is not the ultimate in terms

of what species are included. Ideally all species should be native and sourced locally to achieve maximum benefit for our native insects. These seeds are hard to come by in large quantities and VERY EXPENSIVE!

A mix of entirely native home-grown seeds could cost £1,000+ per hectare! The advanced PARTRIDGEmix is a compromise, providing the best year-round habitat for greys and other farmland wildlife at a relatively reasonable cost of £375 per ha.

The mix is pleasing to the eye, but does it provide chick food? We sampled insects in it, using similar methods to other GWCT monitoring, and looked at arable margins (cultivated uncropped margins), extended overwintered stubbles and winter wheat, for comparison. As is the case in GWCT samples across the UK, winter wheat contained very few chick-food insects, below the required Chick Food Index (CFI) of 0.7 (CFI=0.23 ± 0.04 SE, n=15). However, contrary to GWCT samples in WBM mixes from 10 other English sites, all three non-crop agri-environment scheme (AES) habitats on Rotherfield delivered average CFIs above 0.7 (PARTRIDGEmix = 0.82 ± 0.16, n=39; arable margin = 0.93 ± 0.30, n=8; extended overwintered stubbles = 1.40 ± 0.31, n=6). The structure of a well-managed PARTRIDGEmix allows chicks to forage freely. Based on these results, Defra has included the PARTRIDGEmix and management in their ELMS trial scheme under the name Wildlife Plot: www.gov.uk/guidance/create-andmaintain-wildlife-plots We encourage you to include Wildlife Plots in your new contracts when available. We recommend requesting a derogation from Natural England to manage current WBC like a Wildlife Plot - a winner for partridges, wildlife, and your wallet. 🐦