

Scottish Raptor

Bringing you the latest news from the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme

Hi. Spring is in the air and the new breeding season is well underway. Only this morning I was out and about checking out my local Buzzard nests for signs of activity. Since our last issue back in January I've been busy preparing the 2014 annual report which is just about ready to send to the printers and amongst representing the SRMS at various meetings both at home and abroad I've also been working on the SRMS website - raptormonitoring.org - which we will be launching very soon. This issue of Scottish Raptor brings you up to speed with some of the latest developments coming out of the SRMS. We also have some fantastic articles from invited contributors including an article on the Langholm Moor Demonstration Project which I'm sure will be of interest to many of you. As ever, if you would like to offer any articles/snippets/photographs for future issues I would love to hear from you.

Amy (SRMC)

Scottish Red Kite Coordinated Roost Count

On 10th & 11th January 2015, SRSG members braved high winds and snowstorms to take part in the international European Red Kite coordinated roost count programme. Complete coverage of all known Scottish Red Kite winter roost sites was achieved. In total 26 Red Kite roosts were watched and 548 birds were counted. This represents a healthy increase in numbers of birds on last year's total, a reflection of the expanding Red Kite population in Scotland now numbering 231 breeding pairs in 2014. The largest roost in Scotland is presently in west Perthshire and this site held 130 birds on the 11 January 2015. The development of a significant Red Kite winter roost in Angus is also a welcome feature of this year's count.

Location	No of roosts	No of kites	Lead observer
North Scotland	5	127 (42, 25, 22, 21, 17)	Highland RSG
Central Scotland	7	187 (8, 130, 35, 8, 4, 2)	Central and Tayside RSG
East Scotland	3	82 (59, 11, 12)	North East RSG
South West Scotland	11	152	Dumfries and Galloway RSG
Total	26	548	

Most Red Kite winter roosts are attended by immature or sub-adult birds, with adult breeding birds remaining on territory. Roosts also provide a good opportunity to read wing tags to identify individual birds, and we know that there are significant movements of young birds to other Red Kite areas from the various breeding locations that are now established across Scotland. A further annual census will take place in early- to mid-January 2016. The dates have still to be confirmed.

Duncan Orr-Ewing
SRSG Red Kite Winter Roost Coordinator



Oot and about

Over the last few months I've been out and about representing the Scheme at various meetings and events. In February I attended a Northern England Raptor Forum meeting where I presented the Scheme and some of our planned developments. This was swiftly followed by the SRSR conference which was a fantastic opportunity to catch up with folks and see some fantastic presentations of raptor work which is going on in Scotland and also further afield. In March I had the pleasure of attending the EURAPMON conference in Sierra Espuña Natural Park, Spain where I presented the work of the Scheme in a workshop on best practice. This was a great opportunity for me to network with other country coordinators across Europe and it was fantastic to have the opportunity to visit an Eagle Owl nest site where the female was incubating.

This month sees me attending Scotland's Big Nature Festival where I will be representing the SRMS on the BTO stand and also jointly doing a presentation with Alan Heavisides (Chair of Lothian & Borders RSG and also one of SRSR's representatives on the SRMG). I'm also looking forward to escaping my desk hoping to spend some time with volunteers to get to know them better and to hopefully see some raptors!

A request of all eagle and Sparrowhawk ringers

The Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme (PBMS) is a long-term, national monitoring scheme that quantifies the concentrations of contaminants in selected species of predatory and fish-eating birds in Britain. We monitor the levels of contaminants to determine how and why they vary between species and regions, how they are changing over time, and the effects that they may have on individual birds and on their populations. It is run by the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology and more information on the PBMS can be found at <http://pbms.ceh.ac.uk/>

The PBMS has two requests.

1. EAGLE FEATHERS. The PBMS would like to develop capacity to examine exposure to selected contaminants, such as mercury and lead, by analysing shed feathers. Species of particular interest are White-tailed Eagle and Golden Eagle that may scavenge shot game (and so be susceptible to lead exposure). The PBMS obtains few carcasses of these species and analysing feathers may be the only way to assess exposure. We are requesting that licensed ringers who are monitoring and ringing chicks at the nests of Golden Eagles and White-tailed Eagles collect shed (ideally primary and tail but any will do) feathers of adult birds and chicks. These can be stored in plastic or paper bags—samples from same nest/bird can be stored together.

We would also need the following ancillary information: date of collection; contact details of collector (ideally name and email address), and broad location of nest—we realise this is sensitive information so a 10 km² grid reference, location in terms of name of valley etc. or nearest town would be sufficient.

If you intend to submit feathers to the PBMS, please contact Lee Walker prior to posting them as we can provide a pre-paid postage label for you submission (leew@ceh.ac.uk; 01524 595830).



2. ADDLED AND DESERTED SPARROWHAWK EGGS. The PBMS also requests that licenced ringers who are monitoring and ringing chicks at the nests of Sparrowhawks collect addled and deserted eggs and submit them to the scheme. This will allow the status of British Sparrowhawks to be included in a European-wide monitoring programme to measure the levels of flame retardants in a range of environmental samples. Instructions on how to store and pack the eggs can be downloaded from our website (<http://pbms.ceh.ac.uk/>). If you intend to submit Sparrowhawk eggs for analysis please contact Lee Walker prior to posting them as we can provide a pre-paid postage label for you submission (leew@ceh.ac.uk; 01524 595830).

Richard Shore
Centre for Ecology & Hydrology

Raptor trends

March saw the publication of our methodological report on Scottish Raptor trends (see http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/commissioned_reports/542.pdf). At this stage, final rigorous trends can only be produced for species for which we fully understand any changes in monitoring coverage (such as the comprehensively monitored reintroduced species, Red Kite and White-tailed Eagle, and some long-term studies, such as Goshawk). The trends for other species are provisional until such a time as we can work with observers to compile coverage information through time, which we aim to do as soon as we possibly can.

Many SRSG members helpfully contributed to a questionnaire about coverage back in 2012. We'll be looking to use this information to help improve the trends for a number of species. I also hope to spend time over the summer making contact with a number of you so that we that we can get the greatest value from the data you have collected and build it into the updated trends.

We would ideally like to report trends at a range of geographic scales, individual study area, regional and where possible at a national scale. As these updated trends are finalised we hope to publish them on the new SRMS website.

The Donald and Jeff Watson Raptor Award

SRSG devised the award in 2007 in association with the Watson family as a memorial to the contributions of both father and son to the study and conservation of raptors in Scotland, and specifically to recognise 'A significant long-term amateur contribution to the study of raptors in Scotland.'

In 2015 the award was presented jointly to both Ian Miller and Peter McHugh. Both men monitor raptors in the Lowther Hills of Dumfriesshire and Lanarkshire, especially around Sanquhar, Wanlockhead, Leadhills and Dursdeer villages – Ian for the past thirty years, and Peter over the last 15-20 years. Both men are local to the area and are well respected in their local communities.

They have continued to monitor in spite of extremely poor breeding success and appalling incidents of persecution, including numerous illegal poisonings, nest destruction, shot Hen Harriers, shot Short-eared Owl and even a shot Golden Eagle in 2012.



Ian and Peter followed their passion for birds of prey in the face of significant intimidation at times, including being followed home by gamekeepers, shadowed on the moor and being physically threatened. The information they have provided has helped to raise awareness of the problems faced by raptors in these areas and has resulted in various press and web reports that have drawn significant local community and wider public condemnation of raptor persecution.

The issues faced by raptors in such areas are recognised by the Scottish Government, who have recently strengthened legislation and who are determined to reduce this outdated and illegal practice. The information gathered by Ian and Peter is vital in helping to reduce raptor persecution in this way and they deserve great credit for their efforts and persistence over the years.

Chris Rollie
Chair of Dumfries & Galloway RSG

SRMS training

The Training Working Group met for the first time at the end of January. It was great to have representatives from eight SRSG branches, including a mixture of participants with relevant skills, some whom had already worked closely with the SRMG and some new faces too. The first meeting involved preliminary discussions on the three areas for training that the SRMS is looking to support: (i) training for existing, experienced SRSG Members; (ii) training and support to help new volunteers to get involved in raptor monitoring (including discussion of a potential new Common Raptor Monitoring Scheme as a point of entry for new volunteers); and (iii) training that will be required to support the introduction of the on-line data submission system. The next meeting of this group will take place in late August or early September 2015.

Highland Raptor Study Group (First training day)

In the spirit of and as a follow-on from the SRMS's Training Working Group in January the HRSG arranged a training session aimed at members with varying levels of experience. The training day was on Saturday 11th April and led by Brian Etheridge in forestry areas on the Black Isle, Ross-shire. Ten members met up with Brian at the assembly point before moving on to the first wood. It was a good omen for the day when a pair of Ospreys flew over as we started. We had a very successful day working our



way through two woodlands where Brian showed many examples of raptor signs like plucking posts, moulted feathers etc.

Highland Raptor Study Group Members woodland raptors training day.



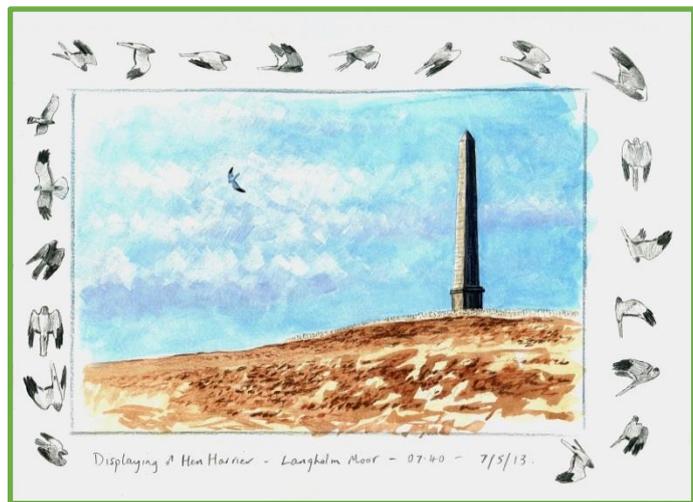
and pointed out calls from Buzzard and Red Kite. In the end we identified six active Buzzard nests / territories and a single active Red Kite nest. There were enthusiastic comments about the day and questions about when are we going to organise a moorland raptor training day.

Doug Mainland
Chair of Highland Raptor Study Group

Revealing the facts and exposing some myths about the raptor monitoring in the Langholm Moor Demonstration Project

Background

The Langholm Moor Demonstration project (LMDP) is a 10-year project designed to demonstrate ways of resolving the conservation conflict between moorland management for Red Grouse hunting and raptor conservation. The LMDP builds on the Joint Raptor Study (JRS) that took place on Langholm and five other moors between 1992 and 1996, which identified the circumstances under which raptor predation can limit Red Grouse numbers. The LMDP aims to demonstrate means of managing moorland to produce a combination of good habitat, a viable population of breeding raptors and economically viable driven Red Grouse shooting. Therefore, the LMDP has the potential to change the fortune for many upland-nesting raptors. The project recently published its 7-year review (Langholm Moor Demonstration Project 2014; available at www.langholmproject.com/PDF%20downloads/7yr%20review.pdf).



Displaying male Hen Harrier, Langholm Moor (John Wright)

To stimulate engagement with the key stakeholders (e.g. game managers, conservation organisations and statutory agencies), the LMDP is a partnership between five organisations: Buccleuch Estate (owners of Langholm Moor), Scottish Natural Heritage, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, RSPB and Natural England.

Although securing the Hen Harrier's SPA status is a key action in the LMDP plan, the conservation of the other raptor and owl species breeding on or in close vicinity of Langholm Moor is also important. This report explains how the raptor populations have developed on the moor since the start of the project in 2008. We also describe some of the diet analyses of raptors that we have done on Langholm Moor. Finally, we address some misconceptions about the LMDP that we often hear when we meet various stakeholders.

Methods

Every year, project staff and members of the Lothian & Borders and Dumfries & Galloway RSG branches cooperate to monitor breeding raptors, owls and Raven on Langholm Moor, using the best practice for each species as described in Hardey *et al.* (2013). All raptor and owl monitoring was done under the relevant Schedule 1 licences.

The focal species, of which all nesting attempts are monitored, are Hen Harrier, Peregrine, Raven and Merlin. We have also monitored Buzzards intensively, but the monitoring effort has varied over the years and has been extended to include nests within a 2 km buffer zone around the project area in some years.

Hen Harrier nests have been fitted with nest cameras for surveillance and to record prey items, and in the early project years observations were made from a hide close to the nest. After harrier chicks have hatched, the five gamekeepers at Langholm place diversionary food (white day-old cockerel chicks and rats, so they can be easily distinguished from natural prey) on feeding posts near the nests. This is done to minimise the Hen Harriers' predation of Red Grouse chicks, and previous research has shown that diversionary feeding could reduce the take of Red Grouse by approximately 86% (Redpath *et al.* 2001). The diversionary feeding continues on a daily basis until 30 days after fledgling (a total of around 60 days) or earlier if the fledglings have left the area.

Buzzard diet during the breeding season has been studied intensively between 2011 and 2013 using prey remains in and around the nests, pellet analyses and nest cameras. Buzzard diet in the non-breeding season has also been studied in the winters 2013/14 and 2014/15. In addition, in 2014, we have studied the diet of breeding Peregrines using nest cameras and prey remains. There are no Goshawks breeding on the project area, but in 2014, the Forestry Commission kindly provided LM DP with nest camera footage from a nest within a kilometre outside the project boundary.

Results

Hen Harrier

During the first six years of the project, there were only 1-3 breeding attempts by Hen Harrier on the moor annually (Fig. 1). This is below the project aim of seven breeding Hen Harrier females, which was 1% of the national population at the time of the start of the project. However, in 2014, the situation improved markedly, as a total of 12 Hen Harrier females made breeding attempts on the moor. Of these, 10 were successful, producing a total of 47 fledglings (Fig. 1). This sudden increase in Hen Harrier numbers might have been triggered by increased food abundance. For example, in 2014, there was very high vole abundance regionally. Furthermore, in spring 2014, we recorded the highest abundance of Meadow Pipits, many other species of small songbirds and Red Grouse on Langholm Moor since the inception of the project in 2008.

The Hen Harrier breeding productivity during the LM DP has been good, with on average 4.2 fledged young per breeding female. This is above our target productivity of 2.6 fledglings per female (Fig. 1). In Scotland as a whole, the percentage of harriers rearing young has declined from 61% in 2004 to just under 43% in 2013 (Challis *et al.* 2014). At Langholm Moor, the equivalent figure in the first seven years of the project was 83%.

In addition to increased breeding number of Hen Harriers on Langholm Moor, also the number of Hen Harriers overwintering on the moor was higher in 2013/14 and 2014/15 than in the previous



two winters when systematic Vantage Point (VP) watches took place. We also know that two female harriers fitted with satellite tags spend the whole winter 2013/14 and 2014/15 on and near Langholm Moor.

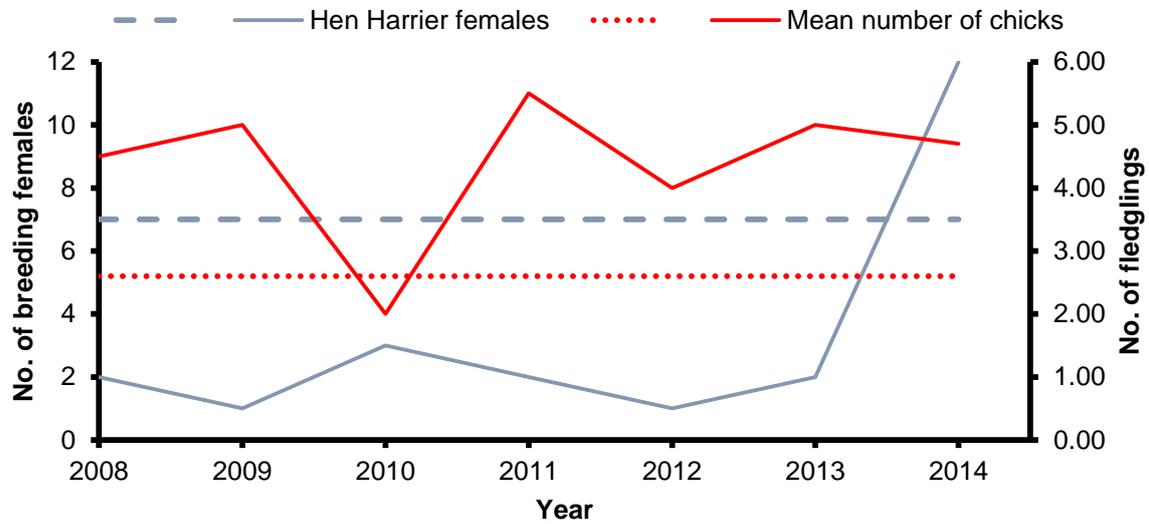


Figure 1. The number of breeding Hen Harrier females (blue solid line) and the mean number of chicks produced per breeding female (red solid line) at Langholm Moor between 2008 and 2014. The LMDP target values of the number of breeding females (7 females; blue dashed line) and the number of chicks produced (2.6 chicks per breeding attempt; red dotted line) are also shown.

Myth 1: "Persecution of Hen Harriers is ongoing on Langholm Moor". We can categorically confirm that no Hen Harrier nests have been persecuted during the LMDP project, as all four failures recorded so far have been due to abandonment. Three of the abandoned nests (two in 2010 and one in 2014) belonged to secondary or tertiary females in polygynous pairs, i.e. the male was already paired up with another female. In 2014, a very late breeding attempt was abandoned by a pair.



Meadow pipit watching a passing female Hen Harrier (John Wright)

Diversionsary feeding of Hen Harriers has proven to be a cost-effective, practical and viable technique for reducing predation of grouse chicks during the period when harriers have chicks at or around the nest. No grouse were observed being brought to harrier nests during nest watches in the years 2008-2012. However, analyses of nest camera footage from 2010-2014 suggest that approximately 5% of prey delivered to the nest are grouse chicks. This result comes with the caveats that in the first six years of the project, only a



maximum of three nests have been fed per season and grouse numbers were relatively low. In addition, the Red Grouse chick mortality is still relatively high on Langholm Moor compared to other moors. In 2014, 10 nests were subjected to diversionary feeding, and that obviously became much more challenging logistically. We are currently preparing a manuscript aimed for publication in a scientific journal describing our main results in more detail.

Myth 2: "*Diversionary feeding does not work*". Our data suggest that the number of grouse brought back to the nest is very limited, and this confirms the findings from the JRS, which showed an 86% reduction in grouse numbers being brought back to the nest for nests that were diversionary fed compared to nests without such food (Redpath *et al.* 2001). Clearly, if one of the main aims is to minimise the number of grouse chicks taken to the nests by Hen Harriers, diversionary feeding works very well. However, in the JRS, diversionary feeding did not have a positive impact on autumn grouse density. In the LMDP, there has still not been any shooting of grouse. Thus, whilst the grouse numbers have increased in Langholm Moor since 2008, the method of diversionary feeding is likely to be regarded with scepticism by some stakeholders until the grouse population has reached a density which allows shooting.

Myth 3: "*Diversionary feeding makes Hen Harriers lazy and less able to hunt*". Our data from both nest watches and nest cameras suggest that approximately 42% of the food brought back to the Hen Harrier nest is diversionary food. The majority of the prey (ca. 58%) is in fact "wild" food, such as Meadow Pipits and voles, and to a lesser extent skylarks and rarely wader and grouse chicks. This gives us confidence that diversionary feeding does not make Hen Harriers forget how to hunt wild prey.

Merlin

The number of confirmed Merlin pairs has increased from 1 to 6 pairs during the seven years of the LMDP, probably as a response to a combination of factors. For example, patches with tall heather, which provides good nest sites for Merlins, have been kept at the same time as heather management (mainly burning and cutting) that favours Meadow Pipits, the main prey for Merlins, has been intensified. The reinstated legal control of foxes has most likely reduced the risk of predation of Merlin nests.

Buzzard

In the years 2010-2013, there were between 12 and 14 active Buzzard nests on the moor and between 7 and 11 nests were monitored in a 2 km buffer zone around the moor. However, it is likely that some additional nests were not found in the buffer zone. In 2014, nine Buzzard nests were confirmed on the project area and an additional five nests in the buffer zone, but search effort was reduced in that year. Since 2012, Buzzard chicks and adults have been fitted with patagial (wing) tags, to provide data on individual movements, recruitment and dispersal patterns. The analysis of this data is part of an ongoing PhD project at Newcastle University.

Analyses of prey items brought to nests recorded by nest cameras and of prey remains and pellets from in and around nests suggest that Buzzards are opportunistic foragers, mainly eating voles,



lagomorphs and pheasants. Over three breeding seasons 2011-2013, only 1.0% of prey items identified through nest camera footage and 4.8% of prey remains from in and around nests were Red Grouse. However, it is likely that Red Grouse (and other large prey items) was consumed away from the nest during the breeding season, and such prey would not be included in nest camera footage. In addition, preliminary analyses suggest that Buzzards consume Red Grouse also during the non-breeding season, as Red Grouse remains were found in 3% of pellets and constituted 1% of identified prey in pellets collected at roost sites in the winter. More work is currently underway into the biases associated with pellet analysis as part of an ongoing PhD thesis, but already now preliminary analyses suggest that pellet analyses underestimate the amount of grouse Buzzards consume.

Peregrine

The number of occupied territories has remained at generally 2-3 sites per year in and within 2 km of the project area. This is half of the maximum number of occupied territories during the JRS (Redpath and Thirgood 1997). Vantage point watches suggest that the summer densities of Peregrines on the moor are equivalent to those observed during the JRS, whereas the winter densities are lower than during the JRS. Analyses of nest camera footage and prey remains have shown that Peregrine diet consists mainly of pigeons and passerines, but also game birds and waders. Grouse made up on average 10% of the diet.

Goshawk

There are no Goshawk breeding on the project area, and we are only aware of a few Goshawk nest sites within 5 km of the moor. One of these pairs has been monitored by means of a nest camera in 2014. The results showed that the main prey items were rabbits, corvids, wood pigeons and thrushes. No Red Grouse was observed in the nest camera footage.

Short-eared Owl

The Short-eared Owl is not a key species for our monitoring team, so the monitoring effort has varied between years. The number of Short-eared Owl pairs seems to vary in accordance with the vole abundance. Consequently, in 2014 we estimated that at least 12 breeding pairs were present on the moor.



Short-eared Owl juvenile (Brian Benn)

Long-eared Owl, Tawny Owl and Barn Owl

A number of Long-eared, Tawny and Barn Owl pairs nest on and around Langholm Moor. The survey effort varies between years, but it is clear that their numbers and reproductive success are higher in years with high vole abundance.

Raven

The number of Raven nests on and within 500 m from the moor has remained relatively stable with 4-5 pairs annually during the LMDP study. In 2013, the project undertook a pilot study involving fitting radio-transmitters to nestling Ravens and following their foraging behaviour. By analysing 21 Raven pellets, only four contained grouse remains, whereas 11 contained small mammals, seven contained goat/sheep remains (probably scavenged) and eight invertebrates (mainly beetles).

Other raptors

We regularly observe Sparrowhawks and kestrels hunting on the moor, and no doubt there are several breeding pairs of these species on the moor and in adjacent woodlands. Unfortunately, there has been no time to survey these raptors. We have also observed non-breeding Red Kites, Golden Eagles, Ospreys, hobbies and even a Red-footed Falcon on the moor. The Red-footed Falcon was observed in 2014. Interestingly, the female bird was colour-ringed, and we manage to track its origin to northern Italy. Sadly, the record was not accepted by the local county recorder, despite photographic evidence of the colour-ringed bird sitting on a fence-post in the northern part of Langholm Moor.

The future of LMDP

Our results suggest that the number of breeding Merlins have increased on Langholm Moor during the first eight years of the LMDP. The sudden increase in Hen Harrier numbers in 2014 was welcome, and the project has now met its Hen Harrier target of having seven breeding females in one year. Preliminary results from 2015 suggest that the number of breeding Hen Harriers is likely to remain relatively high. The underlying reasons for the increases in Merlin and Hen Harrier numbers on Langholm Moor is probably a combination of sympathetic habitat management that leaves long heather in some areas (i.e. good nest sites) and rotational muirburn that has created good habitat for voles, Red Grouse and songbirds (i.e. increased prey abundance). In addition, the legal predator control of foxes and crows that Langholm's team of keepers undertake has reduced the risk of nest predation for the ground nesting raptor species (e.g. Hen Harrier, Merlin and Short-eared Owl) and probably increased the productivity of other key prey species. Foxes can reduce the proportion of successful Hen Harrier nests, at least locally (Baines and Richardson 2013, McMillan 2014), but so far none of the Hen Harrier nests have been depredated. In addition, the strict protection of raptors on Langholm Moor is helping the recovery of these raptor species. The last suspected persecution events involving Hen Harrier nests on Langholm Moor were recorded in 1992 (Baines and Richardson 2013)

Although some key raptor species have increased, not everything is progressing as the project partners would have hoped. Most importantly, the Red Grouse numbers have not increased to the levels anticipated, and as a consequence, there has been no shooting of Red Grouse on Langholm Moor. A lack of driven Red Grouse shooting would be a disappointing legacy for the project, given this is the key incentive to continue to manage habitat and generalist predators (i.e. foxes and



crows) in the way that has benefited the raptor assemblage. If driven Red Grouse shooting could be reinstated in the presence of a viable Hen Harrier population on Langholm Moor, it is likely that other moors would increase their tolerance levels regarding Hen Harriers and other raptors.

Acknowledgements

We thank all project staff, members of the SRSG and volunteers who have contributed to raptor monitoring during the LMDP, especially Dave Anderson, Merlin Becker, Kenny Bell, Damian Bubb, Tim Chamberlain, Phil Golder, Kirstie Hazelwood, Mac Hotson, Malcolm Henderson, Paula Keane, Tony Lightley, Aly McCluskie, Anna McWilliam, Stephen Murphy, Thomas Pringle, Mike Richardson, Eimear Rooney, George Smith, Andrew Walton and John Wright.

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Staffan Roos (RSPB), Sonja Ludwig (LMDP), Cat Barlow (The Langholm Initiative) and Richard Francksen (Newcastle University)

Any burning raptor questions you would like to have answered?

The SRMG is keen to draw up a list of potential research projects which could be activated if suitable students/funding came along. If you have an idea for a raptor-based collaborative research project and would be interested in making data from your long-term study available then please do get in touch.



Action on the high rises of Coatbridge



Kestrel nesting on a high rise in Coatbridge (Jackie Gilliland)

For the last four seasons we have had nesting Kestrels on our man made falcon ledges at the high rises in Coatbridge, North Lanarkshire. This is a combined project with North Lanarkshire Council and Central Scotland Raptor Study Group. The Kestrels nested on them the first season after we mounted them. No fewer than 17 Kestrel chicks have fledged from here in that time. Kestrels, believe it or not, don't seem to be doing so badly within our council area, in relation to the rest of the country. The cameras have let us find out things that we have not witnessed before, for example,

we have watched the female parent gradually surround her scrape with vole fur as the incubation period lengthens. The cameras have also shown us that within an hour or two of it hatching, the first Kestrel chick is fed with a vole that has been kept by the female parent specifically for that purpose. I think that she can hear the chirping from the egg and gets prepared. At the time of writing, a pair of Kestrels occupying one of the ledges has hatched its first eggs.

Peregrines also use these high rise buildings to shelter, hunt from, and feed. High rises, and our nearby quarry sites, resemble coastal cliff habitat and for the last three years, and outwith breeding time, an adult female has frequented this site. She is ringed and PIT tagged but unfortunately our microchip reader does not work due to the close surrounding metals on the buildings outer construction.

Jackie Gilliland
Central Scotland Raptor Study Group

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