

# Gamewise

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AUTUMN/WINTER 2024

## A beach life?

An uphill struggle for beach-nesting waders

## Speeding up nature's recovery

The challenge of achieving nature recovery targets



## Also inside

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Professor Chris Stoate retires  
Focusing on farmland insects  
The wrong trees in the wrong place

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**Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust**  
 Fordingbridge, Hampshire SP6 1EF  
 Tel: 01425 652381  
 Email: info@gwct.org.uk Reg. Charity No: 1112023  
 Reg. Company No. 05579632 Vat No. 665 2959 92  
 Patron HM King Charles III  
 President The Marquess of Salisbury PC, DL  
 Chairman Sir Jim Paice, PC, DL, FRAGS

Chief Executive Teresa Dent CBE, FRAGS  
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 Alastair Leake PhD, FRAGS  
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 Director Scotland Rory Kennedy  
 Interim Director (Wales) Lee Oliver  
 Chief Finance Officer Nick Sheeran  
 Interim Director of Membership and Marketing  
 Amber Hopgood  
 Head of Communications Joe Dimpleby

**Contact us**  
 Advisory - Lizzie Herring  
 T: 01425 651013 E: advisory@gwct.org.uk  
 Accounts - Hilary Clewer  
 T: 01425 651017 E: accounts@gwct.org.uk  
 Marketing - Amber Hopgood  
 T: 01425 651021 E: marketing@gwct.org.uk  
 Membership/donations - Heather Acors  
 T: 01425 651024/651016  
 E: membership@gwct.org.uk  
 PR and media - Eleanor Williams  
 T: 01425 651000 E: press@gwct.org.uk  
 Research - Lynn Field  
 T: 01425 651025 E: research@gwct.org.uk  
 Shop - Caroline Marlow  
 T: 01425 651010 E: shop@gwct.org.uk

**Other offices**  
 The Allerton Project  
 T: 01572 717220 E: allerton@gwct.org.uk  
 Fundraising  
 T: 07508 698129 E: jpayne@gwct.org.uk  
 Scotland  
 T: 0131 202 7670 E: scottishhq@gwct.org.uk  
 Salmon & Trout Research Centre  
 T: 01929 401893 E: fisheries@gwct.org.uk  
 Uplands  
 T: 01833 651936 E: uplands@gwct.org.uk  
 Wales  
 T: 07767 019305 E: wales@gwct.org.uk

**Editing, Design and Layout**  
 Louise Shervington  
 E: editor@gwct.org.uk  
 Graphic design: Chloe Stevens

**Advertising, Production**  
 Mark Brown, Fellows Media Ltd, The Gallery,  
 Manor Farm, Southam, Cheltenham, Glos GL52 3PB.  
 Tel: 01242 259249 Email: mark@fellowsmedia.com

ISSN 1757-7357 Printed on chlorine-free paper from sustainable forests



On the cover Oystercatchers.  
 © Laurie Campbell

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# WELCOME

TERESA DENT CBE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE

**T**his summer, the weather has reminded us how much it governs almost everything that happens in the countryside. Heavy rain and floods last autumn left most farmers with much less autumn planting than intended and some with none at all (see page 20). A wet summer followed and the results are seen both in food production and wildlife productivity. Recent Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board data states that 11% less cropped area was grown in 2024, and that yields are 8% down on the five-year average. Invertebrate numbers seem to have been badly affected by waterlogged soils overwinter. Wild game shooting relies on breeding success and for red grouse in both Scotland and northern England this has been one of the worst years in memory, with almost all shooting cancelled. Whether this will prove to be as bad a year for wild bird productivity as 2012 was, we will discover as scientists finish their field seasons and start to analyse their data.

This weather and yield impacts are both symptomatic of climate challenges; a stark reminder of how hard species have to work to recover, and how important it is for us as conservationists to work hard to deliver the three-legged stool they need for recovery: food, habitat and protection from what would otherwise kill them. We need to look at whether that is higher ground to save their nest from the floods, thick hedgerows to save their nestlings from chilling, or managing predation during the vulnerable nesting period. We cannot let up on a single one of those things if we want to achieve the Government's 2030 target of a reversal in species' decline (see page 38).

Let us hope that next summer gives farmers, conservationists, invertebrates and birds a better chance of success. 2025 will be a different summer for me as I am retiring from the GWCT at the beginning of the year having been honoured and privileged to be chief executive of this wonderful charity since the beginning of 2002. It is hard to adequately express my gratitude to the GWCT's fantastic staff, dedicated trustees, and the four wonderful chairmen I have had the privilege of working with, as well as our many and generous supporters.

The chairman and trustees are recruiting a new chief executive this autumn and I very much look forward to welcoming that individual and introducing them to the wonderful work the GWCT does and the exceptional staff who do it.



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4. Why we need the right trees in the right places
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RESEARCH THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

## BIG FARMLAND BIRD COUNT

The Big Farmland Bird Count saw a record number of counts submitted, which showed some interesting results, in particular farms that were part of an agri-environment scheme had higher bird counts across all crop types. The highest number of different bird species was recorded on mixed farms, with an average of 23 species. Numbers of thrushes were twice as high in western England and Ireland compared to eastern England, Wales or Scotland. Finches and buntings were more prolific in southern England than in northern England and Wales with their numbers doubling in areas with supplementary feeding.

SAVE THE DATE: 2025 Big Farmland Bird Count 7-23 February

# IN *focus*



FIND OUT  
MORE



## BLACK GROUSE ARE DISAPPEARING BEFORE OUR EYES, WILL YOU HELP US SAVE THEM?

**B**lack grouse populations are struggling due to the loss of suitable habitats and food sources for their chicks. To combat this decline, our GWCT uplands research team have been working on a groundbreaking project to understand more about black grouse habitat needs and to translocate birds to more suitable environments. By tagging these birds, we gain vital data on their movements. Funding from Natural England between August 2023 and March 2025 is soon coming to an end, so with your help we have a unique opportunity to continue to reverse this path to extinction. Your support is vital and your donations will help us tag and track the birds' movements, study their habitats and translocate them to areas with better conditions for their survival. If you would like to support our appeal and find out more about the plight of the black grouse, please visit [gwct.org.uk/blackgrouse24](https://gwct.org.uk/blackgrouse24).

## In the NEWS



© Amy Mason

**1** BBC Landward's Dougie Vipond made two separate reports from visits to our projects in Scotland. At Balgonie he was taken on a grey partridge count with researcher Fiona Torrance, and at the GWCT's demonstration farm at Auchnerran, Max Wright showed him how 'wader-friendly farming' helps lapwing, oystercatcher and curlew thrive there.

**2** Farming Today featured the GWCT's work on three occasions this summer. In July they interviewed Julie Ewald about the Sussex Study, which showed a 37% decline in insects over 50 years (see page 23). Lee Oliver spoke to them about drone work with curlews in Wales, and Johnny Wake and Teresa Dent were interviewed in a piece about the Central England Environmental Farmers Group.

**3** ITV News covered two stories in its regional evening news programme for the south. For the Sussex Study, they made a visit to Hugh Passmore's farm along with Julie Ewald and Steve Moreby to talk about insect declines; and a few weeks later they joined the GWCT fisheries team in their annual monitoring and tagging of salmon and trout juveniles that have hatched on the River Frome in Dorset this year.



## RESEARCH THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

## MAUREEN WOODBURN

A curiosity for the wildlife all around her has seen Mo study pheasant ecology for more than 30 years

**M**aureen Woodburn has worked in the lowland game research team for more than 30 years. Fascinated by wildlife from an early age, she studied Zoology at Glasgow University which set her up for her scientific career.

"ONE OF MY earliest memories of gamebirds was as a young girl growing up on a dairy farm in Scotland. It was harvest time and we had taken the 'field tea' out to Dad and the other workers. As we all stood around the old 'Landie', suddenly a small brown bird popped out at the end of the tramline with about six or seven tiny chicks scurrying about her feet. "What are they?" I asked. "Partridges", Dad said. I was transfixed and can still picture the scene today, some 50 plus years later. It was that experience, together with precious time spent with my uncle, Bobby Smith, who had vast knowledge and enthusiasm for birds, that ignited my curiosity for the wildlife around me.

"LITTLE DID I realise that several years later, while doing my Masters in London, the door into gamebird research was about to open.

After a lecture from David Hill, a scientist at The Game Conservancy Trust (now the GWCT) outlining their research, I knew it was for me. I arrived in Fordingbridge in May 1986 to start my project – radio-tracking hen pheasants to look at breeding success and survival in the wild.

"SINCE THEN, WE have looked at many aspects of pheasant ecology from what habitats they use during the year and their fascinating mating system, through to how internal parasites impact their breeding success in the wild. They are spectacular looking birds and, although not native to the UK, are an iconic sight in our countryside.

"WE HAVE ALSO looked closely at how managing the countryside for pheasants can hugely benefit other wildlife species and improve biodiversity in our environment. Currently we're studying the effect of releasing pheasants in sensitive areas, including ancient semi-natural woodland and Sites of Special Scientific Interest, looking for very subtle changes to ground flora communities and lichens on trees. It's this 'bigger picture' relating to these birds that makes them so important – our research really does make a difference."



(L-R) Farmer Ian Boyd receiving a trophy from Peter Thompson MBE, who inspired many of the GWCT's farmland conservationists.



(L-R) Hugh Oliver-Bellasis who received an OBE, hosted a project working closely with Nick Sotherton, former GWCT director of research, who developed conservation headlands and beetle banks.

# Birthday Honours

## Conservationists recognised

TWO WELL KNOWN GWCT personalities were included in the King's Birthday Honours list this summer. Peter Thompson worked for the GWCT for more than 30 years until his retirement in 2018. A farmland biodiversity advisor, he is described as a huge inspiration for many of the Trust's current farmland conservationists (see page 74). Peter was known for his passion for wildlife and the ability to translate science and communicate the message effectively. Peter was made a Member of the British Empire (MBE) for services to farmland ecology and wildlife conservation.

Hugh Oliver-Bellasis, a vice-president and former trustee, set up a project with the GWCT on his farm in the early 1980s to find a way to recover grey partridges while continuing to grow productive arable crops. The results were groundbreaking and saw the invention of conservation headlands, beetle banks and managed field margins, all of which were included in agri-environment schemes and remain to this day. He was awarded an Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to nature conservation and the rural community.

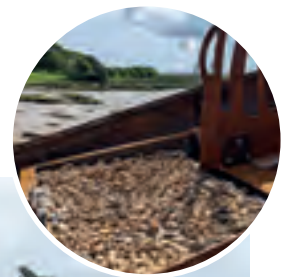
# Our Lady of the South

## D-Day sculpture serves as a nesting site for rare birds

A NEW SCULPTURE UNVEILED IN HONOUR OF THE WOMEN WHO PLAYED A part in the preparations for D-Day, will also help our rare and threatened wading and coastal birds find a safe nesting site.

'Our Lady of the South' was designed and constructed in consultation with the GWCT and has been positioned beside saltmarsh habitat along the eastern bank of the Beaulieu River on the Exbury Estate in the New Forest. It sits across the river from the North Solent National Nature Reserve, where our Gravelly Shores project is underway to boost numbers of threatened beach-nesting birds like ringed plover, oystercatchers and terns, by creating new shingle habitats and trialling novel non-lethal predation management techniques to improve their breeding success (see page 30).

Mike Short, who leads the Gravelly Shores Project, which is funded through Natural England's Species Recovery Programme, says: "Since 1995, the UK's breeding population of oystercatcher has declined by 22%. They urgently need our help, and Exbury's conservation-minded landowner, Nick de Rothschild, has done just that by making 'Our Lady of the South' into the most exclusive shingle nesting platform along the south coast."



(Inset) A shingle nesting platform for waders inside 'Our Lady of the South' sculpture.





(L-R) GWCT's Alastair Leake is renowned for his policy work especially with Defra's Janet Hughes.

## Guiding future policy

### Natural England Board

WE ARE DELIGHTED THAT ALASTAIR Leake, our director of policy and head of the Allerton Project, has been appointed to the Natural England board. He will serve a three-year term, with a likely extension for another three years. He joins the GWCT's senior biometrician, Nicholas Aebischer, who is already on Natural England's Scientific Advisory Committee.



## Thank you

### In memoriam

WE ARE EXTREMELY GRATEFUL TO receive donations in memory of James Crosbie-Dawson, Philip Plotkin, Keith Robinson, David Christopher Ansell, Alan Peck, Anthony Charles Ball and Anthony Hamilton. We would like to thank their families and friends for thinking of us during such a difficult time.



Over the last 40 years wild Atlantic salmon have declined by some 80%.

## Save our salmon

### Help make a difference by donating to our salmon appeal

Salmon are a keystone species that tell us much about the overall health of the ecosystem of our waterways. Over the last 40 years wild Atlantic salmon have declined by some 80% (see page 70). The GWCT's fisheries team based on the River Frome, have built up over 20 years of detailed data on more than 250,000 juvenile salmon in the catchment to find ways to reverse this decline.

By donating to our 'Save Our Salmon' appeal, you will help us provide evidence of the most effective interventions which can not only be applied on this river, but could be rolled out nationally in a bid to save the species. Together, we can make a difference. Find out more at [gwct.org.uk/salmon24](http://gwct.org.uk/salmon24).

## New GWCT trustees

### Alexandra Henton, Andrew Reed and Minette Batters

WE ARE PLEASED TO WELCOME THREE new GWCT trustees. Alexandra Henton is the editor of *The Field*. She grew up in rural Leicestershire and loves all country pursuits. She believes passionately in introducing the younger generation to countryside activities and recently launched *The Field Junior*.

She brings a host of communication and marketing skills with her and says she has always been a big fan of the GWCT.

Andrew Reed is a board member of William Reed, and is the managing director of Wine and Exhibitions. Andrew has kindly helped the GWCT secure favourable terms with Stable Events for both GWCT's Scottish and Welsh Game Fairs. He lives in Sussex and was previously GWCT's Sussex county chairman, and brings business, marketing, and communication skills to the trustee body. He says: "I am excited to be part of the GWCT as it approaches its centenary. Although

there are challenges ahead, there are also opportunities and I look forward to helping exploit them with the brilliant GWCT team."

Minette Batters grew up on a 300-acre mixed farm near Salisbury, taking over the tenancy from her father in 1998. She comes from a successful and high profile position as the president of the NFU, which she held from 2018 to 2024. In July she was given a life peerage and created Baroness Batters of Downton in the County of Wiltshire. Minette brings a lot of policy experience and knows the new Government's team at Defra well. She said: "The pressure is on and there's a massive job to do, and that's exciting. Farmers are the solution to so many of the challenges we face.

"My determination with the GWCT will be to focus on what's working and promoting this as there are many great examples, and that's what we want to lead everybody towards."



Electric fencing protecting a curlew nest in a farmer's field in Wales which has been cut.

# Saving elusive curlew

## Using drones to help waders and farmers in Wales

THE GWCT WALES TEAM HAVE SPENT THE SUMMER PUTTING THEIR DRONE TO use across farms and fields in a bid to help the breeding curlew population. Having spent five years honing their drone work, they have now developed a technique that is revolutionising practical curlew conservation by allowing them to locate the nests of this elusive wader and work with farmers to protect the chicks from being killed by machinery or predators.

Based on surveys of various species across Wales, including deer, brown hare, grey squirrels, feral goats, grey seals, partridge, terns, and using a combination of thermal and zoom cameras operated from a drone, the nests can be located very quickly and accurately, while causing no disturbance to the birds.

Curlew numbers in Wales have declined sharply and it is predicted that it may become extinct as a viable breeding population within 10 years. To help them, GWCT is part of a three-year partnership project called 'Curlew Connections Wales', which aims to locate and monitor breeding curlew by working with farmers and the local community to find and protect nests from predation, alongside conducting predation management, across three sites.

Through this work in Montgomeryshire and North Radnorshire the GWCT has shown that the drone can be used as a research tool that causes no disturbance and importantly, leaves no scent trails that can lead predators to the nests. Project officers James Warrington and Katie Appleby spent the breeding season with farmers, locating and protecting curlew and other wading bird nests, and moving chicks to safety before crops are harvested or fields cut. Having built relationships with many farmers over the years, the GWCT is regularly called upon to offer these kind of practical conservation tools.

Katie Appleby says: "Without the farmers, who actively take part and help us, curlew would not stand a chance and we would not be able to do the work we do and are so passionate about.

"The future for curlew in Wales is looking bleak, but there is a glimmer of hope that through the dedication and hard work of these farmers, and with technology like that of the drone, we might just be able to offer a future for this iconic bird in Wales."



A true gentlemen, Gwyn Morgan-Jones will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

## In memory

### Gwyn Morgan-Jones

GWYN GREW UP IN MENAI BRIDGE, Anglesey and was the very first of his family to study at university, going first to Bristol University where he studied geography and geology. In 1966, he obtained a postgraduate diploma from the Royal School of Mines, Imperial College, London. Gwyn went on to have an illustrious career in the stone industry, and also served as president of the Stone Federation of Great Britain in 1984/5. His career took him all over the world, but as a proud Welshman, he always loved returning to the slate mines of north Wales.

As a schoolboy, Gwyn was a keen sportsman, excelling in athletics, especially the triple jump. He was coached by Welsh Olympic gold medallist Lynn Davies and Ron Pickering OBE, winning numerous trophies in Welsh schoolboys' competitions. Gwyn also cherished the outdoors and enjoyed climbing in the mountains of Snowdonia and sailing on Chelmarsh Reservoir in Shropshire. However, his greatest passion was shooting and deer stalking. Gwyn captained his local shoot in Gretton for many years and worked as a deer stalking instructor in Thetford Forest.

In later life, Gwyn continued his love of the outdoors working for the GWCT, and also as a steward for Leicester Tigers rugby and at racecourses across the East Midlands. He will be greatly missed by all who knew him; a true gentleman.

Gwyn passed away peacefully on 9 June 2024 aged 80. He leaves a son, two daughters, and six grandchildren.



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**F**reshwater Habitats Trust first started working with the GWCT in the early 2000s. Our two organisations were both interested in the benefits of minimum tillage which led to us working together for the first time as part of the EU LIFE funded 'SOil and WAter Protection' project (SOWAP), led by Syngenta.

After SOWAP we moved on to assessing the benefits of wetting-up the farmed landscape for birds, and were joined in this Defra-funded work by the RSPB, capitalising on the close relationships that the GWCT had with landowners and farmers.

Having established a productive working relationship, it was natural to move on to thinking about the water environment more broadly. This was when, with colleagues at the University of York, we developed the Water Friendly Farming project, which has established a long-running demonstration project in three typical farmed catchments in Leicestershire, close to the GWCT's Allerton Project's base at Loddington.

Water Friendly Farming officially launched in 2012 and has become a mainstay of Freshwater Habitats Trust's research and evidence work. It has underpinned our approach to catchment management, supporting our role as co-hosts of the New Forest, Ock and Thame catchments. Crucially, the project is providing groundbreaking information on the importance of different kinds of freshwater habitats in 'typical' farmed countryside.

Water Friendly Farming is one of the longest running and most detailed catchment scale agri-environment research demonstration projects. Now a partnership between Freshwater Habitats Trust, the GWCT's Allerton Project, the University of York, the Environment Agency and landowners in the three catchments, the project's results are influencing policy and practice. To support this, we recently launched a Water Friendly Farming website to share our findings about the effectiveness of agri-environment and natural flood management measures.

Throughout the relationship we have benefited from the GWCT's interest in underpinning its work with evidence – a shared value of our two organisations. Chris Stoate, head of research at the Allerton



## HOW OTHERS SEE US

# PROFESSOR JEREMY BIGGS

The CEO of Freshwater Habitats Trust gives his opinion

Project who sadly retired this summer, has facilitated this work from the outset. He had a crucial role in ensuring we balance our interests in getting the best from the farmed landscape for nature and ecology, while maintaining a commercially viable farming system. Since that first collaboration more

than 20 years ago, our organisations have gone from strength to strength – and, for Freshwater Habitats Trust, working with the GWCT, and Chris in particular, has been an important part of our growth.

Find out more about Water Friendly Farming at [waterfriendlyfarming.org.uk](http://waterfriendlyfarming.org.uk). ■

**Since that first collaboration more than 20 years ago, our organisations have gone from strength to strength – and, for Freshwater Habitats Trust, working with the GWCT, and Chris in particular, has been an important part of our growth**

Freshwater Habitats Trust is a national evidence-based conservation charity that works to protect life in freshwater. Freshwater Habitats Trust is building the Freshwater Network, a national network of wilder, wetter, cleaner and connected freshwater landscapes, to reverse the long decline of freshwater wildlife. [freshwaterhabitats.org.uk](http://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk)



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## In the field



### COVER CROP CORNER

THE CHALLENGES OF THE 2023/2024 cropping season weather have been well recognised across the industry. As a result, we ended up with a significant area of ground still uncropped in May of this year (see page 20). Rather than leaving the soil bare, we planted two different summer covers. This allowed us to see the benefits of this approach to both soil health and farmland biodiversity.

We drilled a legume-based cover mix which is designed specifically for this situation. Additionally, we planted a multi-species cover crop which delivers for both winter and summer sown cover. Both these mixes have various benefits which will prepare the farm for the next cropping season by:

- Providing diverse roots which improve soil structure and reduce potential risk of soil erosion.
- Supplying essential pollen and nectar sources for insects in late summer.
- Helping to fix nitrogen that will be available for the following crop.

We've also been analysing the benefits of a year-long fallow where a post-harvest over winter cover crop is grown. This is destroyed in spring to manage grass weeds and is followed by a sown summer cover crop. ■

Jim Egan

**KINGS CROPS** provide agronomy advice and supply seed for the Allerton Project farm's game cover, stewardship and green cover crops. [kingscrops.co.uk](http://kingscrops.co.uk)



At Open Farm Sunday visitors learnt how it was possible to farm sustainably and help nature.

## Farming with nature

Amie Pickering reflects on Open Farm Sunday

I HADN'T BEEN WORKING FOR THE ALLERTON PROJECT FOR VERY LONG BEFORE I was asked to co-ordinate Open Farm Sunday (OFS). To get started, I attended a 'Host Farmer Meeting' at Bragborough Hall for a day of Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) workshops. I learnt about how to engage the public in food, farming and the countryside through various educational activities such as digging soil pits, creating explorative 'journey sticks' and estimating the land area needed to produce one loaf of bread – the answer is 1m<sup>2</sup> for a regular white loaf.

It was great that this year's OFS theme, 'Farming with Nature', was a perfect fit to host at the Allerton Project. Everyone was catered for – if it was food and farming you were interested in, our machinery and arable displays gave a great overview of what is grown in the UK and how we do it. There were two clear favourites for the younger ones: the bouncy tractor trailer tours and the lovable piglets and lambs at 'meet the animals'. For those who wanted to learn about how farming and nature can co-exist, we had activities relating to biodiversity and wildlife with stalls dedicated to bees, worms and many other insects. We also offered a 'Hedgerow Hunt', where families had to identify both different species of hedgerow tree as well as farmland birds. We were lucky to be joined by some of our partners including East Mercia Rivers Trust, Kings Crops and Nestlé, who provided family friendly activities as well as free giveaways. Visitors were then able to relax and enjoy cream teas provided by the local Women's Institute while observing the talents of local artist Penny Richardson. Thank you to everyone who took part – we couldn't have done it without you.

# Did you know?

**SINCE 1992, MACRO MOTH NUMBERS HAVE INCREASED**

by 36% including 27 new species including flounced rustic, brown rustic, dingy footman, straw dot, green carpet, shaded broad-bar, November moth and flame shoulder.

## A voice of reason

Join us to celebrate our colleague and friend Professor Chris Stoate on his retirement after 36 years at the GWCT's Allerton Project

**A**s Chris Stoate retires from the Allerton Project, we can only reflect on what has been an incredible journey of not only a dedicated agro-ecologist, but a colleague and friend, marking the end of an era. Commencing his GWCT career in Fordingbridge, Chris has worked for the last 32 years researching agricultural land management and conservation here at the Allerton Project which culminated in his second book *Farming with the Environment: Thirty years of Allerton Project Research* (see In Brief box).

In the book Chris demonstrates the findings of the Allerton Project's research and how it relates to agricultural and conservation policy more broadly. It draws together peer-reviewed research to tell a coherent story about the effects of different farming methods on wildlife and the environment. This has been invaluable to the development of current policy now and into the future.

While Chris can boast an extensive list of research projects, papers, and books, it is his dedication and approach to collaborative working for which he is particularly noted. Chris has pioneered the concept of 'Participatory Research' initially through his own PhD, but then on the ground within the catchments around the Allerton Project, culminating in a Community-based Heritage Lottery funded project and his first book *Exploring a Productive Landscape*.



**Chris is one of the rare people able to communicate his ideas and research equally well to both scientific and agricultural communities, earning him the respect from both**

The collaboration between the Allerton Project's small research team and the many PhD students, research organisations, universities and NGOs has been key to his success and resulted in Chris being appointed visiting professor at the University of Nottingham. These collaborations have also brought specialist expertise and created an interdisciplinary approach, which Chris acknowledges has made a ground-breaking contribution.

Since the inception of the Allerton Project in 1992, Chris has worked very closely with John Szczur, our ecologist, who has an exceptional knowledge of plant, vertebrate and invertebrate ecology. John speaks very fondly of those early days at the Allerton Project, a time when the visitor centre was

some rather leaky farm buildings, a far cry from the facility that stands here today. Yet they both became entirely captivated and excited about what the estate could offer in terms of future research. As a duo they have always held the utmost respect for one another, and John speaks highly of Chris' ability to always keep the work that they have done practically grounded. This has followed through to the establishment of the Central England Environmental Farmer's Group, with Chris as a member of the steering committee and facilitator of the Eyebrook Farmer Cluster.

Jenny Bussell and Gemma Fox, the other two members of the four strong Allerton research team observe: "Chris is one of the rare people able to communicate his ideas

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and research equally well to both scientific and agricultural communities, earning him the respect of both.” Gemma and Jenny provided the most wonderful thoughts about Chris the colleague, not the professor and said: “As we sit on upturned buckets watching our simulated rain fall on a flower rich margin, our thoughts turn to the man who’s responsible for our current situation. Chris has been our leader for the last five years and during that time his enthusiasm for agri-environment research has led to pursuing an array of projects important for both their scientific principles and their relevance for policy and application. His wide-reaching knowledge has resulted in an eclectic range of field work, from standing in soil pits a metre deep, to monitoring gas emissions from sheep urine. It’s been an interesting ride, and it’s always been rewarding to be part of such influential and topical research. As a leader Chris has always supported and encouraged our ideas. He has given us the confidence and the space to take ownership of our research projects and take pride in our work, while always offering guidance

when needed. He will leave a hole in the Allerton research team, but we know his love of the Allerton Project will keep him close by when we need advice. We’ll miss him, but we won’t miss trying to decipher his ‘professorial handwriting’ on samples in the bottom of the deep freeze.”

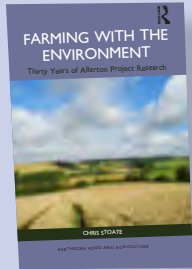
Alastair Leake, director of the Allerton Project, echoes everything colleagues have had to say, but most of all has enjoyed working alongside a man that has not only broken barriers, but led the way in terms of the participatory approach. Alastair has admired and respected his commitment to sustainable living both at work and at home, making him a true pioneer.

Chris set out from GWCT HQ on the 18 February 1992 to Loddington to conduct a night time spot count of brown hares, the first scientist to set foot on Allerton ground. This was the beginning of a 30 year journey of research here at The Allerton Project that has been as influential in agricultural and environmental policy arenas as it has been to the farming community. As a team we are incredibly grateful for his enormous

**In Brief**

**FARMING BACKED BY RESEARCH**

*Farming with the Environment*, written by Chris Stoate, is a detailed account of 30 years of research. The book is particularly timely as both farmers and policymakers seek a post-EU path that delivers our food, economically viable farm businesses and numerous societal benefits from the farmed environment. Order from [gwctshop.org.uk](http://gwctshop.org.uk).



contribution, mentorship and passion that we know will extend well beyond his retirement. The Allerton Project would not be held in the same regard that it is today without his efforts and that should never be underestimated. We will strive to ensure we continue to do it justice. ■

**His wide-reaching knowledge has resulted in an eclectic range of field work, from standing in soil pits a metre deep, to monitoring gas emissions from sheep urine**

(L-R) Gemma Fox and Jenny Bussell who worked closely with Chris and contributed to influential and topical research.



# Feeling the pressure

Joe Stanley reports on a challenging cropping season which almost saw Allerton's first year without a harvest



Wheat overlooking fallow fields this June at the Allerton Project. (Inset) Drilling summer fallow into a failed winter wheat field.

**A**s every reader will appreciate, the 2023-4 season has been merely the latest in a succession of incredibly challenging years for farmers and growers across the country, with record rainfall through the winter continuing into spring impacting the heavy clay soils of the Allerton Project farm as hard as anywhere. Through the calendar year of 2023, we received 35% above our normal average rainfall, while the five-and-a-half-month period mid-October 2023 to March 2024 brought the equivalent of our entire average annual precipitation.

As reported by Allerton ecologist John Szczur in the last issue of *GameWise*, by April we were staring at our first 'year without a harvest'. A challenging 2022-3 season had led to a late harvest and late autumn drilling campaign, which was derailed by successive named storms beginning with Babet in mid-October. Wheat crops drilled just in front of Babet either subsequently failed or are of low-quality heading into harvest. Some of our fields were finally planted with a 'plan D' after successive autumn and spring drilling windows closed on various planned crops.

Although the fears of a 'year without a harvest' are thankfully not entirely realised, the final numbers across the arable area of the farm for this year are:

## Climate change is posing a fundamental challenge to our ability to produce plentiful, affordable food across the globe, and we in the UK are not insulated from that concerning fact

- 40% cropped (a mixture of surviving winter barley and wheat, alongside May-drilled spring oats).
- 40% 'summer fallow' (catch-crop mixtures provided by our partners Kings Crops).
- 20% rotational fallow (legume fallows and diverse herbal leys, part of our mid-tier agri-environment scheme).

We are by no means unique in our experience this year, and I have spoken to many farmers who are in the same boat. Climate change is posing a fundamental challenge to our ability to produce plentiful, affordable food across the globe, and we in the UK are not insulated from that concerning fact.

However, in true Allerton fashion we have turned a challenging situation to our advantage by taking the opportunity to conduct research on our summer fallows: short-term non-cash crops grown between spring and autumn to improve soil health (and available as a paid option under the Sustainable Farming Incentive from next year). Working with our partners Kings Crops and Nestlé, we will assess the real

impact of these multi-species covers so that we are better able to advise Defra and growers on how they might best be utilised going forward.

We have spent decades building resilience into our arable soils, but recent seasons have put them under more extreme pressure than we thought possible only a few short years ago. What the future holds in a warming world is, if nothing else, highly uncertain.

As *GameWise* went to print harvest was underway, with disappointing yields realised from our surviving winter crops. However, despite the very late drilling date, our spring oats look promising after a relatively kind growing season, and oilseed rape and cover crops have already been planted for the coming year. ■

Joe Stanley is head of of sustainable farming at the Allerton Project and is keen to help farmers improve soil resilience in the face of increasingly extreme weather patterns.





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# Focusing on FARMLAND INSECTS

A new paper from the Sussex Study showing a 37% decline in invertebrates is published alongside a new guide for farmers interested in insect recovery. Joe Dimpleby reports

**In Brief**

**GUIDE TO INSECT-RICH FARMLAND HABITATS**

This explains the options available to farmers, how to establish and manage them and what species they benefit. It also introduces the concept of Integrated Pest Management (IPM), an approach which fosters beneficial species to control crop pests naturally and reduce the need to use insecticides. Many of the measures are based on research by the Allerton Project, the GWCT's demonstration farm at Loddington in Leicestershire (see page 17).



Allerton Project director Alastair Leake said: "The new guide is based on years of groundbreaking GWCT research. Here at the Allerton Project we have been able to show how simple management techniques such as beetle banks, hedgerow restoration, and pollinator mixes can reverse insect declines and increase farmland bird numbers with minimal impact on food production."

Download a free copy at: [gwct.org.uk/insectrich](http://gwct.org.uk/insectrich).



**T**he GWCT's ongoing Sussex Study is the world's longest running scientific survey of cereal ecosystems and provides a robust indication of the national picture. A recently published scientific paper based on the study and authored by GWCT principal scientist Julie Ewald, shows that insect abundance in cereal fields dropped by 37% between 1970 and 2019. The results from 2020-2024 samples have yet to be analysed, but indications are that in the past four years invertebrate numbers on average remained fairly constant.

The Sussex Study is unique in that it samples invertebrates in the same 100 fields, at the same time of year (mid-June), using the same methods. It also maps



changes in farming practices, such as cropping, field size, and pesticide use, which, together with climate change, are major drivers of variations in invertebrate abundance.

As well as identifying the problem, the GWCT has used the results of the study and other research projects to find practical solutions to conservation challenges. *The Guide to Insect-Rich Farmland Habitats* (see In Brief) details what measures farmers can take to increase invertebrate numbers, improving biodiversity while maintaining yields. It draws on decades of research and work with land managers to develop agri-environment scheme measures, including 30 out of 36 arable options currently available through the new Environmental Land Management schemes.

Julie Ewald, who oversees the Sussex Study, said: "We are grateful to the farmers in the study area for allowing us to survey their land over 50 years.

"Farmers cannot be blamed for the impact of the intensification of agriculture. Since the Second World War they have been tasked with producing more and cheaper food against a backdrop of rising costs in a global marketplace.

"The Sussex Study farmers have used agri-environment options such as conservation headlands and grass margins developed by the GWCT creatively, and reduced

(Left) Steve Moreby joined the Sussex Study team collecting and analysing samples in 1983, a role he continues to this day. (Top) Julie Ewald and Hugh Passmore. The Sussex Study farmers have used agri-environment options such as conservation headlands and grass margins developed by the GWCT creatively, and reduced their insecticide use in cereal crops.



**Joe Dimbleby** our head of communications is keen to highlight the latest research findings from the Sussex Study.

**MORE INFORMATION**

To find out more about the key findings of this paper go to [gwct.org.uk/sussexsummary](http://gwct.org.uk/sussexsummary). For more information on the Sussex Study watch the Ecological Continuity Trust webinar [gwct.org.uk/sussexwebinar](http://gwct.org.uk/sussexwebinar).



## Since 1970 the UK has lost 73 million wild birds, and farmland species have shown the biggest overall decline of 60%

their insecticide use in cereal crops. It is vital that the Government continues to fund these measures properly, so more farmers take them up.”

During the period 1970-2019 a total of 4,757 samples containing 2.98 million invertebrates were collected from cereal fields across the study area. Though the average decline was 37%, certain taxa showed steeper reductions. Beneficial predators including ground beetles (-80%) and ladybirds (-78%) fell significantly and aphids, which are food for a wide range of invertebrates, dropped by 90%. There was no detectable change in the number of pollinators, but many groups, such as bees, are not normally associated with cereal fields.

Another key discovery was a decline of between 50-80% in several groups that provide food for farmland bird chicks. National data show that since 1970 the UK has lost 73 million wild birds, and farmland species have shown the biggest overall decline of 60%. In the first few weeks of life many of these farmland species are dependent on insects including sawflies, ground beetles, and weevils, which in turn depend on arable flora in cereal fields.

Many farmland birds are dependent on insects including sawflies, ground beetles, and weevils, which in turn depend on arable flora in cereal fields.

Steve Moreby, GWCT senior entomologist, joined the Sussex Study team collecting and analysing samples in 1983, a role he continues to this day. He said: “While we have seen a decrease in insecticide use in the past 15 years, herbicide usage continues to increase and this has resulted in a decline of what we call ‘chick food’ insects, which feed on weed plants, with a knock-on effect on red-listed species such as partridge, skylark and yellowhammer.” ■



### In Brief - view from the farmer



#### HUGH PASSMORE

APPLESHAM IS A 850-ACRE MIXED FARM ON THE chalk downland of the South Downs in West Sussex. “Our involvement with the Sussex Study dates from 1970 when my uncle Christopher Passmore, now aged 93, started working with Dick Potts. Dick’s enthusiasm and understanding of farming systems was essential in getting everyone involved. I learned a huge amount going round the farm with him and it was always good fun. We had a lot of laughs the year Julie got the Land Rover stuck and we had to pull her out with the tractor!

“Dick was incredibly knowledgeable, but always challenging and curious. He maintained that under-sowing grass in an arable crop is one of the best things you can do for insects. I remember him telling me that one year of applying insecticides in the summer, can mean 10 years before you get your beneficial predators back. That was an eye-opener for me. We don’t use insecticides during the summer and rarely in the autumn. In the last couple of years, we haven’t applied them at all. We also try to look after our dung beetles. Last year we trapped around 370 and this year we recorded 670 beetles from 11 different species. To protect them we avoid worming the cattle and don’t use Ivermectins. We sample the sheep and cattle regularly to see if they need treating and generally find it’s unnecessary.

“It’s very important to have the Sussex Study’s long-term dataset as it gives us a good understanding of what is happening and what needs to be done. For example, it has been a valuable guide to what works and doesn’t work for the grey partridge and other bird species. The findings in Julie’s paper show it is a complex issue with a lot of factors involved. It is sobering to see the declines, but it challenges us to try to turn things around. I think it’s possible to reverse the decline, but with the caveat that there are factors beyond our control, such as climate change. It is essential for everyone, not just farmers, to play a part.” (See the *Final Word*, page 74).

# The highs and lows

Siân Whitehead reports on the results of a heather cutting project and how even with care, damage to the moss layer is inevitable

**W**e have previously highlighted the importance of deep-peat habitats for their biodiversity value, as important carbon stores and for the key role they play in flood-risk management. Following the tightened regulation of burning as a habitat management tool on these heather-dominated swards, there has been a significant shift towards cutting as an alternative form of management. This management reduces the tall, mature shrub canopy, encouraging new growth and opening up the sward to allow other plant species, such as mosses and cotton grass, to thrive.

In summer *Gamewise* 2023, we reported on a study that we conducted in 2018 to examine the short-term effects of this heather cutting on blanket bog vegetation, focusing particularly on the depth, and variation in depth, of the moss layer. We found that heather cutting led to a decrease in depth and structural variation of the moss layer, leaving cut areas with a mostly flat, uniform surface. In the light of these findings, we established a new study to consider how this effect on the moss surface is influenced by the height at which the heather is cut. In 2022, we set up a multi-site experiment which looked at the effects of three different cut heights: i) high cut – flail on its highest setting and further lifted by the operator to just remove the heather canopy; ii) medium cut – flail on its highest setting but then resting on the substrate during operation (this height is routinely used by contractors who have been conducting extensive heather cutting as part of ongoing peatland restoration projects in the North Pennines); and iii) low cut – flail at its lowest setting and resting on the substrate during operation. A fourth treatment was one of no-cutting control, against which we could compare the effects of cutting. Cutting management was undertaken in December 2022. We revisited the plots in March 2024 and measured the variation in depth of the moss layer. We used the differences between consecutive depth measurements to calculate an index of surface topography, with higher values representing a more heterogeneous surface and lower values indicating a flatter, more uniform surface.

Our results showed that, as might be expected, when the flail was on its lowest setting, it significantly reduced

## Some damage to the moss layer was inevitable when the machinery hit uneven ground, causing unavoidable drops in the height of the flail

the index of surface topography (see Figure 1), removing hummocks and, in some places, completely removing the moss layer to leave exposed peat. However, we also found that, even with the flail at its highest setting, and with the best endeavours of the experienced operator to lift the flail to remove only the heather canopy, the variation in height of the moss layer was reduced relative to the uncut control plots. This may have been due in part to hollows becoming infilled with cut heather brush. Some damage to the moss layer was inevitable when the machinery hit uneven ground, causing unavoidable drops in the height of the flail.

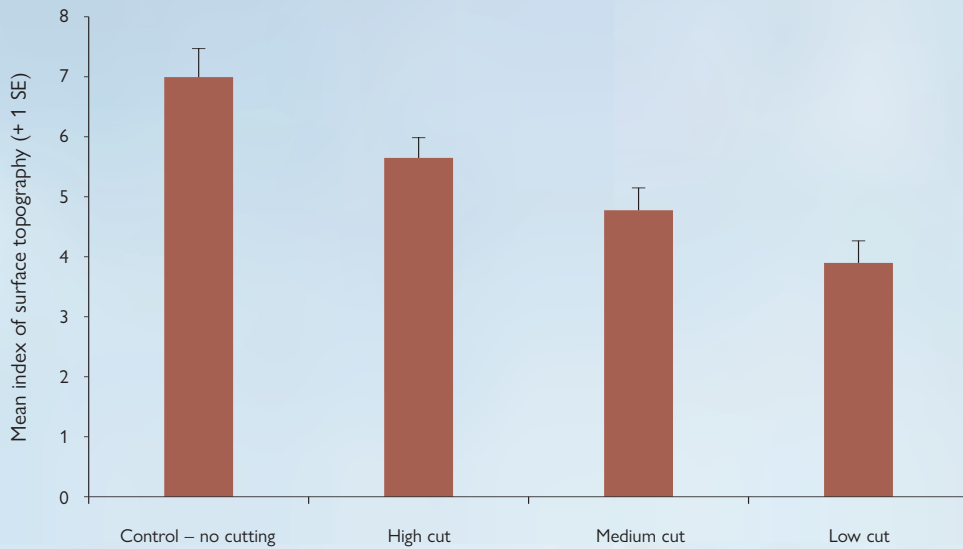
We are continuing with annual monitoring of our plots, not only to see what happens to this surface topography in the medium- to long-term, but also to consider responses of the other vegetation to this mowing management. ■

### DID YOU KNOW?

Over 40 million tonnes of carbon are stored in the South Pennines Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and West Pennine Moors. Formed over millennia – some blanket bogs are 9,000 years old. *Sphagnum* moss is essential to forming peat, which accumulates at about 1mm per year.

Siân Whitehead has been studying the effects of heather cutting on blanket bog following the restrictions of prescribed burning.





**Figure 1**

Post-treatment plot mean index of surface topography in each of four treatments. Values for each treatment are based on data from 24 plots



## WHY IS SURFACE UNEVENNESS IMPORTANT?

Blanket bogs are acidic, waterlogged habitats that are entirely rain-fed and found in the cooler, wetter conditions of the UK uplands. They are characterised by their moss layer, much of it comprising *Sphagnum* moss. Different species of *Sphagnum* have different growth forms, some creating large hummocks and others forming carpets in saturated hollows. Collectively, these mosses form a protective layer over the peat surface, creating a micro-climate and helping to prevent desiccation and erosion. Equally important is the topographical variation created by this moss layer, with the surface roughness further reducing evaporative losses and water run-off. The hummocks and hollows also create nesting opportunities for ground-nesting birds, such as red grouse and golden plover, as well as providing shelter and micro-habitats for invertebrates and other animals.



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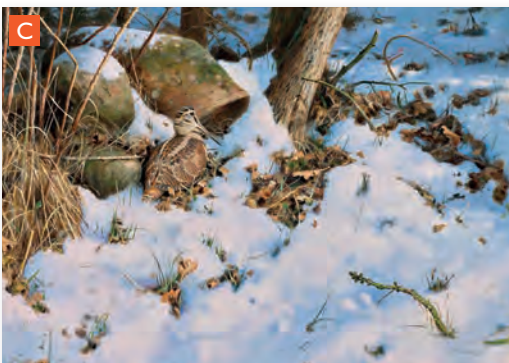
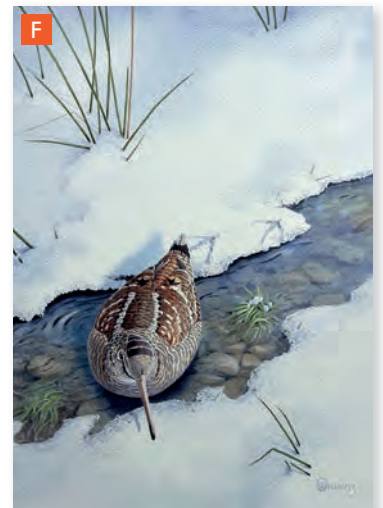
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# A beach life for breeding waders?

Mike Short explains how it's an uphill struggle for beach-nesting waders



Nest cameras have shown lesser black-backed gulls to be an important predator of ringed plover eggs on the North Solent National Nature Reserve.

**T**he Solent region in the south of England is a nationally important breeding area for ringed plover and oystercatcher. In the UK, ringed plover is red-listed with the English population estimated to be just 1,688 breeding pairs in 2019; Oystercatcher is amber-listed reflecting a 22% decline between 1995-2020. The numbers of breeding pairs of oystercatcher in England is unknown, but the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) regards a 2005 estimate of less than 10,000 pairs to be realistic. While high profile wading birds like curlews and lapwings have been hogging the conservation limelight, populations of coastal breeding waders have quietly been slipping away. Why is that?

It is now widely recognised that poor breeding success, not adult survival, is the major demographic bottleneck affecting population recovery of wading birds in human-modified landscapes. With approximately 1.25 million people residing around the Solent, finding a safe place to breed has become increasingly difficult for beach-nesting birds. Here, the effects of coastal squeeze – loosely defined as the loss or degradation of naturally occurring habitats through anthropogenic development, coupled with increased human disturbance – on breeding bird populations, have been dramatic.

**It is now widely recognised that poor breeding success, not adult survival, is the major demographic bottleneck affecting population recovery**



**Cameras revealed high levels of nest predation by foxes and crows, with clear evidence of nest predation by lesser black-backed gulls being the principal cause of ringed plover nest failure. This is interesting, because lesser black-backed gulls (and herring gulls) were recently removed from the General Licences**

To worsen matters, global warming is accelerating dynamic processes like coastal erosion, and more frequent storm surges and rising sea-levels now threaten the existence of some of the last remaining naturally occurring intertidal shingle habitats in the Solent. These are critically important nesting areas for species like ringed plover and oystercatcher, as well as terns that arrive here from Africa to breed.

As the extent of suitable beach-nesting habitat diminishes, so predation impacts can be more dramatic. Generalist predators like foxes, corvids, and gulls, thrive in human-dominated environments. They are highly adaptable scavengers, adept at living in both urban and rural habitats and can benefit greatly from anthropogenic food resources which help them to be more productive. As more beach-nesters squeeze into spatially restricted breeding sites, so predators can have a bigger impact.

GWCT predation scientists have been monitoring the nests of ringed plover and oystercatchers on the North Solent National Nature Reserve for several years now – an extension to research looking at nest predators of curlews breeding in the surrounding New Forest National Park. This reserve supports by far the highest concentration of breeding ringed plover and oystercatcher in Hampshire, with ca. 26 pairs and

30 pairs respectively. Indeed, breeding aggregations of both species are ‘designated features’ of the North Solent SSSI, as are little terns, which sadly no longer breed here.

For ringed plover and oystercatcher, most nesting attempts occur along a narrow two kilometre shingle spit, which is slowly being lost to erosion. The spit is seasonally ‘protected’ by an enforced Bird Sanctuary Order to prevent disturbance to nesting birds. Elsewhere, human disturbance is often flagged as the main problem facing beach-nesting ringed plover and oystercatcher, but here we can rule that one out.

On the North Solent NNR, cameras have revealed high levels of nest predation by foxes and crows, with clear evidence of nest predation by lesser black-backed gulls being the principal cause of ringed plover nest failure. This is interesting, because lesser black-backed gulls (and herring gulls) were recently removed from the General Licences which had previously allowed them to be controlled to protect endangered birds like ringed plover.

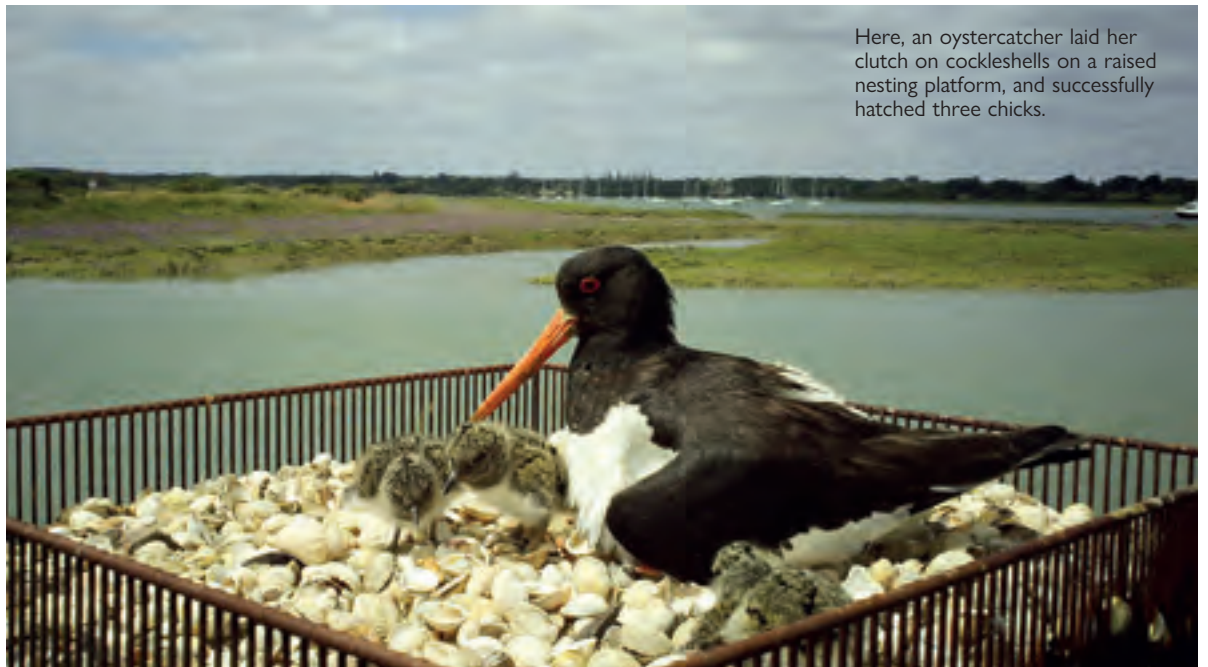
**The Gravelly Shores project**

The Gravelly Shores project is led by the GWCT, in collaboration with Beaulieu Estate and Natural England. It is part-funded through Natural England’s Species Recovery Programme (SRP) and it aims to increase

A clutch of oystercatcher eggs on the new shingle habitat made using imported dredged marine aggregates. This new and safer area for beach-nesting birds was funded through Gravelly Shores.



**Mike Short** is our head of predation management research.



Here, an oystercatcher laid her clutch on cockleshells on a raised nesting platform, and successfully hatched three chicks.

## It is already clear that without some form of nest protection, oystercatcher eggs stand little chance of hatching

populations of beach-nesting birds by providing new shingle habitat. The SRP funding is also facilitating 'solution trialling' of novel non-lethal nest protection measures for ringed plover and oystercatcher. If these measures work, then great. If they don't work, or they are found to be of only limited value, then we will be able to explain why.

At the heart of Gravelly Shores is the transformation of 1.7ha of scrub grassland into vegetated shingle habitat. We will import around 3,000 tonnes of dredged material from the Solent to create a new beach. This sits above the intertidal zone but adjacent to saltmarsh and mudflats which provide invertebrate-rich feeding areas for parents and chicks. Our intention is to create a more stable, manageable expanse of loose shingle, more resilient to dynamic coastal processes and it will be seasonally 'protected' using an electric fence to deter mammalian predators. We completed half the habitat works in March, with the remainder scheduled for completion this

Nest cages help to protect ringed plover eggs, but cameras have recorded adult ringed plovers killed by a variety of different predators. Here, a short-eared owl is seen taking a colour-ringed adult.



autumn. Last summer several ringed plover and oystercatcher pairs nested here, which is encouraging.

This year we continued trials of a nest protection cage design for ringed plover, which is being used at breeding sites across England. The cage allows adults to enter and tend the nest, but the wire mesh forms a physical barrier to larger nest predators. In our trials so far, this cage design has improved hatching success but in 2024 cameras recorded almost a quarter of breeding adults taken by predators including fox, crow and short-eared owl among others. Cages clearly help protect ringed plover eggs but they also inhibit adult escape behaviour, and losing a breeding adult from the local population is worse than losing a clutch of eggs which can quickly be replaced.

We are evaluating several non-lethal nest protection measures for oystercatcher (nest cages, elevated shingle platforms and electric fences) by comparing hatching success of protected nests to unprotected nests. It is already clear that without some form of nest protection, oystercatcher eggs stand little chance of hatching. In 2024 cameras again revealed fox predation to be the principal cause of nest failure, followed by predation by hedgehogs which can easily enter nest cages and pass under electric fences.

With such a diverse range of predators to contend with, there will be no 'silver bullet' solution to reducing predation impacts on breeding waders. It seems inescapable that to boost populations of ringed plover and oystercatchers breeding locally, a significant reduction in fox and crow predation pressure will be required, alongside use of a broad range of non-lethal nest protection measures. And there's also the issue of how to manage impacts of predatory gulls. If using nest cages to protect ringed plover eggs leads to substantial increases in adult mortality, then other gull management solutions will be required. ■

# Hamish Mackie

HAMISH MACKIE SCULPTURE

LIFE IN BRONZE





### DID YOU KNOW?

Eels can take on oxygen and survive both under water and on land. They have gills like other fish but can also use their mouth and gills as a rudimentary lung which allows them to survive out of water.

# Slippery work

The lives of eels are a bit of a mystery. Eleanor Williams reports on a challenging new project for the fisheries team

Eels are caught at night using a special net.



Eleanor Williams is our communications officer who is keen to promote the findings of our new study looking at eels.

**F**or a fish that has been around for millions of years – one that has long been culturally and economically important to us – we know very little about eels.

The European eel has declined by around 90% since the 1980s and is one of only a few UK species considered to be ‘critically endangered’. It is disappearing faster from our rivers than any other fish, despite being considered one of the toughest and most resilient of fish species.

Eels hatch in the Sargasso Sea near Bermuda and spend about three years drifting across the Atlantic Ocean on the Gulf Stream. They arrive in Europe as glass eels that then become elvers and swim up rivers and waterways across the continent. They can spend decades living in the riverine environment before they migrate back across the Atlantic to the Sargasso Sea, where they spawn and die.

Eels typically live for 15-20 years, but some are known to live past 80 years. Despite being one of our longest living river inhabitants, little is known about their life and what triggers the start of an eel’s migration.

Will Beaumont is leading the fisheries team’s latest project which involves tagging eels in a bid to better understand their movements in our river and waterways, and monitor the start of their migration from the UK across the Atlantic Ocean. In June they caught, tagged and released around 74 eels in the River Frome near Wareham.

The eels were trapped overnight and processed in a mobile riverside laboratory the next day. Each eel was weighed, measured and the smaller ones fitted with a PIT tag – the kind of ‘microchips’ used in cats and dogs – while the larger eels were fitted with both acoustic and PIT tags.

A second phase will take place this autumn when the team plan to trap and tag mature eels, known as silver eels, as they start their migration. These will be tracked on their way to the sea, and with luck, some way along the channel.

Eel tracking is an entirely new study area for the team, which has been monitoring the wild Atlantic salmon stocks on the River Frome for the past 50 years, as well as carrying out research into many other fish species.



## The European eel has declined by around 90% since the 1980s and is one of only a few UK species considered to be 'critically endangered'

Will is used to putting tags into wild salmon and sea trout, but said: "Tagging eels is a bit of a challenge. They require a lot of anaesthetic to go under, and their skin is pretty tough."

The eels carrying acoustic tags will have to swim within 400 metres of a receiver to be picked up, and the smaller eels need to be caught again in future surveys and scanned. The team have placed 35 receivers along the River Frome and in Poole Harbour. There is also one outside Plymouth and another near the Channel Islands.

The data collected will help researchers see what habitat the eels are choosing and how they move around the river catchment. It will also give vital information about the transit times through the different environments when they decide to start moving down the river, through the harbour and down the Channel. It can also highlight whether the eels prefer to stay higher up near the surface or lower down near the bottom when migrating and what the survival rates are for different environments.

The decline in the European eel population has been put down to several factors, including a parasitic

worm that infests the swim bladder, illegal fishing, water pollution and habitat loss. Will explains: "We do know they are one of the toughest fish species we have, but we still seem to be managing to wipe them out. If we want to save them, it is extremely important we get a better understanding so we know how to stop them from disappearing forever."

The project is a collaboration with the Environment Agency, CEFAS and Bournemouth University. ■

(Top) Eels are measured and tagged. Usually 45-65cm (18-26in) they rarely reach more than 1.0m (3ft 3in), but can reach a length of up to 1.33m (4ft 4in) in exceptional cases.

### In Brief

#### CELEBRITY EEL

The oldest ever known European eel was a captive one named Ale that lived in a well in the Swedish fishing village of Brantevik and died in 2014 at the age of 155. Ale had lived in the well ever since he was released into it in 1859 by an eight-year-old boy, Samuel Nilsson.

## Life stages of the European eel

- **Larvae (*Leptocephali*):** Eel hatchlings look nothing like adult eels, but more like tiny transparent leaves. They get carried on the Gulf Stream current from the Sargasso Sea across the Atlantic to the European continental shelf.
- **Glass eels:** At the continental shelf the larvae begin developing into glass eels which look like tiny versions of the adults but are still transparent and barely visible except for their backbone, which shows up as a dark stripe through their bodies. They swim to the coast where they find their way to fresh water.
- **Elvers:** The juvenile eels travelling up the rivers. These are often seen trying to climb obstacles in their way, sometimes even vertically, on their journeys up river.
- **Yellow eels:** Adults still growing and maturing while living their lives in the rivers and waterways.
- **Silver eels:** Adult mature eels that are ready to start their migration back to the Sargasso Sea and leave by swimming down river and out to sea.



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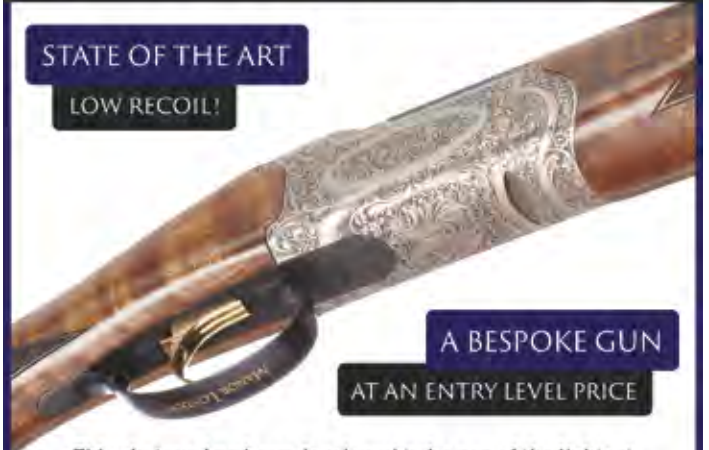
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# SPEEDING UP nature's recovery



Henrietta Appleton considers the challenge  
of achieving nature recovery targets

## THE TIMELINE TO 2030:

6

BREEDING SEASONS FOR FAUNA –  
BUT ONLY

2

GENERATIONS FOR  
CURLEW AS THEY DON'T USUALLY  
BREED UNTIL THEIR THIRD YEAR



6

SPRING AND SUMMERS FOR FLORA  
TO SEED, FLOWER AND SPREAD

As highlighted in *Gamewise* last autumn, the term 'critical threshold' is often associated with the availability of habitat and defines an abrupt change in species population levels because of habitat loss or fragmentation. However, perhaps more appropriate now is the concept of density-dependent population dynamics and depensation. This is where species population growth rates have become negative because a population becomes unable to reproduce at least sufficiently to maintain its population and has the potential to accelerate population decline leading to local extinctions.

One of the new Defra secretary of state's five key policy priorities is ensuring nature's recovery and at a stakeholder reception to "sow those first seeds of change" he specifically committed to speeding up nature's recovery. While this is clearly needed given that we have only about six breeding seasons (weather permitting) to meet the target of halting wildlife decline by 2030 (see timeline left), I am concerned that any failure to embrace a broader approach to conservation will mean that we will ultimately fail, as we did before with Biodiversity Action Plan targets (that were not legally binding).

### Targeted action

The focus on habitat as the basis for publicly-funded conservation strategies began with the first agri-environment scheme in 1987. Since then we have had more schemes and new options; but declines continue, suggesting that there are not enough measures that support, for example, red-listed species. We believe, therefore, that policymakers should be challenging the status quo as, if the tools employed to deliver nature recovery are no different, why should the outcomes be any different?

Although we have our concerns about some approaches to nature conservation (see page 40), the overall message should be about achieving success through targeted action – 'right people, right approach, right place, right result.'

The GWCT's work has consistently shown that the 'right people' are the farmers and land managers as they (usually) have the motivation and knowledge to deliver the 'right approach' in the 'right place'. Achieving success therefore needs policy in support of bottom-up initiatives and landscape-scale collaboration such as Environmental Farmers Groups and catchment level partnerships such as the Welland Valley Partnership.

Given that nature's decline has been monitored and researched for decades, the 'right approach' is widely understood – but not always accepted. Practical conservation measures are bread and butter to the

**The overall message should be about achieving success through targeted action – 'right people, right approach, right place, right result'**



## The approach based on science has resulted in ‘gold star’ examples where private investment (not tied by top-down policy approaches) has achieved demonstrable success in reversing wildlife declines

GWCT. These measures revolve around three principles which find their roots in game management, namely: habitat provision, food (including supplementary feeding) and protection from predation. They are adaptable as for each site or species the relative proportions will change – as they will by season too. These three principles have been shown to be effective conservation measures for a range of upland, lowland and woodland fauna at the farm and at the landscape scale to provide the important spatial element.

In addition the current approach of legal protection to combat wildlife decline is not encouraging (given the evidence so far). It is not the intention to ‘protect’ that is failing; it is the concept of protection as an effective delivery measure. Just applying legally binding protection to an area or species does not work; actions are required. For example the protected water vole has been restored through the removal of a key predator, the American mink. Protection can also result in unintended consequences. Who would have foreseen that the legal protection of badgers is now a hindrance to the conservation of some red-listed species?

The protection of the badger has seen tremendous increases in its population, and in this way can be called a success. But as far as I am aware there has been no effort to underpin this by the creation of suitable habitat and food sources: it was not a requirement of the accompanying Act. As a consequence of this population

increase, badgers are now considered important predators of ground-nesting birds, bees, hedgehogs, amphibians and small mammals. Yet nothing can be done to mitigate their affects as the Badgers Act merely allows interference to protect land, crop, poultry or other property from serious damage. This Government could therefore revisit the recommendation of the Law Commission in 2015 and seek to introduce a regular (five-yearly) review

Farmers and land managers have the motivation and knowledge to deliver the ‘right approach’ in the ‘right place’, especially through landscape-scale collaboration.

### CONSERVATION STRATEGIES IN THE UK

**Rewilding** – must be balanced with food production to avoid offshoring our environmental footprint.

**Land sparing/land sharing** – land sharing allows greater connectivity across the landscape.

**Reintroductions/translocations** – must follow International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)/Defra guidelines.

**Natural capital** – vital for blended finance but an incomplete marketplace for wildlife.

**Conservation management** – involves:

1. Habitat provision – must be the right type in the right place and supported by other measures if evidence suggests.
2. Protection from predation – important for many ground nesting red-listed species to avoid local extinctions.
3. Supplementary feeding – important for farmland birds from February to April.



**Henrietta Appleton** is our policy officer (England) who believes that policy needs to facilitate ‘right people, right approach, right place, right result’ to support nature’s recovery.



### Who would have foreseen that the legal protection of badgers is now a hindrance to the conservation of some red-listed species?

This Government could revisit the recommendation of the Law Commission in 2015 and seek to introduce a regular (five-yearly) review of schedules, such as the Badger Act, so that the level of protection can vary according to the conservation success of the species.

of schedules so that the level of protection can vary according to the conservation success of the species.

Rather than legal protection, a better less prescriptive approach would be to focus on harnessing individual motivation (hence right people) supported by policy that allows for good governance and management. This is the approach taken by other international designations such as the IUCN Green List which regards good governance, sound design and planning, and effective management as the baseline components supporting successful conservation outcomes.

The 'right place' is also a subject of debate. Focusing on protected areas and nature reserves has value in site specific and rare species but lacks the scale and extent to deliver for more mobile species and for wildlife as a whole. The overall ambition of the Global Biodiversity Framework is to halt the loss of biodiversity across the world. However, it is the translation of these global targets to national, local and particularly individual land holding level that is important, as it is at the micro-scale that effectiveness is key yet presents the greatest difficulty.

The 'right result' is clearly wildlife recovery. The approach outlined above (and often in GWCT literature) is based on science and has resulted in 'gold star' examples where private investment (not tied by top-down policy approaches) has achieved demonstrable success in reversing wildlife declines (see The Right Result box). It is important that policy allows for species recovery to be complementary to economic land uses such as farming and sustainable game management.

In a land where we have competing priorities for limited funds it simply makes no sense to curtail private sector delivery through top-down protection with its associated restrictions – especially as we are all the losers if nature continues to decline. ■

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Elin plans to develop the Welsh Farming network.

## Elin Thomas

### Boost for farming community

ELIN THOMAS JOINED GWCT WALES IN April as our new agriculture and conservation officer. Experienced in the agriculture sector, Elin will work with the GWCT's existing farming community, and develop this network of farmers more widely across Wales. The farming community is a platform from which to share GWCT science, to represent farmers and demonstrate the work that farmers are actively doing to increase biodiversity and wildlife on their farm. It is also a means of engaging with the whole rural community and will continue to develop so that we can deliver educational material, based on our work to wider audiences. It is a valuable means of showcasing skills, experiences and actions. Our priority is to ensure that farmers are at the heart of agri-environment policy making. We hope this gives us and our farmers a voice to deliver a powerful message to the Welsh Government. For more information please visit: [gwct.wales/farming-community](http://gwct.wales/farming-community).

### Royal Welsh Show

MORE THAN 200,000 VISITORS FLOCKED to the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show at the end of July. The GWCT Cymru stand located at the Countryside Care Area included the use of two ponds for pond dipping activities which was popular with families. Discussions were hosted by the GWCT Cymru team including talks about the Welsh uplands.

[gwct.org.uk/wales](http://gwct.org.uk/wales)



James Warrington flying the drone to look for curlew nests.

## Curlew Connections

### The use of thermal optic drones in locating nests

CURLEW CONNECTIONS WALES IS GAINING MOMENTUM IN MONTGOMERYSHIRE. The nesting season went well and Katie Appleby, curlew and people officer, and Julieanne Quinlan, project manager, continue to work to foster robust relationships with farmers, landowners, and local communities to understand the current breeding curlew areas. An extensive nest finding programme was supported by our dedicated volunteers, Nest Finder and the use of thermal optic drones in locating nests. As nests were detected, nest protection measures were swiftly deployed. In tandem with non-lethal protection, lethal predator control provided additional protection for the parents and chicks during this vulnerable stage. We are awaiting the results of our monitoring efforts to pinpoint local challenges impacting the local breeding populations.

To celebrate the first year on the ground, the project launched its first 'World Curlew Day' celebration on 21 April. Held in Llanfyllin, in collaboration with local arts charity, Arts Connections, the day was tailored to the local communities to encourage engagement through the medium of the arts. Sessions in arts and crafts, music and poetry, willow sculpture making, and local storytelling were celebrated. We anticipate even more fun-filled events in 2025 – so stay tuned.



Electric fencing protecting a curlew nest in a field. Using a drone helps us locate the nest so that the farmers can work around them.

FIND OUT MORE



#### MORE INFORMATION

Contact: Interim Director for Wales:  
Lee Oliver [loliver@gwct.org.uk](mailto:loliver@gwct.org.uk)  
07984 016102.



The Balgonie walk demonstrated to policymakers how productive agriculture and biodiversity can co-exist.

## Balgonie in focus

### Demonstrating biodiversity on the farm

FARMERS, POLICYMAKERS AND Government agencies visited Balgonie this summer to look at different mixes of cover crops, soil and root structure, 'gappy' hedges, and wildlife corridors, with conversations around agro-economics and biodiversity. The success at Balgonie is reflected in the data, with grey partridge breeding pairs up by 44% since 2014, and autumn covey counts increased by 320%. This year the breeding bird surveys on the farm identified 33 different bird species.

The PepsiCo Fab (Farmland Arable Biodiversity) project demonstrates how productive agriculture does not need to be negatively impacted to promote biodiversity on the farm. With six farms taking part the project is co-ordinated by the GWCT and PepsiCo, with Scottish Agronomy, NatureScot, and Kingdom Farming as partners.

## Minister visits the Scottish Game Fair

No sleep for 27 hours but the Minister still made it to the GWCT Game Fair

THE DAY AFTER THE UK ELECTION NIGHT COUNT, Jim Fairlie, MSP Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, enjoyed a tour of our central exhibit at the GWCT Scottish Game Fair, and then an informal discussion and conversation over a policy lunch having had no sleep for 27 hours. Discussions focused on the need for greater collaboration to tackle the twin challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, and also how to trial different options and adapt our practices through learning what works in balancing productive land management with biodiversity stewardship. These themes carried over into later panel discussions at the fair when NFUS President, Martin Kennedy, spoke passionately about what farmers already do for nature and the complementary benefits between game management, predator control and agriculture.



(Left) Jim Fairlie, MSP, enjoying a tour of our central exhibit at the GWCT Scottish Game Fair.



One female lapwing was colour ringed as a chick in 2019 and has returned to the same field every year.

## Ringing waders

### Gaining insight into life history and movements

VISITORS TO UK BEACHES MIGHT WELL have seen gulls or other shorebirds carrying a fancy looking bit of jewellery around their legs. These are rings that can hold a huge amount of scientific value. Using rings means that individual birds can be marked which enables us to have an incredible insight into their life history, movements and migrations. Many projects have been developed using colour ring combinations which are unique and can identify individuals without the need to re-trap the bird. They also have the added advantage of allowing anyone to submit records of where and when they have seen ringed birds.

We have been colour ringing lapwing at Auchnerran since 2018, with 20 unique combinations this year alone and this has given us some fantastic records of birds returning. One amazing female lapwing was colour ringed as a chick at Auchnerran in 2019. Since then, we have recorded her returning to the exact same field, within the same 5m<sup>2</sup> area every year. Amazingly, in each year, she has successfully reared chicks to fledging age (two, two and one respectively) and means she is fledging roughly 1.67 chicks per year, which amidst national declines, probably puts her among the most successful breeding lapwing in Scotland.

You can report seeing ringed birds at: [app.bto.org/euring/lang/pages/rings.jsp](http://app.bto.org/euring/lang/pages/rings.jsp).

[gwct.org.uk/scotland](http://gwct.org.uk/scotland)



The winning team from the Country Food Trust.

## Scottish Game Awards

### GWCT Scottish Game Fair a resounding success

THE GWCT SCOTTISH GAME FAIR HELD AT SCONE PALACE IN JULY IS A FANTASTIC celebration of rural life and this year saw record visitor numbers making it the highest-performing weekend in the show's 35-year history. One of the many highlights of the fair is the Fred Taylor Memorial Trophy for Working Hill Ponies. This year the winner was stalker Kevin Wilson from the Reay Forest Estate with 13-year old mare Dawn, judged by Sylvia Ormiston.

In the first running of the Scottish Game Awards, a new joint venture between Scottish Land and Estates, GWCT and Scotland's Regional Moorland Groups, the winners were:

**Game Champion of the Year** – the Country Food Trust. Highly commended – Winston Churchill Venison; Angus Glens Moorland Group and Strathmore Rugby Club Partnership.  
**Conservation and Sustainability in Sporting** – Glenogil Estate & Game Conservancy Deutschland Partnership. Highly commended – Seafield and Strathspey Estates.  
**Gamekeeping Team of the Year** – Auchnafree Estate. Highly commended – Dalnaspidal Grouse Moor.

**Special judges' commendation** – Conor Kelly, headkeeper at Stanhope and Patervan Estate.

**Fishing Beat of the Year** – Bemersyde Fishing. Highly commended – Kercock Fishings.

The GWCT extends its congratulations to all those recognised by these awards.

## Rural education day

### Findynate Estate hosts pupils

THE GWCT AND THE ROYAL HIGHLAND Education Trust Perth and Kinross (RHET) held a rural education day at Findynate Estate, Strathhtay, attended by around 70 year five and six pupils from local schools. Pupils learnt about the importance of woodland and forestry, what's involved in moorland management, what a gamekeeper does, some basic game cookery, farming for sheep and cattle, and the importance and delivery of conservation in the countryside. The day was kindly sponsored by CR Smith, RHET and BASC Scotland with support from Findynate.



Pupils meet the dog team at Findynate.



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# The wrong trees in the wrong place

When woodland replaced grouse management in south west Scotland, the devastating impact on priority species warns of what could happen in other parts of the UK uplands



## Impact of Afforestation

**5,000** pairs of breeding curlew lost from south west Scotland

**1,750** pairs of curlew lost from the southern Cheviots

**20%** of former UK moorland is now covered with coniferous plantations



Large commercial forestry plantations in Galloway have led to increases in the number of foxes and crows, which predate on wader eggs and chicks. When predation management stopped it limited curlew productivity to unsustainable levels.



Over the last 10 years, curlews have emerged as a leading priority for conservationists in the UK. Their numbers have declined by more than two-thirds since the mid-1990s, and there are now real fears that the birds could become extinct as a breeding species, particularly in Wales and the south of England. This decline is even more concerning because the UK holds a large proportion of the world's Eurasian curlew population, which is classified by the IUCN as 'Near Threatened'.

Research has shown that curlews can live for up to 30 years, and adult birds have a high annual survival rate. Declines stem from the fact that breeding success is often very poor, and the number of chicks produced each year is too low to replace the slow but steady loss of older birds. Each breeding season represents another tiny loss, which slowly accumulates over many years and perhaps even decades. This has meant that curlew declines can be difficult to see and understand on the ground.

Conservationist Patrick Laurie runs a hill farm near Dumfries in south west Scotland where he has witnessed the steady decline of this iconic wader throughout his lifetime. He said: "When we look to address the causes of curlew decline, we often need to work back in time to confront problems which might have started 20 or 30 years ago. The situation is confusing and complex, and it doesn't help that adult birds will return to the same fields each year to lay their eggs, regardless of whether or not they are successful. It's no wonder that farmers and conservationists find it easy to assume that all is well. At the same time, curlews have always been widespread, abundant birds. Many people find it hard to imagine that they could ever be in trouble."

Since the curlew's decline is linked to poor breeding success, research has focused upon eggs and young birds. It has become clear that curlew chicks are experiencing a range of complicated problems, which vary between

## In the uplands, extensive areas of woodland creation have destroyed curlew habitats

different regions. In some lowland areas, breeding attempts are being destroyed by agricultural operations, particularly where these are linked to intensive grassland management. Silage is cut too soon or too frequently, and the speed and intensity of that work has driven a number of local populations to the brink.

In the uplands, the creation of extensive areas of woodland has destroyed curlew habitats. The problem is particularly acute in southern Scotland, which has seen a huge increase in commercial forestry. Afforestation also leads to increases in the number of foxes and crows. These generalist predators steal eggs and eat chicks at levels that often prove to be unsustainable.

Patrick has recorded 119 curlew nesting attempts in Galloway over several years and only a single chick was produced during that time. He said: "Curlews were always here when I was growing up. When I got into conservation, we were doing everything we could to protect black grouse, and nobody gave a second's thought to curlews. They had always been so common; it was hard to imagine they'd ever go downhill."

Patrick's farm lies in a good area for curlews, with a mix of moorland, white grassland and improved pasture where sheep and cattle are grazed. This entire area was managed for shooting, including driven grouse, until the 1960s, and a neighbouring beat still holds the record grouse bag for this part of Galloway. The old game books reveal not only a wealth of grouse in those days but also golden plover, black grouse and mountain hares being shot right up to around 1964. After this, pieces of moorland were gradually sold off for a range of interests and the land's sporting value

Patrick Laurie remembers when curlew were widespread and abundant.

declined dramatically. Many of the old beats were planted with commercial forestry in the 1970s and 80s, and records show that various species vanished soon afterwards.

Retired shepherd Jim Hamilton remembers the collapse of lapwings on the hill once the moors were broken up. "Lapwings were the first to go. They crashed very quickly, and soon we were left with little more than a handful of birds. Within 10 years, they had all gone. Since that very steep decline, the birds on the hill have just been petering out. For a while, it seemed like curlews would survive the change, but they're fading away too now. It's a very sad state of affairs, and it started when the hill was broken up and the keepers left."

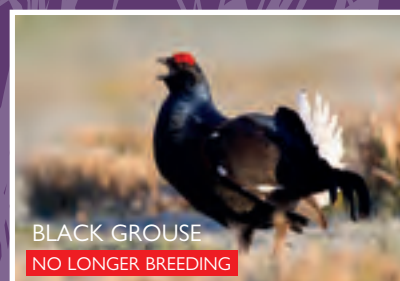
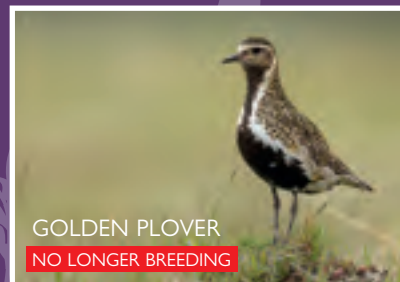
Jim went on to explain: "The driving force behind these declines was increased predation, which coincided with a change in grazing patterns. Fox and crow numbers seemed to boom in the new forestry plantations, and there was an increase in sheep stocking, which ate out some of the best habitats. Curlews found their nests were more vulnerable to predation at precisely the moment when predator numbers were rising. It seems obvious to me that if we want birds like curlews for the future, we have to base our work on predator control. Even the most vocal critics of shooting will admit that grouse moor keepers provide a rock-steady foundation for curlews and a variety of other wading birds."

Without gamekeepers, it became impossible for busy shepherds to keep on top of predator numbers and the curlew population began to decline. Patrick said: "In 2010, the hill held roughly 12 pairs of curlews, but it's telling that we simply don't know for sure. Back then, nobody really thought of counting them. The number of birds on the hill steadily dwindled until 2021, when we were left with a single pair. Their nesting attempt failed, and no more birds came after them. That was the end of curlews here. Curlews boomed when our hill was looked after as part of a grouse moor, and the number of birds collapsed as various aspects of that management were withdrawn. The same forces which drove out mountain hares and golden plover in Galloway simply took much longer to drive out curlews, but the end result was always inevitable."

Working with local curlew enthusiast John Murray, Patrick ran a survey of curlews across a large part of Galloway during the spring of 2022. The search uncovered a woefully small number of birds still breeding in the landscape. John afterwards commented that the result was worse than anybody thought. He said: "People knew that curlews were doing badly here, but nobody realised it was this bad. Even in former 'hotspots', the number of birds was depressingly low, and the only positive stories came from farms and estates where predator control is carried out. That said, even some of these places were struggling. It seems like predator control is an important tool, but it has to happen across big areas to be really effective. In this landscape of small hill farms and new forestry, there just aren't enough people working together in the same direction."

Against national trends of decline and collapse, it's clear curlews that breed on land managed for grouse shooting actually do very well. Their numbers are stable on many moors, and on some they are even increasing.

## Wildlife Declines on Patrick's farm





That's partly down to the issue of scale: bigger estates can make decisions across extensive areas of upland habitat, and they can drive changes across large areas to make a real difference. When you compare a map of

## Curlews boomed when our hill was looked after as part of a grouse moor

### RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

## Ground-nesting birds in Scotland



Nick Hesford, Head of Advisory – Scotland

I co-authored a scientific report titled *Changes in the abundance of some ground-nesting birds on moorland in South West Scotland*, published in 2018, which found severe declines for several species of ground-nesting birds. The study looked at trends for moorland birds in the region, compared to the whole of Scotland, and then focused on two Special Protection Areas, Langholm and Muirkirk, to examine changes in land use and moorland bird numbers. The report found clear declines for several species of ground-nesting moorland birds in south west Scotland that closely mirror those seen elsewhere in the UK and which may be attributed to land-use change, including afforestation and agricultural intensification or abandonment, as well as a decline in the extent of grouse moor management. This management can help retain heather moorland, and may form stable habitats where prescribed burning, sympathetic grazing and predator control can help conserve numbers of some upland birds. The effect of losing grouse moor management was clearly shown in both case studies, where significant declines in ground-nesting birds occur in tandem with the loss of keeping. ■

curlew distribution with grouse moor management, the link is very clear. England's population of curlews lines up almost precisely with the Peak District, the Yorkshire Dales and the Pennines, all of which are associated with grouse moor management. The same is true in Scotland, where extraordinarily high densities of curlews are found in the grouse shooting heartlands of upland Angus, Aberdeenshire and Perthshire.

These birds owe their success to a programme of predation management during the rearing season and the provision of varied habitat associated with grouse moor management. In many areas, curlews choose to nest in patches of recently burnt heather, and there are clear benefits linked to the sort of careful grazing management required by grouse. Importantly, curlews are particularly associated with the moorland fringe, those bits of wet, often rushy moorland that are found around the moor itself. Those connections between farming and sporting management are crucial, and it's clear that predator control and habitat management extends beyond the areas that are most productive for grouse.

For Patrick, it is important that this success is recognised, as well as the devastating impact on a range of iconic species when grouse management is halted. He said: "Curlew are extraordinarily popular birds. It's hard to put a finger on precisely why they are held in such high esteem, but there's no doubt that everybody loves them. The sound of a curlew calling in the spring is a landmark of the changing seasons, and while many species live alongside these birds on moors and the lowland floodplains across the UK, curlews have come to represent a wealth of farmland and upland biodiversity." ■

(L-R) Natural regeneration of native plant species on the moorland edge is an example of the right place; one of the last curlew photographed by Patrick on his farm in 2016; some of the best habitats were destroyed by over grazing.

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## RESEARCH &amp; DEMONSTRATION

# SHOOTING & CONSERVATION

The latest news, advice and events

## In Brief



Trevor Rigby (left) receiving his trophy.

## A worthy winner

THIS YEAR THE JUDGES HAD NO hesitation in awarding the Jas. Martin Lincolnshire Grey Partridge Trophy to Trevor Rigby who is a fantastic advocate, ambassador and indeed practitioner of the Partridge Count Scheme. He undertakes the count on a number of farms and shoots across the county and helps encourage them to improve habitat wherever possible. He is also an extremely energetic persuader of waverers to enter their land into the scheme. He is a very worthy winner of this year's trophy.

## Boost for swifts

THE ALLENFORD AND MARTIN DOWN Farmer Clusters, in Wiltshire, facilitated by GWCT advisor Megan Lock, have installed 31 swift nest boxes and eight calling speakers. Megan said: "These boxes provide man-made nesting sites, and the callers let the swifts know they are there which greatly increases the chances of the boxes being used. Farmer Cluster members will be monitoring the boxes and we are already looking at how to expand this project going forward."

## Gamekeepers Welfare Trust

Being there for gamekeepers, stalkers and ghillies. For more information see [thegamekeeperswelfaretrust.com](http://thegamekeeperswelfaretrust.com).



The Aim to Sustain Game Assurance Scheme is working to ensure that game meat becomes a more accessible food product.

# Around the shoot

## Innovative research in practice

### Allerton Project Shoot, Loddington

High standards and best practice game, wildlife and habitat management are key priorities for the shoot at the Allerton Project, informed by many years of GWCT research. To further this commitment, we are a member of the Aim to Sustain Game Assurance Scheme. This scheme is important for all of us to be able to demonstrate our own levels of best practice to each other and inspire confidence in those not already involved in shooting. It must be a key focus for the shooting industry, and can really assist in building a positive relationship with the general public regarding game meat, making it a more accessible food product. Finding a viable outlet for the meat products produced through sustainable shooting is a principal objective, and assurance schemes could be a way to help achieve this and protect the future of our industry. Find out more at: [aimtosustain.org.uk/assurance](http://aimtosustain.org.uk/assurance).

# On the ground

**JOIN THE AIM TO SUSTAIN GAME ASSURANCE**  
Scheme to publicly demonstrate that your game farm or shoot is operating sustainably and to the highest standards possible [aimtosustain.org.uk/assurance](http://aimtosustain.org.uk/assurance).



## This autumn

**ADD PROVISIONS OF WATER OUTSIDE** the release pen, within the game cover crops and woodlands. Utilise header tanks to provide water across the shoot using gravity fed water systems such as bell drinkers.

**FLAIL EDGES OF GAME COVER CROPS** to provide a foraging area to help hold birds within drives before a shoot day. Topping maize at regular intervals allows game to utilise the food value of the crop throughout the year.

**MAINTAIN A TIDY ENVIRONMENT** around release pens and drives. Remove all partridge release pens prior to shooting along with any other disused shoot debris.

**ASSESS THE WOODLAND HABITAT** while the tree canopy is dense, as this will allow you to mark areas which will benefit from thinning or sky-lighting to improve the habitat mosaic. February is ideal to start felling operations, so communicate early with the relevant forestry teams to confirm licenses prior to work.

**AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SCHEMES CAN** be utilised significantly to enhance biodiversity on a shoot. Incorporate a scheme onto the farm to improve game management and species recovery.



Training is now mandatory in Scotland if you want to use spring traps. GWCT offer approved courses.

## HOW TO...

# set a spring trap

**T**he recent introduction of a Wildlife Trapping Licence under the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill 2024 offers a fresh incentive to adhere to current legislation and best practice guidance when it comes to setting spring traps in tunnels – in Scotland and in the UK as a whole. The GWCT Advisory Service has a wealth of experience in advising trap operators on how to set spring traps correctly. Key recommendations include:

- 1. Set traps in accordance with current legislation and manufacturers guidelines.** Stay abreast of recent changes by undergoing regular training.
- 2. Make every effort to reduce the risk of non-target capture.** Identify non-target species that are likely to frequent areas near traps and adjust tunnel designs accordingly. If non-target captures are made, consider moving the trap.
- 3. Avoid setting traps in areas known to be**

inhabited by protected species such as red squirrels or pine marten.

**4. Check traps regularly.** If a bad capture causes an animal to suffer for a prolonged period of time, this might constitute an offence under current animal welfare legislation.

**5. Keep accurate records of all traps set and captures made.**

## DID YOU KNOW?

The GWCT Advisory Service offers independent trap assessments that identify shortcomings and areas of improvement across an estate or farm. We have also developed an easy-to-use platform for digital record keeping. Moreover, as training is now mandatory in Scotland, we offer approved courses starting this October, drawing on our extensive experience in delivering such courses. Please see page 57 or contact [scottishadvisory@gwct.org.uk](mailto:scottishadvisory@gwct.org.uk).

**DID YOU KNOW?** Don't leave it until after the end of the season to book a visit from your GWCT advisor if you are planning improvements to your shoot. An autumn visit allows much more time to implement changes for the 2024/5 season.



**FOR MORE ADVICE** – book a visit or join one of our courses. Get in touch: 01425 651013 (England/Wales) or 0131 202 7670 (Scotland). [gwct.org.uk/courses](http://gwct.org.uk/courses)



CREATING THE ULTIMATE...

## Woodland flushing point

Good flushing cover also offers great habitat for other woodland wildlife.

**S**howing pheasants over treetops in mature woodland offers testing shooting that is rather different from drives where guns stand in the open for birds from a cover crop or other covert.

Getting the birds up there and flying strongly requires good flushing cover with easy opportunities to rise and head towards the guns. Creating this cover also offers great habitat for other woodland wildlife.

### TOP TIPS FOR A FLUSHING POINT

**1.** Strim a two-metre wide track through the wood at least two and a half times as far back from where the guns will stand as the height of the trees. This track will normally have a line of sewelling run out on the shoot day, just before the drive starts.

**2.** Cut alleyways towards the guns for the birds to rise through, with openings to the sky at the far end, and a fringe of full height trees beyond. These should offer the birds an easy 25 to 30 degree rise.

**3.** Thin the canopy on the other side of the sewelling track to allow light penetration to encourage ground cover from where the birds

**Getting the birds up there and flying strongly requires good flushing cover with easy opportunities to rise and head towards the guns. Creating this offers great habitat for other woodland wildlife**

will flush from. Dragging the lop and top from the rising area back here can give instant cover and a climbing frame for regrowth.

**4.** Concentrate some feeders in and around the flushing cover.

**5.** Woodland canopies close over surprisingly quickly, so please make sure to strim the track and check and adjust the freedom of rising every year before the shooting season.

For bespoke advice contact our advisors who will be able to tailor their recommendations to your land. Email [advisory@gwct.org.uk](mailto:advisory@gwct.org.uk) or ring 01425 651013.





The song thrush has a series of repeated phrases sung one after another.

**SPECIES SPOTLIGHT...**

# The serenading song thrush

**T**he song thrush is one of the earliest birds to start singing in the morning, often starting at 3am, and then again at dusk. They sing from late winter all the way through to July, with a loud and very clear song, which does vary from bird to bird. However, the song has a series of repeated phrases sung one after another, which distinguishes it from a singing blackbird or mistle thrush. Song thrushes are widespread throughout Europe, and as far east as Siberia. Northern populations are migratory, heading to Africa, whereas most of our song thrushes tend to be residents holding on to the same territories over the winter, so can be seen year-round. Song thrush breed from March until April, often producing up to three broods of up to five blue, spotty eggs in a cup-shaped nest in trees, close to the trunk. They are also famous for their habit of bashing snails on a stone, or an 'anvil' as it is called, to crack open snail shells. Although once one of our most common birds, it is now unfortunately an amber-listed species of conservation concern as it has declined significantly since 1970.

**WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?**

1. Aim to cut farm and garden hedges on rotation to boost berry production and protect nest sites from predation.
2. Establish areas of wild bird crops. Kale is particularly favoured for foraging.
3. Aim to create extended margins in arable and grassland fields to increase feeding opportunities.
4. Try to leave damp areas in field corners

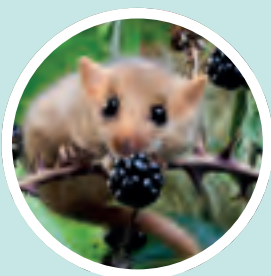
and gardens to maintain insect populations.

5. Song thrushes are vulnerable to molluscicides, so a consultation with your agronomist is advised for best practice slug control to prevent poisoning.

**Megan Lock** is our farmland biodiversity advisor working with farmers to improve habitats for wildlife on their farms.



**THIS WORK ALSO BENEFITS**



Piles of broken

## snail shells

are a good indicator of a song thrush's presence.



© Keith Hider

All traps operators are now required to complete an approved training course.

# Get ahead of the game

Scottish Government/NatureScot approved training courses

THE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AND Muirburn (Scotland) Act 2024, makes it illegal to use certain traps to kill or take a wild bird or mammal without a licence. In order to obtain a licence to use spring (tunnel) traps or catch-alive corvid traps (including multi-catch crow cages, Larsen traps, Larsen mate traps, and Larsen pod traps) all trap operators will be required to complete an approved training course, **regardless of whether or not they have undergone training in the past.** The training courses offered by the GWCT Advisory Services have been approved by NatureScot and Scottish Government and carefully prepared to an agreed standard. They are designed to help all land managers, including gamekeepers, understand and observe current legislation and best practice. Each course is a half-day of training and provides successful candidates with the necessary certificate to obtain their unique licence number, which must be fitted to each trap while in use.

The next series of GWCT courses is due to be run in autumn/winter 2024/2025 on the following dates:

## Corvid Trapping

Glenogil, Angus Glens: 16 or 17 October.  
Cardney, Perthshire: 30 or 31 October.  
Carfraemill, Scottish Borders: 6 or 7 November.  
Strathnairn, Inverness-shire: 12 or 13 November.  
Durisdeer, Dumfries & Galloway: 5 or 6 February 2025.

## Spring (Tunnel) Trapping

Glenogil, Angus Glens: 16 or 17 October.  
Cardney, Perthshire: 30 or 31 October.  
Carfraemill, Scottish Borders: 6 or 7 November.  
Strathnairn, Inverness-shire: 12 or 13 November.  
Durisdeer, Dumfries & Galloway: 5 or 6 February 2025.

To book a place on one of our Scottish Government/NatureScot approved training courses this autumn and in 2025, please contact us on 01425 651013 or [scottishadvisory@gwct.org.uk](mailto:scottishadvisory@gwct.org.uk). All courses are also bookable on [gwct.org.uk/events/calendar/](http://gwct.org.uk/events/calendar/). We will also consider running bespoke courses for groups at other venues on agreed dates.

[gwct.org.uk/advisory](http://gwct.org.uk/advisory)

## In Brief



Rules are to protect non-target wildlife like barn owls.

© Lionel Gibraltar

## New rodenticide use rules

IN JULY, NEW REGULATIONS CAME into effect for gamekeepers using second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs). These updates mean SGARs can no longer be used in open areas and must be applied only near buildings. The aim is to protect non-target wildlife, like barn owls, which have been found to have high levels of SGAR residues due to their prey being exposed to these rodenticides.

### Key points

- The new rules start on 1 January 2025.
- Usage restrictions: SGARs will only be usable in and around buildings.
- Legal compliance: Not following these guidelines can lead to legal consequences.

### Alternative rodent control methods

Gamekeepers are encouraged to:

- Reduce food and shelter sources for rats.
- Implement other methods such as trapping, shooting, and other rodenticides.
- Explore cholecalciferol products as they are safer for non-target animals.

**Training and certification:** Updated training courses will be available by the end of the year, ensuring compliance and best practice. For more details and to access updated resources, go to [thinkwildlife.org](http://thinkwildlife.org).

## In Brief

## CONTACT US

FOR ADVICE OR A COMPLETE LIST of training courses please email [advisory@gwct.org.uk](mailto:advisory@gwct.org.uk) or ring our specialist advisors on 01425 651013 (England), 07741 902021 (Wales) or 0131 202 7670 (Scotland). [gwct.org.uk/courses](http://gwct.org.uk/courses)

# John Marchington

## An appreciation

NEWS OF JOHN MARCHINGTON'S PASSING AT THE AGE OF 96 came as we were going to press with the previous *Gamewise*, so here we give a fuller appreciation of his life and contribution to the GWCT.

John was a passionate sportsman and well known in the world of shooting and conservation, with regular contributions to the sporting press, and books on topics as wide ranging as game shoot management, wildfowling and ferreting – all illustrated with his own superb photos.

He had tremendous energy and drive, and from humble beginnings built his own highly successful estate agency business with 24 branches across southern England, while still finding time to indulge his passion for fishing, shooting and tennis. Indeed, it was through tennis that he met Janet, his wife of almost 70 years. They honeymooned on Skye, where he had visited once before: the start of a joint life-long passion for the island. There they found a second home and holidayed with family every year, enjoying the hard work of tramping the moors for a few grouse, hunting the bracken areas for rabbits, salmon fishing when conditions were right, and generally enjoying the low key but wonderfully diverse sport that Skye has to offer.

John joined what was then The Game Conservancy's council in 1976, becoming a trustee when The Game Conservancy Trust (GCT) was formed in 1980, and taking the chair of the development committee in 1989, before retiring from council and becoming a vice president in 1990. Richard Van Oss, now in his 90s, who was director general for much of the time when John was on council, remembers him as an astute businessman, who was a considerable support in the development of the Trust.

John always did whatever he could to support us, a typical example being his generosity in the supply of many of the best shooting related photos in the GCT picture library.

Mike Swan

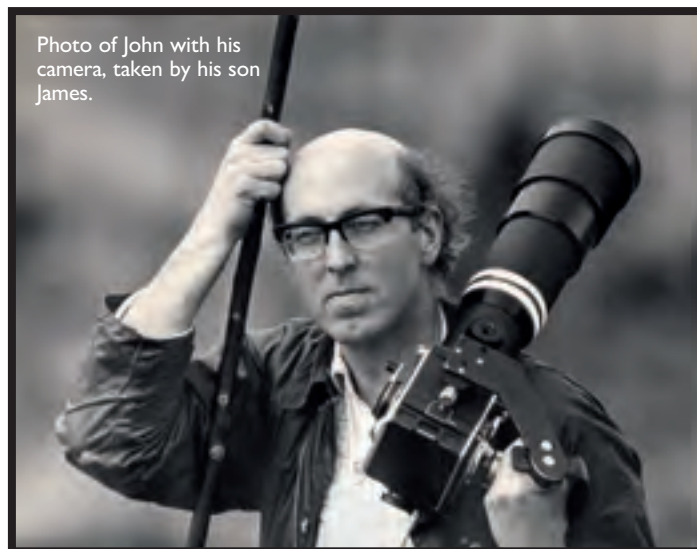


Photo of John with his camera, taken by his son James.



John was passionate about the countryside.

# Keith Howman

## A well-travelled life

WORLD PHEASANT ASSOCIATION (WPA) CO-FOUNDER, AND former trustee of the GWCT, Keith Howman OBE died on 17 March 2024, aged 88. Together with his wife Jean, who survives him, and four friends, he established the WPA in 1975 with the intention of funding captive breeding centres and international community-based projects to protect endangered galliformes (the order of birds to which pheasant, grouse and partridge belong). Today the WPA has chapters around the world and is running long-term projects in Vietnam, Pakistan, Greece, Indonesia, Nepal, Cambodia, Uganda, and Cameroon. As chairman in the 1980s, then president and finally president emeritus, Keith spearheaded the charity, volunteering countless hours and hosting numerous events including an annual clay-shooting competition and auction at which a team from GWCT always took part.

Keith believed in the importance of scientific research and the WPA funded several GWCT projects. Most recently it engaged GWCT's director of advisory, Roger Draycott, to provide advice on habitat creation and management for the critically endangered black-necked pheasant. Reduced to a small population in north-east Greece, it is the only European native pheasant and likely ancestor of the old English gamebird. Roger said: "It was a privilege to know Keith, his enthusiasm for conservation was inspiring and what his charity has achieved and continues to do is nothing short of remarkable. There was a natural affinity with the GWCT and Keith embodied the principal of the sporting conservationist, recognising that the shooting community would support efforts to save the world's endangered wild pheasant populations."

Joe Dimbleby



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## Living with greys

The superb new must buy book

IF THERE IS ONE BOOK ON YOUR 'must buy' list, it has to be Tarquin Millington-Drake's *Living with Greys*. Glossy coffee table books come and go but this one is very special, as the quality of the photography and the text is without equal. The book takes us through a year in the life of a population of grey partridges on a farm in the Cotswolds managed by George Ponsonby who has, over some years, attempted a grey partridge restoration project based on GWCT research. The restoration was photographically documented by the author culminating in the publication of this book. The attempt has been a resounding success with a starting count of 17 pairs on 1,500 acres (or a pair to each 88 acres) to 135 pairs (or a pair per 11 acres). Along the way, there have been enjoyable days of driven wild grey partridges. In the UK, you can do this in places you can count on two hands, usually with one hand behind your back.

*Living with Greys* takes us through the year, season by season with photographs of pairs during the nesting season, small chicks as broods foraging for insects in specially designed brood-rearing covers and coveys of birds in the autumn and winter. The photography is superb and obviously reflects very many hours in their creation. It reminds me of why so many of us at the GWCT have dedicated so much of our careers to the conservation of this wonderful bird.

Unlike other books, the text is accurate and describes the resources needed by birds at all times of the year and how management of the farm and predators can be made to provide them. If you struggle to choose Christmas gifts, your problems are over.

Nick Sotherton



The book takes us through a year in the life of a population of grey partridges restored on a farm in the Cotswolds.

## Raising funds

Donating gun proceeds to the GWCT



THANKS TO THE GENEROSITY OF GWCT SUPPORTERS, the Holts Auctioneers Charity and Legacy Programme has raised another £12,500 for the GWCT so far this year. The market for antique and modern guns is still incredibly buoyant with the USA and other overseas buyers accounting for nearly half the lots sold.

If you are interested in having a gun or related item valued, please book into a Holts valuation day. Holts would also be pleased to talk to you about donating the proceeds of the sale of a gun to the GWCT. They will handle the entire transaction, from collection to sale, and 100% of the hammer price of your items will be donated on your behalf to the GWCT with no fees for you. Find out more at [holtsauctioneers.com/legacy.asp](https://holtsauctioneers.com/legacy.asp) or call David Thurgood on 01297 306123.



## Shoot sweepstakes

Could you run a sweepstake for the GWCT this season?

RUNNING A SHOOT SWEEPSTAKE IS AN easy way to support the GWCT and the shoots below explain why they take part.

"I help run a small shoot and hold a sweepstake on shoot days. The bag size is around 50 birds and because it is unpredictable, we go for a winning number = bag x species. Half goes to the winner and half to the GWCT, with some winners donating it all. We usually give around £200 and the following season I always announce how much we raised, which is appreciated by all the guns."  
Ian Bowler, Friars Court shoot

"Our shoot sweepstake scheme has proved extremely popular. We ask for a £10 stake. (£5 for shots fired and £5 for birds in the bag at the end of the day), with every penny going to the GWCT. You don't win any money, but you do win the chance to come and shoot next season as my guest. With two winners per shoot, odds are good with the end of season draw containing about 50 names."  
Andrew Reis, Fifield Bavant shoot

"As a roving syndicate, we have supported the GWCT sweepstake since it was introduced. We ask all our guns to pay £10, with 50% going to the GWCT to help support its research, and 50% to the winner of the draw. The guns also enjoy a drop of sloe gin on shoot days, which is provided by the GWCT for our efforts."  
Chris Stone, The Wednesday Syndicate

If you could support us by running a GWCT sweepstake we would be very grateful. We supply all the sweepstake material, including shoot cards illustrated by Owen Williams, and you will receive a bottle of sloe gin for every £100 raised. Please email [sweepstakes@gwct.org.uk](mailto:sweepstakes@gwct.org.uk) for your free pack.

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## BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

### Unique experiences in Bucks

THE GWCT WAS THE GRATEFUL benefactor along with Spinal Muscular Atrophy of the simulated **game day** set in the stunning grounds of West Wycombe and led by Edward van Cutsem. The challenging and sporting clays by E J Churchill and the generous hospitality of Sir Edward Dashwood, helped raise more than £74,000.

Edward van Cutsem auctioneering during lunch.



Three guests enjoyed a unique rifle experience at Padbury Hill courtesy of Justin Farrington Smith and one of the UK's leading rifle experts Bruce Potts. The lucky three bought the 'money can't buy' lot at the February dinner and part of the experience was to shoot a WW2 Mauser K98 German sniper rifle and its Russian counterpart a Mosin Nagart as portrayed in the film 'Enemy at the gate'. Save the date for the next Brook's dinner on 27 March 2025.

West Wycombe Estate hosted the Chiltern **gundog fun day** by kind permission of Sir Edward and Lady Dashwood. More than 100 dogs competed in trials along with a fun timed scurry. Thanks to sponsors Muntjac Trading, Skinners and the Chiltern Gun Dog Society, £2,350 was split between the GWCT and Medical Detection Dogs.

## CORNWALL

### Conservation work at the fore

"WELCOME TO PROBABLY THE SMALLEST driven shoot in the county, if not the country!" Trevannel Farm hosted this year's shoot walk by kind permission of Gary Morse. Guests enjoyed an excellent tour of the farm's drives guided by Gary and GWCT advisor, Mike Swan. Trevannel Farm was a runner up in the Purdey Awards and it was clear to see the amount of work that Gary puts into conservation.

The Blazing Barrels clay shoot returned with more than 20 teams shooting across three fast and furious drives on the Werrington Park Estate, by kind permission of Tom Williams.

Teams competed for prizes including hand turned, Blazing Barrels wooden clay pigeon trophies and a selection of Eley shotgun cartridges. Thanks to sponsors Eley and Werrington Park Equestrian.

Guests enjoying the spectacular Trevannel Farm shoot walk.



## BEDFORDSHIRE



(L-R) Hugo Johnson, Castleacre, Richard Rampley winner of the Grey Partridge award, and Roger Draycott, GWCT.

### Willow Hill walk

A RECORD TURNOUT OF GUESTS enjoyed the farm walk at Willow Hill Farm courtesy of the Davison family. The grey partridge award was also presented to Richard and Andrew Rampley. Thank you to sponsors Castleacre, Hutchinsons, NFU Mutual (Beds), Oakbank, Tuckwells and Robinson Hall.

## CAMBRIDGESHIRE

A short-eared owl spotted on the shoot walk.



### Simulated game

THE CLAY DAY AT SIX MILE BOTTOM saw Pecks clench victory in a competitive and sporting challenge. Thanks to sponsors Ashton Legal and Country Store. Guests also enjoyed a fascinating shoot walk at Green Drove Farm by kind invitation of Michael Sly, to see a commercial farm in the fens supporting a fantastic wild pheasant shoot.

## DERBYSHIRE & S YORKSHIRE

### Wonderful moorland

THE RIMINGTON WILSON FAMILY hosted a wonderful evening on their stunning moor at Broomhead, near Sheffield. GWCT's Matt Goodall, together with our host and the keepers talked through all the complexities of managing heather moorland, not only for grouse but all wildlife and in particular ground-nesting birds.

## DORSET



Guests viewed fascinating topography in Dorset.

### Bridehead shines

THE SUN SHONE ON DORSET AS GUESTS arrived at the **Bridehead Estate** by kind permission of Sir Philip and Lady Williams. A range of topics were covered including Ash dieback, SSSI's and invasive species, and Mike Swan was on hand to answer some complex questions. Guests enjoyed a BBQ and drinks thanks to sponsors Collins Nets, Moons Cider and B Curtis Family Butchers.

## GLOUCESTERSHIRE

### Glorious Campden

THE CLAY SHOOT WAS ENJOYED by 26 teams in glorious surroundings. This was our final time at Campden House and thanks must go to our hosts Tom and Suzie Smith. The winning team was Ashbridge Partners just pipping Guiting Grange. Everyone then enjoyed lunch provided by Henry Bonas Limited. The two auctions including the top lot, a 300 bird day generously donated by Jason Houghton, helped raise £45,000 bringing the total raised over three years to almost £130,000 which is a tremendous effort. Thanks to sponsors Ashbridge partners Weatherby's Hamilton, Forsters, Evelyn Partners and Perdix Partnership, to everyone who kindly donated auction lots, Tom Smith and Stuart the head keeper and his staff for making the day so enjoyable.

## CUMBRIA

### Hartside win

A SUCCESSFUL TEAM FLUSH CLAY pigeon shoot at Westward Park in July was enjoyed by 25 teams, who were tested on four different flushes. The winning team Hartside Estates score of 365/400 was most impressive. Competitors enjoyed a delicious lunch kindly sponsored by Horse and Farrier, Dacre and Warrendale Wagyu. Thank you to Original Marquees, Hopes Auction Co, Lyon Group Holdings and Edwin Thompson for



The winning team Hartside Estates.

sponsoring clays and traps.

Look out for the game dinner at the Michelin starred restaurant The Dog and Gun, Skelton, Penrith on 13 November.

## E YORKSHIRE

### Sledmere's fascinating history

A WONDERFUL EVENING HOSTED BY Stephen Greenfield and David Foster gave guests a rare glimpse of the Sledmere shoot and its fascinating history. The tour included visiting some spectacular drives, especially the renowned School House Dale. Smailes Goldie kindly sponsored the evening which concluded with superb refreshments.

This year's **Bang Bang Ball** will be at the Pavilion Suite, Lazaat Hotel, Cottingham on 30 November. Tickets include a three-course dinner, dancing with the Ordinary Men and auction, for £75 per person (tables of 10 available). Kindly sponsored by Hull Cartridge Co. Ltd, Gamebore and GSC Grays. See [gwct.org.uk/bangbang2024](http://gwct.org.uk/bangbang2024) for more information.



The walk at Sledmere visited some of the shoot's spectacular drives.

## GCUSA

### GCUSA's 38th annual auction



GAME CONSERVANCY USA'S 38TH AUCTION IN SUPPORT OF THE GWCT will be held on Monday 18 November at the Leash Club in midtown Manhattan, when GCUSA will be honored to welcome GWCT chairman Sir Jim Paice as guest speaker. The cocktail reception is complimentary to members of GCUSA and GWCT; reservations required. For more information contact Robyn Hatch, Director GCUSA at [info@gcusa.org](mailto:info@gcusa.org) or (203) 661-5959. [gcusa.org](http://gcusa.org)

## HERTFORDSHIRE

### Don't miss a delicious game lunch

SAVE THE DATE FOR THE GAME INSPIRED LUNCH AT WESTMINSTER KINGSWAY College, London hosted by chef José Souto on the 14 November. Lunch could be cooked by the next Michelin star chef. Contact Gay Wilmot-Smith [gwilmotsmith@gwct.org.uk](mailto:gwilmotsmith@gwct.org.uk) to book.

## KENT

# Swampies win

THE BTF SPONSORED CLAY SHOOT AT Frogs Hole Farm was blessed with glorious weather. Traps were expertly managed by Phil Ham and his team and saw 25 teams compete and shoot three 100 bird flushes, with The Swampies from Sheppey the overall winners. Guests were treated to a barbeque from James Smith serving his renowned 'Veni' burgers and the day raised more than £20,000.

After an interesting farm walk on the



The Swampies from Sheppey shot very well.

Squaries Estate near Westerham, the next event is the quiz challenge on Friday 15 November at Marden Cricket Club, an evening not to be missed.

## N YORKSHIRE

# Clays, walks and a curlew safari

FOR THE SIXTH YEAR THE WYKEHAM clay shoot raised funds for the GWCT and local charities, amounting to more than £250,000. CEO Teresa Dent said: "This is a tremendous event, and incredibly kind that the GWCT has been supported so wonderfully." This year £45,500 was shared between the GWCT, Scarborough and Ryedale Mountain Rescue and local charities. Thank you to everyone who supported including Hatfields, the headline sponsor, the team at Dawnay Estates and Viscount Downe for hosting.

More than 30 guests attended the river walk with David Bamford, river manager from the Yorkshire Dales Salmon Group and Dylan Roberts, GWCT's head of fisheries, talking about practical river management and the latest research on salmon and sea trout. The evening rounded off with excellent refreshments provided by the Coverbridge Inn.

The curlew safari in Wensleydale was sensational. Guests heard from avid conservationists, Lord Bolton and Ian Sleightholm, head keeper from the Bolton Castle Estate, about the essential habitats that help the wader population survive and



Ian Sleightholm with a curlew chick he rescued on the walk.

thrive. Curlew, grouse, lapwing, skylark, oystercatcher and many other bird species were seen in abundance. Everyone enjoyed refreshments at the Wheatsheaf Inn afterwards. A big thank you to GSC Grays for sponsoring both these walks.

On Thursday 7 November the biennial pub quiz will be held at the White Bear Pub, Masham. Teams of eight are invited to participate in an evening of entertainment to include the quiz, supper and vermin auction. Kindly sponsored by Theakstons, Knight Frank and Lycetts. Tickets are £40. For further information contact [sdingwall@gwct.org.uk](mailto:sdingwall@gwct.org.uk).

## LEICESTERSHIRE & RUTLAND

# Challenging clays

TWENTY TEAMS ATTENDED THE CLAY day at Prestwold Hall in May, by kind permission of the Packe-Drury-Lowe family. The teams were shown some challenging clays organised by Honesberrie Shooting, before enjoying a delicious lunch and a competitive auction kindly conducted by Ian Walter. More than £14,000 was raised and this could not have been achieved without the support of the teams and our sponsors, Mather Jamie, Bentley Leicester, Howes Perceval and Oakwood Feeds. Next year's clay shoot will take place on the 22 May.

## LONDON



(Inset) Guest speaker Charlie Jacoby entertained guests at the Summer Dinner.

# Summer Dinner

OUR SECOND SUMMER DINNER AT the Turf Club in July was a resounding success raising £14,500. Guests were greeted with a Champagne reception before indulging in a three-course game dinner, including a peppered venison fillet sponsored by Eat Wild, with refreshing beverages provided by San Pellegrino and Acqua Panna. The highlight was a speech by Charlie Jacoby from Fieldsports Channel, followed by a live auction hosted by Charlie Foley from Christie's, and a raffle. Thank you to Richard George Tailoring and Wilde & Glorious who sponsored the Best Dressed Award, and the Heads & Tails game respectively. The live auction and raffle featured a remarkable array of lots including a Holland & Holland gun fitting, a magnum of Pol Roger, and a conservation tour with stalking on the Abbeystead Estate in Cumbria. Thank you to everyone who supported the evening.

## NORTHUMBERLAND

The popular river walk on the Bywell Beat of the North Tyne.



[gwct.org.uk/events](http://gwct.org.uk/events)

## NORTHAMPTONSHIRE



The Courteenhall winning team Fossil Fuels (Keith Smith, Ian Cross, Elliot Grice, Louise Grice).

## Sporting clay fun

IT WAS A GLORIOUS SPORTING DAY at Courteenhall for the simulated **game day** which saw team Fossil Fuels win the shooting challenge, with an individual sharpshooter win for Jamie Thompson. Thank you to sponsors Carter Jonas, Kings, Sytner Group and Forsters. Richard Wright also held a **clay day** at Glooston, by kind permission of David Crouch, which saw Phil Parkin captain the winning team. Thanks to sponsors Fisher German, TNR Haulage, Belmont Automotive, RJM Plant Hire, Joseph Morris, Corporate Architecture, Euromec, Weatherbys and David Pease.

## SCOTTISH AUCTION

## Outstanding result

ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL SCOTTISH **auction** took place at Prestonfield, Edinburgh in May, raising an outstanding £100,000. Our generous headline sponsors Saffery, Pentland Land Rover and Invenergy were supported by McInroy & Wood, and Highland Game who supplied the delicious venison. A fantastic array of lots included artwork, holiday homes, as well as a fantastic selection of fishing, stalking and shooting, with a Highland shooting day and a week's fishing on the Isle of Lewis taking the top slots. Thank you to Tim Wishart and his committee. Next year's auction will take place on Thursday 1 May.

Guests enjoying the Scottish Auction.



© Roy Summers/Scottish Field

## NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

# Thank you Chris Butterfield



The clay day raised a tremendous £25,000.

THE BIBLICAL RAIN DID NOT DAMPEN the spirits of the 25 teams at the **clay day** at North Lodge Farm, Widmerpool, by kind permission of the Butterfield family. The shooting was won by the Lindholme Boys, before being followed by a delicious game-themed lunch. A fiercely contended auction conducted by Ian Walter helped raise a tremendous £25,000. Thanks to sponsors Stratstone, Evenbrook and Openfield, all the teams and to our auction donors and bidders.

### Farewell to chairman Chris Butterfield

CHRIS AND JULIA BUTTERFIELD HAVE been involved with GWCT Nottinghamshire since 2013 and have raised a staggering £400,000. Averaging at nearly £40,000 per year, with a relatively small membership, they have certainly punched above their weight.

## SCOTLAND – GRAMPIAN

# Keeping the bar raised high

THE SPORTING DINNER AND AUCTION at Lochter Activity Centre in April was a hugely successful event. A record number of guests enjoyed a spectacular game buffet while Colin Slessor of Aberdeen & Northern Marts expertly ran the auction, helping to raise more than £46,000. There was a fantastic array of lots, and we are very grateful for the generous support from the lot donors, the main sponsor Savills, and to Alan Hamilton and his committee. This was Alan's first event and he's certainly kept the bar raised high.

The **golf day** at Balmoral Estate in June enjoyed fine weather. Teams competed in a Texas Scramble format and played the nine-hole course twice with different tee boxes



Retiring chairman Chris Butterfield and his wife Julia.

Chris has been an absolute stalwart to the GWCT – not only has he raised a huge amount of money, but he has been enormously generous with his time and his own financial input through sponsorship and auction lot donations. A great ambassador of the GWCT, his farm at Widmerpool has hosted many of the events including a country fair, concert and much more. Chris has also implemented many of the GWCT's conservation policies and was previously a runner up in the Purdey Awards, and a finalist in FWAG's Silver Lapwing Award in 2022.

Everything that has been achieved could not have been done without the back up of Julia, his wife, and Vicky, his loyal assistant, as well as all the dedicated team at North Lodge Farm. Their enthusiasm, drive and support will be much missed.



The winning team at the Balmoral Golf Day.

on the back nine. Stuart Stevens' team were crowned the overall winners before enjoying a fantastic BBQ. Huge thanks to all the teams involved and to sponsors Howden Rural.

## SHROPSHIRE

# Joining forces

SHROPSHIRE JOINED FORCES WITH Cheshire to host a mid-summer lunch in June in the spectacular grounds of Cholmondeley Castle, enjoyed by nearly 200 guests. They heard from GWCT chairman, Sir Jim Paice, and guest speaker, Sir Johnny Scott, who entertained the audience with countryside tales and reminded us that country life in the UK is in danger of being lost as too many people lose their rural roots. He emphasised to guests that the country way of life is worth fighting for, so that the next generation can enjoy the same unique relationship with the countryside and all that thrives within it. The auctions, with live lots under the gavel of Bernie Hutchinson, helped raise more than £35,000. The event was supported by principal sponsor GS and PA Reeves and Balfours.



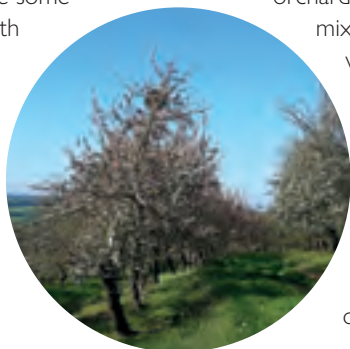
(L-R) Steve Barker, Shropshire chairman, Katy Bickerton, Mary Williams and Richard Goodwin.

In July members enjoyed a river and woodland walk hosted by Steve Barker and family at Leaton Knolls, by kind permission of the Hon Charles Bridgeman. Speaker, GWCT advisor, Matt Goodall, pointed out that with a change of Government if self-regulation isn't deemed to be working then it is likely to be imposed. He explained: "In Wales and Scotland they already have licencing and regulations for releasing gamebirds. English shoots must up their game to stave off regulations." Thank you to sponsors Massey Game Feeds and Bright Seeds.

## WALES

# Unique game management walks

NE WALES: GUESTS ENJOYED A GAME management walk at the Gwysaney Shoot, kindly hosted by James and Sian Davies-Cooke. A tour to the rearing pens where both partridge and pheasants are reared for the shoot, was followed by a visit to see various drives and release pens. A lively discussion followed led by Matt Goodall, GWCT advisor, who also gave some insight into communication with the Welsh Government. On cue and as he did last year, James provided a cuckoo calling to further entertain the group, before providing a homemade lasagne cooked on his BBQ. Many thanks to James and Sian for a lovely evening.



SE WALES: A walk with a difference also took place at the Whitehouse Farm shoot near Monmouth, by kind invitation of Mrs Judith McConnell, McConnell Farms and the shoot's syndicate members, led by part-time keeper Gavin Sinkovski. This is a shoot with a difference as it is a working fruit farm comprising about 450 acres of cider orchards, blackcurrant bushes and mixed woodland. The audience, which included an encouraging number of the younger generation heard GWCT's Matt Goodall, explain how the shoot operated. The walk was rounded off with a buffet supper washed down by the farm's own cider.

Guests enjoying the Gwysaney walk; (inset) the Whitehouse Farm cider orchards.



gwct.org.uk/events

## SUSSEX



The Pitmans team, the overall winners.

# Battle commences

THE STUNNING ORGANIC BATTLE Estate hosted the clay day, kindly sponsored by Gaby Hardwicke, Batchellor Monkhouse and CLM. Great rivalry ensued between the teams, with the eventual winners being The Pitmans. The traps were expertly managed by Phil Ham and a BBQ lunch and auction followed.

The Firle Shooting Club provided the backdrop for the shoot walk, with a view down to the English Channel and beyond. Peter Settlefield, an agronomist and the shoot captain, gave a fascinating talk and showed how 34 hectares devoted to game crops, sited and properly grown can be equally rewarding. A delicious BBQ made it difficult to leave this magical estate.

## WALES

# Ceredigion shoot

THE CLAY SHOOT AT DOVEY VALLEY was once again a great success with eight squads of six guns enjoying the challenges of the valley's 100 clay stands. Steve Duggan won, closely followed by EJ Biddulph, with Andrew Venables and Christopher Ray joint third. The winner of the main raffle prize, a print by Owen Williams, was Alun Ffranc Oliver who at four years old, is a budding supporter of GWCT Cymru.

Alun with his winning print from Owen Williams.



## WARWICKSHIRE

### Top clay day

THIS YEAR'S FOXCOTE CLAY DAY, kindly hosted by Mr and Mrs Wexner, was supported by nearly 30 local teams who enjoyed five drives set up by Honesberie Shooting to make the most of the fabulous topography. The teams were driven around in 4x4 vehicles from Crossroads Garage, before being treated to a delicious meal provided by Izie Slater catering. Auction lots, including the top lot of a day's shooting for eight guns, generously donated by Foxcote Estate, helped to raise a marvellous £30,000. We could not hold such wonderful days without the generosity of sponsors Carter Jonas, Mackenzie Chapel, Lycetts and everyone who donated an auction lot. A huge thank you to the Wexner family, Nigel Elcomb, Greg the head keeper and his team, including all the beaters and Danny Keaney.

## WILTSHIRE

### Biodiversity boost

FONTHILL ESTATE HOSTED THE SHOOT walk with the tour given by the Hon Declan Morrison. Since 2023 the shoot has focused entirely on wild game with the primary objective to build a sustainable population of grey partridges and increase the wider arable conservation. Thank you to sponsors Fowler Fortescue, Velcourt, The Wiltshire Distilling Co and St David's Game Bird Services.

Barbury Shooting School hosted an evening clay shoot with Clay Carnage the winning team and The Ram Ally Rulers taking the top spot for the juniors. The Barrel of Laughs junior ladies team won the flush.

Teresa Dent is the guest speaker at the dinner and auction on 10 October at Wilton, with a tempting wild game menu and an exciting list of auction items on offer.

The Ram Ally Rulers won the junior clay shoot.



# DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

For a full listing see [gwct.org.uk/events](http://gwct.org.uk/events)

## OCTOBER

- 8 **WALES** The Last Curlew, Senedd Cymru, Cardiff Bay, Cardiff, CF99 1SN, [wales@gwct.org.uk](mailto:wales@gwct.org.uk).
- 10 **WILTSHIRE** speaker, dinner and auction, Wilton, Marlborough, Fleur Fillingham [ffillingham@gwct.org.uk](mailto:ffillingham@gwct.org.uk).
- 10 **LEICESTERSHIRE & RUTLAND** gourmet game dinner and auction, Cini Restaurant, Enderby, Leicester, Lottie Meeson 07976 207113 [cmeeson@gwct.org.uk](mailto:cmeeson@gwct.org.uk).
- 11 **CORNWALL** dinner, guest speaker Tom Wood ex-England and Northampton rugby player, Penventon Park Hotel, West End, Redruth, Sheila Tidball [sheila@caerhays.co.uk](mailto:sheila@caerhays.co.uk).
- 16 **LONDON** City of London dinner, Inner Temple, Vanessa Steel [vsteel@gwct.org.uk](mailto:vsteel@gwct.org.uk).
- 24 **NE WALES** A Taste of Game Evening, Bwyty Iâl, Wrexham, [wales@gwct.org.uk](mailto:wales@gwct.org.uk).

## NOVEMBER

- 7 **NORTH YORKSHIRE** pub quiz, The White Bear, Masham, Sophie Dingwall [sdingwall@gwct.org.uk](mailto:sdingwall@gwct.org.uk).
- 7 **LINCOLNSHIRE** Partridge Dinner, Washingborough Hall Hotel, Lincoln, LN4 1EH, Lottie Meeson [cmeeson@gwct.org.uk](mailto:cmeeson@gwct.org.uk).
- 12 **SUFFOLK** quiz night, Trowel and Hammer Inn, Cotton, Stowmarket, Stephen Roberson [sroberson@gwct.org.uk](mailto:sroberson@gwct.org.uk).
- 13 **CUMBRIA** game dinner, The Dog and Gun, Skelton, Penrith, Sarah Peck [peckies@aol.com](mailto:peckies@aol.com).

- 15 **KENT** quiz night, Marden Cricket Club, Fleur Fillingham [ffillingham@gwct.org.uk](mailto:ffillingham@gwct.org.uk).
- 28 **LONDON** Son's & Daughter's Dinner, Savile Club, Iona Campbell [icampbell@gwct.org.uk](mailto:icampbell@gwct.org.uk).
- 28 **DORSET** An evening with Champions – Join Peter Wilson MBE, London 2012 Olympic Double Trap Gold Medallist. Nathan Hales, Paris 2024 Olympic Trap Gold Medallist and Harry Cobden, the 2023/4 Champion Jump Jockey for a live Q&A, Wincanton Racecourse, Sam Middleton 07458147144, [smiddleton@gwct.org.uk](mailto:smiddleton@gwct.org.uk).
- 30 **E YORKSHIRE** Bang Bang Ball, the Pavilion Suite, Lazaat Hotel, Cottingham, Sophie Dingwall [sdingwall@gwct.org.uk](mailto:sdingwall@gwct.org.uk).

## DECEMBER

- 4 **SOMERSET** Christmas drinks party, Old Oak Farm, Back Lane, Curry Rivel, Langport, Sam Middleton [smiddleton@gwct.org.uk](mailto:smiddleton@gwct.org.uk).

## 2025

### MAY

- 22 **LEICESTERSHIRE AND RUTLAND** clay day, Prestwold Hall, Loughborough, Lottie Meeson [cmeeson@gwct.org.uk](mailto:cmeeson@gwct.org.uk) 07976 207113.

We advise checking with the organisers before attending any of the events listed.

The stunning Derbyshire walk at Broomhead moor.



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# ATLANTIC SALMON

Megan Lock shares her top species to look out for

**T**he Atlantic salmon is an anadromous species, a term that comes from the Greek *anadromos*, meaning 'running upward'. They start their lives in the headwaters of their natal river before travelling thousands of miles to their feeding ground in the North Atlantic off the coast of Greenland, before returning, to the same freshwater rivers where they hatched, to spawn.

Salmon have an interesting life cycle, starting life as a fertilised egg buried in the shallow excavated gravel of the well-oxygenated river bed, known as redds. The eggs hatch and the salmon at this stage are known as 'alevin', tiny transparent fish that live in the safety of the gravel. They then grow into small 'fry' before turning into salmon 'parr', maybe 10-12cm long, which have distinctive thumbprints down their flanks with a single red dot between each, feeding on aquatic insects.

After a period of one to six years, the young salmon migrate downstream to the

sea as 'smolts', becoming silvery in colour ready for the challenges of surviving at sea, where they head to the cold waters of the North Atlantic, feeding on smaller fish and crustaceans. They can stay at sea for one year before they return to the same river as 'grilse', or up to four to five years when they return as 'multi-sea-winter fish'.

The salmon that I used to watch leap on the River Test as a child were 'running' upriver, back to their natal headwaters. This is quite a spectacle to see and they are at this stage highly prized by anglers. Salmon find their home river by smell, with the timing and duration of the spawning migration depending on several factors – the population, the size and location of the river, water flow, temperature, tidal cycle and when the conditions in the river are favourable for upstream migration, usually around October to November.

After some time back in fresh water, their silvery livery is changed for a few dark spots on the back and may have a pinkish flush to the

belly. The male also develops a prominent hook or 'kype' on its lower jaw. They do not feed but focus on spawning where they started life, after which most die (often 90-95%), although a few do return to the sea as 'kelts' to feed and return a second time to spawn.

Over the last 40 years, the number of wild Atlantic salmon in our rivers has declined by some 80%. If we do not act now, these magnificent creatures could disappear from our rivers forever. The GWCT fisheries team are working hard to find the answers and reverse the decline before it is too late – [gwct.org.uk/salmon24](http://gwct.org.uk/salmon24). I just hope that my daughter will continue to see the mesmerising bars of silver leaping in her lifetime and on into the next generation. ■

Megan Lock is our farmland biodiversity advisor. She is passionate about the countryside, and here shares her enthusiasm for species to look out for in the coming months.





### Maximise your INEOS Grenadier with the APB Rear Cargo Shelf

The INEOS Grenadier is built for adventure, but even this rugged vehicle can benefit from enhanced organisation. The APB Rear Cargo Shelf is designed specifically for the Grenadier, transforming your cargo area into a two-tiered storage system that maximises space and accessibility.

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[instagram.com/apbtradingltd/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/apbtradingltd/?hl=en)

### Footwear Country

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[footwearcountry.co.uk](https://www.footwearcountry.co.uk)

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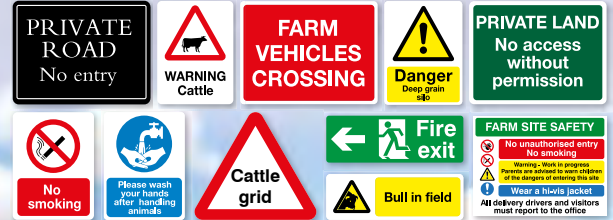
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## THE FINAL WORD

# HUGH PASSMORE

As part of a long-term monitoring project, Hugh believes everyone needs to play a part in helping insects recover

**H**ugh Passmore runs Applesham farm, an 850-acre mixed farm, near Shoreham airport on the South Downs in West Sussex. The farm has been in the family since 1901. Crops include winter wheat, spring barley and rotational grass leys, there is a 60 cow suckler herd and 350 ewe flock. The farm is a member of the Arun to Adur Farmer Cluster and has been monitored as part of the Sussex Study since 1970.

### What have you learnt most from being part of the Sussex Study?

A shocking fact that everyone needs to know is that applying insecticides in the summer for just one year, will take 10 years for your beneficial predators to recover. The Sussex Study gives us a good understanding of what

works and how species will respond if you get it right. Our management approach has produced spring grey partridge counts of around 10 pairs, we have good numbers of dung beetles and 27 species of butterfly, including rare silver-spotted skipper and Adonis blue, small heath, small blue and wall. However, insect populations are still declining, so the challenge is to turn it around. I believe this is possible, but everyone needs to play their part, not just farmers (see page 23).

### What wildlife surveys do you do?

We are long-term members of the GWCT Partridge Count Scheme and have been doing dung beetle surveys to find out what we have and to see if animal health products have any effect on them. We also survey butterflies and are part of an ongoing bird ringing project.

### How have you adapted your farming practice to support invertebrates, in particular chick food species?

We have discovered, through GWCT research, that we naturally do a lot that benefits them. We rotate arable crops with under-sowing, grass and livestock and we don't use insecticides in the summer.

### How challenging has it been to implement these measures?

Mixed farming isn't straightforward and under-sowing is becoming quite challenging due to limited herbicides that are clover safe.

### What's your view on the current ELM schemes and delivering nature recovery?

It is incredibly important that it's properly funded to ensure it is successful. There are some good options in the ELM scheme, but some of the prescriptions need adjusting in my view. The Historic Environment Farm Environment Record mapping system reduces the options we can use, so waters down our scheme.

### What advantage does being part of a Farmer Cluster bring?

The Arun to Adur Farmer Cluster enables us to share information and carry out landscape-scale projects. This includes providing members with Perdix bird feeders and feed for farmland birds in winter through Farming in Protected Landscapes funding. We have also undertaken a soil health initiative and collaborated with Southern Water on nitrate reduction measures.

### You worked with GWCT advisor Peter Thompson for many years. How valuable was his advice and support?

Peter's support has been very important over the years, particularly his help in setting up the Arun to Adur cluster group. He was instrumental in getting us going.

### Why is GWCT research so important?

It provides the information needed to understand what is going right and wrong.

### What is your favourite species and why?

I love seeing grey partridges fly across a field and hearing them calling at dusk. Also boxing hares, twisting and turning at speed. ■

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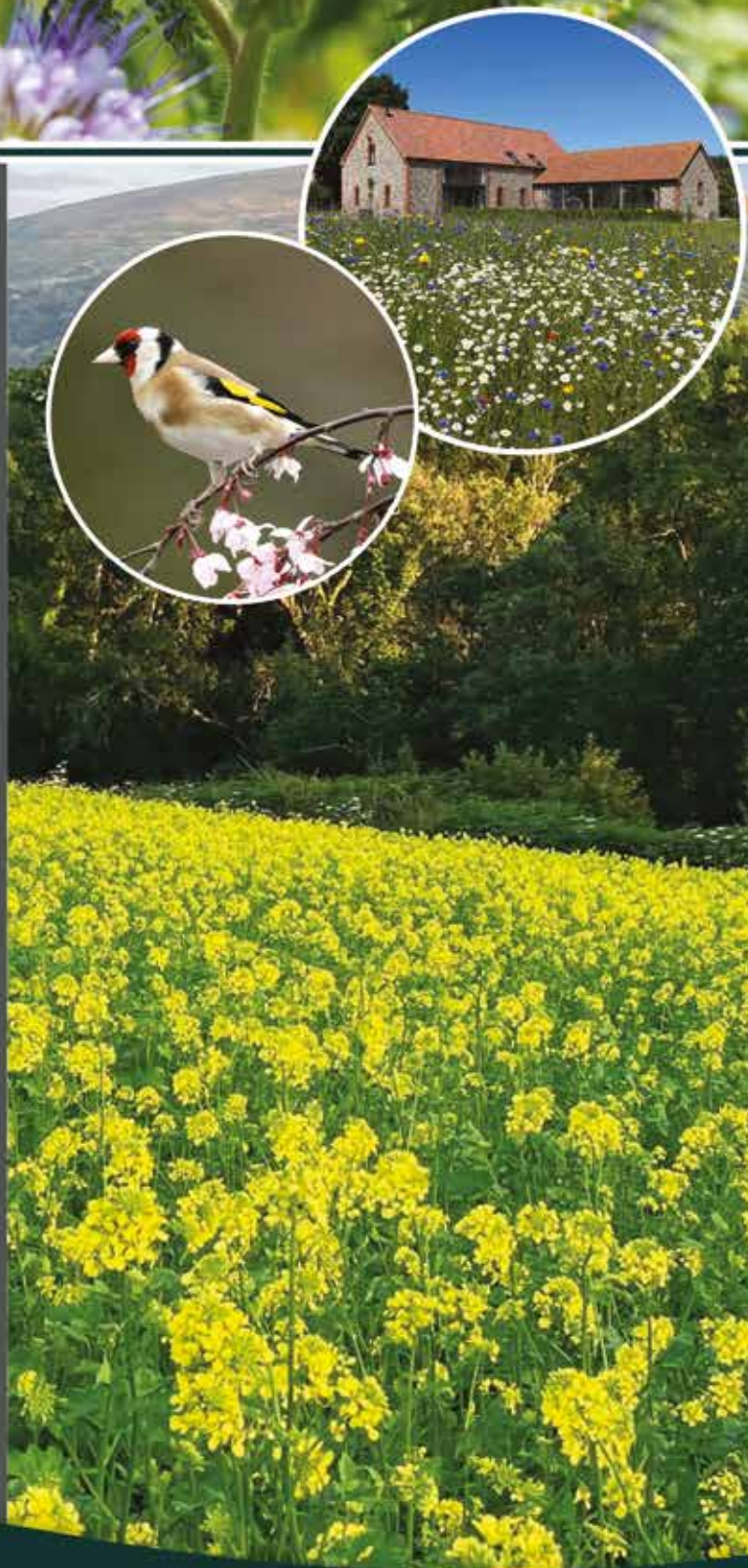
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