

Moor to celebrate

OLIVER McCULLOUGH, BASC Council member and Chair of the BASC NI Committee, reports on a successful project to restore the numbers of red grouse in Northern Ireland.



When dealing with the future of one of our most iconic gamebirds, few today would argue against using evidence-based outcomes and sound science when making decisions regarding their future management. This is particularly pertinent to Northern Ireland where the red grouse population has suffered a significant decline over recent years. Published in 2008, the NI Species Action Plan for Red Grouse described it as a 'red list' species of conservation concern, with the total Northern Ireland population estimated to be between 202 and 221 pairs.

Historical perspective

To gain an appreciation of the standing that the red grouse once had as a game bird in Northern Ireland, we only need to look at some of the accounts contained in the old sporting journals. A 1926 edition of the *Shooting Times and British Sportsman* reported grouse shooting taking place over dogs in every county in Northern Ireland. However, even then, all was not well. The

same article referred to the adverse impact that poaching and the lack of management was having on some moors.

It is interesting to read that while certain counties were having exceptional difficulties in this respect, not so much poaching was taking place on the County Antrim moors. It may only be a coincidence but it is from these same County Antrim moors that news is emerging of a long overdue reversal of fortune for the red grouse in Northern Ireland.

The Glenwherry Hill Regeneration Partnership project

In response to the decline of the red grouse, and many other challenges presently facing upland management in Northern Ireland, the Glenwherry Hill Regeneration Partnership (GHRP) was formed in 2009. Ticking most of the boxes for issues affecting upland management, the chosen site was formerly a grouse moor of note as well as being a progressive



working hill farm, partially situated within the Antrim Hills Special Protection Area (SPA) for hen harrier and merlin.

Covering almost 1,000 hectares and previously part of the Glenarm Estate, the farm was acquired in 1963 by the then Ministry of Agriculture where it has since been managed as an upland beef and sheep farm.



Heather burning is key to regenerating growth of plants which provide food for a wide range of moorland wildlife

IMAGES BY LAURE CAMPBELL



Snaring and trapping are essential to controlling ground predators

Intervention

In the introduction to his book, *Moorland management for agriculture, conservation and field sports*, the author John Phillips points out that no management can succeed without a plan and all plans involve a degree of intervention.

Intervention in this case included finely tuned habitat improvement throughout the farm and, importantly, the commencement of an effective legal predator control programme carried out by a full-time gamekeeper with grouse moor experience.

Given the wide-ranging interest in upland management, it is not surprising to learn of the diversity and number of partners involved in the project. These include representatives from the College of Agriculture Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), the RSPB and the Irish Grouse and Conservation Trust (IGCT).

Additional support to the board, in terms of scientific expertise and advice, is provided by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), the Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group (NIRSG), the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Countryside Management Delivery Branch.

Partnership working has been recognised as an essential element and a fully integrated approach is the order of the day as a recent project article pointed out: "Producing multiple outcomes from one farm requires careful planning to ensure that the management regime used to deliver for one particular interest does not have a negative impact on the others."

Targets

Targets set included increasing the red grouse numbers from nine pairs to 15 pairs by 2014, managing 550 hectares as foraging habitat for hen harrier and increasing the number of breeding waders using the site. Importantly, building and maintaining a viable farm business capable of adapting to commercial realities is recognised as an essential component of the project. This is important as, after all, to be sustainable in anything more than the short term, financial viability must underpin any worthwhile strategy.

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Many beneficiaries

While the target at the start of the project was to almost double the number of red grouse on the moor by 2014, what followed is surely remarkable. Grouse numbers vastly exceeded their target and this success extended to breeding waders, including snipe and curlew now utilising the site. Hen harrier and merlin have also benefitted from the management regime and the target for hen harrier foraging habitat has been substantially achieved.

Unsurprisingly, with the predator control programme in place, the Irish hare numbers have also increased substantially

during the lifetime of the project. These wider environmental benefits are well known to anyone involved in managing grouse moors or indeed managing other land for shooting and conservation. It was therefore very interesting to hear this aspect of the Glenwherry project being highlighted during the recent driven grouse shooting debate in Westminster Hall. At the debate, Danny Kinahan, ex-MP for South Antrim, describing his visit to the Glenwherry site, explained:

"Interestingly enough, the reason I went there was not about grouse. I went to see how they were looking at pollinators and bees. They look at the total management – the bog land, partridge restoration, bees and pollinators and what we are talking about today, grouse conservation."

Skills gap

The importance of predator control in this success story has been widely acknowledged. Its relevance was alluded to by Jim Shannon, MP for Strangford in his contribution to the Westminster Hall debate where he associated predator control with achieving a sustainable moor at Glenwherry.

There is, however, a shortage of gamekeeping skills in Northern Ireland. Keen to transfer skills and knowledge gained from the project, CAFRE, together with IGCT and supported by BASC, deliver a course to prospective gamekeepers. The course, which has been accredited by City & Guilds, provides an introductory qualification entitled Principles of Live Quarry Shooting. It is now in its fourth year and has attracted 12 – 15 participants each year.

It may well be early days but the future is starting to look promising.