Raptor Persecution UK

Two satellite-tagged hen harriers that disappeared from a winter roost both found dead with shotgun pellets lodged in their bodies

Raptor Persecution UK
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December 18, 2024
2132 persecution incidents, 1 conviction, 1 persecution incidents is a England persecution hen harrier, shooting

Natural England has today posted a long updating the status of three brood meddled satellite-tagged hen harriers, which had previously been reported as lost, dwelling post number 1 (1) and Missing. Fate unknown: 2 (2).

A post mortem on the dead hen harrier has concluded it died from natural causes. The two 'missing' hen harriers have been found dead, and both corpses contained shotgun pellets.

ITI reproduce Natural England's blog, below, then ITI comment on the news that Natural England's blog, then on the extraordinary (or not) response from the Moorland Association.

Juvenile male hen harrier 82-MI-23 was tagged in July 2023 and was a resident in Cumbria as part of the Brood Management Trial, before heading to spend the winter in North Norfolk. Prior to its last monitoring spreadsheet for all tagged hen harriers can be found here. It was last recorded on 82-MI-23's tag recorded a very low body temperature, indicating death. As is standard procedure, NE's Enforcement and Appeals Team (NE EA) informed the police of the discrepancies. We only transfer tags to NE EA when under direction from police, specialist NE EA staff were deployed to search for the missing hen harrier. 82-MI-23 was found in a small clearing between Aylsham and Cromer, with no injury visible, and his body showing some signs of predation.

The carcass of 82-MI-23 was photographed and collected, on the advice of the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) and Dr Jim Dale, of the Department of Zoological Society of London (ZSL) for a post-mortem examination. The cause of death, based on the tag, the crop, and other internal signs, indicate that he carried a number of shotgun pellets. One of these is in his death cannot be fully quantified, but 82-MI-23 is consistent with a shot-related cause.

82-FI-20 #185564 + 82-FI-23 #215574

Two female hen harriers 82-FI-20 and 82-FI-23 were tagged in 2020 and 2022 at release sites in northern England as part of the Brood Management Trial. During the winter of 2022 both settled into the same roost site in North Norfolk, roosting in the same hen harrier 'team field' which under the brood management trial partnership agreement.

On 7 December 2022, 82-FI-20's tag stopped transmitting. One week later, on 14 December, 82-FI-23's tag also went silent, leading to the birds both had been behaving naturally. With the full cooperation of Natural England, numerous searches were made by police and NE EA staff around the hen harrier roost site, including roost, and in areas used by each bird, but unfortunately neither was found in the weeks that followed.

Further intermittent transmissions were received from both tags between January and April 2023, but further ground searches were unsuccessful until 12 April, when 82-FI-23 was recovered by NE field staff with the assistance of the local gamekeeper and wildlife manager. Her remains were collected by a Wildlife Crime Police Officer and sent to ZSL for a post-mortem examination. On 25 June 2023, 82-FI-20 finally transmitted again, she was located 4 days later by a quickly mustered multi-agency search team, and also sent to ZSL for a post-mortem.

After months lying dead, both bodies were highly degraded, but three suspected lead shotgun pellets were found within the body of 82-FI-20, and two in the body of 82-FI-23. The level of decomposition of the bodies led ZSL to conclude that it was not possible to explicitly link the death of either bird to the pellets. NWCU could not be ruled out further, but the presence of pellets suggests ongoing illegal persecution in the area, which is tragic to consider.

Detective Inspector Mark Harrison from the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) said:

> "This work that National England, and other organisations do to satellite tag these birds has given the police an opportunity to assess what is going on and where the greatest threats are. We have developed new processes in order to assist incident reporters and, in the case of the hen harrier, what has happened recently is that we have a dedicated email address for people to report sightings of hen harriers. This is a relatively new thing, but it has proved to be very productive and large quantities of information have come in and we have been a significant decrease in crime in relating to tagged birds in the area. Unfortunately, this did not, naturally, but 2 out of 3 of these rare birds was a victim of crime. Further investigation and we will do everything we can to prevent further crimes and prosecute offenders."

Natural England's hen harrier Team monitor, tag and track these rare and threatened birds to support their recovery as set out in the hen harrier action plan. We are grateful to partner organisations and land managers who support our work, and will continue to work closely with the National Wildlife Crime Unit in their efforts to investigate and bring crimes to justice. In the interests of transparency, we publish the status of all tagged hen harriers on our tracking webpage, and aim to share details of hen birds dead when possible. News of additional deaths of tagged hen harriers is always hard for our teams to hear, but it does not discourage us from our continued work on hen harrier recovery.

ENDS

The news of brood meddled hen harrier DU-MI-23, #213827, found dead in North Norfolk on 3 March 2024 that tell, has now confirmed dead of natural causes, first came to light in this August 2024 monthly update that I blogged about on 10 September 2024 (see here). Quite why it's taken nine months for its cause of death to be published is beyond me.

This harrier was one of five that had been found dead during 2024 which, when we were expecting to see more nesting, I note that 10 of the 11 hen harriers that were published the past mortem results of the other four dead harriers.

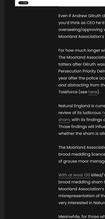
This harrier was not included in my yearly tally of persecuted hen harriers, which currently numbering 131 dead 'missing' birds since 2013 because, because at the moment its death wasn't known. Now we know it died of natural causes, it definitely need to be added to the list. I would the post mortem results of the other four birds with interest.

The two brood meddled hen harriers DU-FI-20 #185564 and DU-FI-23 #215574, which I previously blog as 'Missing, Fate Unknown' and were included on my list of dead 'missing' hen harriers

They both 'disappeared' two years ago, in December 2022, within days of each other, from the same winter roost site in the North Norfolk. This is the first time that NE has announced their corpses were later found (one in April 2023 and the other in June 2023). Why the earth has it taken NE 18 months and 20 months respectively to report that DU-FI-20 was found dead and DU-FI-23 was found dead, and DU-both corpses contained shotgun pellets (3 and 2 pellets respectively)?

The post mortem results of these two harriers are smothered in caution: "The level of decomposition of the bodies led ZSL to conclude that it was not possible to explicitly link the death of either bird to the pellets." Ha ha, we're not being "explicit." The fact that the two corpses contained shotgun pellets shows that they were both deliberately killed, victims of wildlife crime, as stated clearly by Detective Inspector Mark Harrison from the NWCU in his quote. Nothing "explicit" about the both birds had vanished from the same winter roost on a grouse moor that has a long and notorious, within a week of one another, pure to a pretty obvious set of circumstances to anyone looking at the data objectively.

The Moorland Association (the grouse owners' lobby group) has responded to Natural England's blog with yet another bland and shameful attempt at misrepresentation



The Moorland Association

Natural England contradicts itself over hen harriers

18th December 2024

The Moorland Association has expressed surprise that Natural England has contradicted the statutory nature conservation body's own position on the illegal killing of hen harriers. Natural England has issued a statement that contains a number of contradictory statements and conclusions and these facts that these particular birds died because the grouse bird shooting industry is not to blame.

The Moorland Association's Director, Tim Bonner, said: "Natural England's statement is a remarkable volte-face. It is not possible to find the death of either hen2 with illegal activity while stating that the death of other hen2 with illegal activity which was caused by the grouse shooting industry is not to blame.

Land owners and gamekeepers have been targeted by a disgraced team of ex-regulators.

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In the Moorland Association's second paragraph, where it purports to quote from the Natural England blog, the Moorland Association blog author has not only removed the quotes from the post mortem report, but has also removed several of Natural England's words, resulting in an entirely distorted (and thus false) 'quote'.

Natural England wrote

> "The level of decomposition of the bodies led ZSL to conclude that it was not possible to explicitly link the death of either bird to the [shotgun] pellets."

The Moorland Association wrote

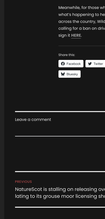
> "This successful tournament contains with today's stunning press statement from Natural England which manages to contradict itself by saying 'it is not possible to link the death of either bird2 illegal activity while also saying that their deaths "arise of evidence of ongoing killing".'"

The Moorland Association has removed the word "explicitly" and removed any reference to shotgun pellets, and then completely fabricated a new 'quote' from Natural England ("arise of evidence of ongoing killing").

The Moorland Association blog author is not identified but it has form for misrepresenting Natural England and the hallmarks of Andrew Gilruth, the Moorland Association's current CEO, who has contempt of a track record for this kind of shoddy behaviour.

Interestingly, the Moorland Association published its response prior to the Natural England blog being published, presumably after having sight of what Natural England chose to publish.

The Moorland Association has since revised its statement, once Natural England's blog went live. Here's how it currently looks:



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Even if Andrew Gilruth didn't write this snidey puff, you'd think such a senior manager would be responsible for overseeing/approving whatever appears on the Moorland Association's website.

For how much longer will he remain in post, I wonder? The Moorland Association's reputation is already in tatters after Gilruth was expelled from the Raptor Persecution Priority Delivery Group (RPPDG) earlier this year after the police accused him of "warning them and distracting them the real work" of the Hen Harrier Taskforce (see here).

Natural England is currently undertaking a formal review of its ludicrous hen harrier brood meddling plans, with its findings due by the end of this month. Those findings will influence DEFRA's decision on whether the licence is allowed to continue.

The Moorland Association has already stated it wants brood meddling licences to be issued as a routine part of grouse moor management.

With at least 131 killed 'missing' hen harriers since the brood meddling chain trial began in 2018, and the Moorland Association's continued bland and misrepresentation of the bleedin' obvious, we'll be very interested in Natural England's findings.

Meanwhile, for those who can no longer stomach what's happening to hen harriers on grouse moors across the country, Wild Justice has another petition calling for a ban on driven grouse shooting. Please sign it, NOW.

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