Raptor Persecution UK

Yet another Hen Harrier 'disappears' from Ruabon grouse moor in North Wales – her satellite tag had been 'deliberately cut off'

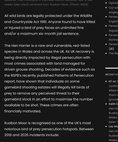
Press release from RSPB (24 June 2020)

RARE HEN HARRIER VANISHES IN WELSH 'BERMUDA TRIANGLE' – SATELLITE TAG CUT OFF IN SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES

- **North Wales Police, RSPB and the National Trust are investigating the disappearance after a satellite tag was switched off in a remote area near Llangollen on a March Friday afternoon**
- **Hen Harriers continue to be persecuted across the UK despite decades of legal protection, with most crimes associated with land managed for grouse shooting**
- **Government is consulting on a ban on the practice of brutal trap-and-release shooting of hen harriers, a key intervention to protect native wildlife.**

In late August 2019, a satellite-tagged female hen harrier was tracked to a remote area of moorland near Llangollen, North Wales. The bird was last recorded flying south from a roost on the National Trust High Peak Estate in Derbyshire. The satellite tag, which had been fitted and tagged by the RSPB, funded by the National Trust.

In late August, data showed that the young bird had been in the same area for several weeks, with no sign of flying south. Then, shortly after 5.30 pm on the night of 31 August the bird's satellite tag data revealed that it was no longer in the area it had been in for weeks, but was located on Ruabon Moor in Wrexham, North Wales, 15 miles to the north of its last fix. The tag was sent for forensic analysis by North Wales Police, who found that it had been switched off and deliberately cut off. The tag was not damaged in any way, implying that, such a trick. Despite searching, the tag has not been found.

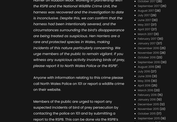


Photograph courtesy of Mark Thomas, RSPB. This is a satellite tagged female hen harrier in the Peak District, National Park, a few miles from the Ruabon Moor area.

All wild birds are legally protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Anyone found to have killed or injured a bird of prey faces an unlimited fine and/or a maximum six month jail sentence.

The Hen Harrier is a rare and a sensitive, red listed species in Wales and across the UK. As UK recovery is being directly impacted by illegal persecution with numerous illegal killings and disappearances, this driven grouse shooting. Decades of evidence such as the RSPB's annually published Birdcrime Report has shown that the vast majority of persecution crimes are committed shooting estates with illegally kill birds of prey to remove any perceived threat to their gamebird stock in an effort to maximise the number available to shot for sport. These crimes are financially motivated.

Ruabon Moor is recognised as one of the UK's most notorious bird of prey persecution hotspots. Between 2004 and 2006 satellite tracking



Satellite tracking of one persecuted Hen Harrier, one of the many Hen Harriers illegally killed in UK since 2004, most of them on or close to grouse moors.

Credit: Mark Thomas, RSPB

Mark Thomas, RSPB's UK Head of Investigations:

"Sadly, this incident is a textbook example of hen harrier persecution and shows the massive impact these crimes are having on this species. In this case a satellite tag from Ranger Harrier was fitted to a young female hen harrier in the Peak District, a choice it either a Hen Harrier Hotspot or the most notorious bird of persecution hotspot in the country. This three month old bird survived for three weeks in a remote area of moorland in highly suspicious circumstances. Based on years of evidence we know that this bird has almost certainly been killed and that the tag and disposal of the body in separate locations to avoid detection. This is not an isolated incident, this area is a crime hotspot for hen harriers and other birds of prey and this has to stop!"

Julian Hughes, RSPB Cymru Head of Species:

"We have provided a dossier of evidence to Natural Resources Wales and have been asked to establish a Wildlife Crime Prosecution Service and Wildlife Crime Intelligence Unit. We have also called for a Wildlife Crime Commissioner, a key intervention to protect a native species from persecution. Through National Nature Recovery, we are also advocating a licensing system for all gamebird shooting in Wales to enable enforcement, strengthening accountability, and ultimately the recovery of the species."

Craig Bird, General Manager for the National Trust in the Peak District:

"We are devastated to learn of the this magnificent bird that started its life on moorland in our care in the Peak District. Hen harriers are important species in the ecosystem of moorland and we are working with our tenant farmers to help them grow grouse and heather to provide nesting and feeding habitat. We are also using our tenancies to restore the landscape so they need to grow more the best chance of survival. A prosecution is allowed to continue, we stand to lose a very important species that is crucial to the health of these landscapes and it can't continue."

Sgt Peter Evans of North Wales Police Rural Crime Team said:

"In September 2019, North Wales Police received a report of a missing hen harrier in the area of Llangollen, Horner on Ruabon Moor. Working in partnership with the RSPB and the National Trust, before and after the harriers was recovered and the investigation to date, no trace has been found. We are aware that other hen harriers had been intentionally secured and the circumstances surrounding the bird's disappearance in this case are very suspicious. We are working with other and protected species in Wales, making investigations in other reported incidents, using the urgent members of the public to remain vigilant. If you witness any suspicious activity involving birds of prey please report it to North Wales Police or the RSPB."

Anyone with information relating to this crime should call North Wales Police on 101 or report a wildlife crime online at www.rspb.org.uk/wildlifecrime

Members of the public are urged to report any suspected incidents of bird of prey persecution to the police on 101 or online at www.rspb.org.uk/wildlifecrime and to report the incident to the RSPB by using the online reporting form at www.rspb.org.uk/raptorcrime or by calling the RSPB's Wildlife Crime Hotline on 0300 123 5421 (8am - 10pm). Reports via the RSPB's reporting form and Raptor Crime Hotline can be made anonymously.

ENDS

Why commentary:

I have no idea why it's taken nine months for this story to emerge, when the Hen harrier disappeared in late August 2019 it was reported to the Police and to the RSPB and the media knew about it. The RSPB's policy is disappointing, but the subsequent media release by the RSPB is detailed and provides a good background history about incidents recorded either on or close to this grouse moor.

I've written previously about most of the confirmed and suspected incidents of persecution on this grouse moor, has recorded a hen harrier, and I've also written about other grouse moors in North Wales, concerned by other organisations. Here's the sorry history:

2018 – Satellite-tagged Hen harrier called Aelin disappeared. No family ID ring found.

2019 – Brown found poisoned (here).

2019 – Satellite-tagged Hen harrier called Heulwen disappeared. No family ID ring found.

2019 – Satellite-tagged Hen harrier called Brynaer disappeared. The tag was recovered with its body. The tag data indicated that the tag had likely been transferred with, prior to disposal of illegally killing.

2020 – A cage trap was reported to police who contacted a game keeper, who admitted to using the trap (Landseer). I don't have further details of this case.

2020 – The RSPB reports a satellite-tagged Hen harrier 'disappeared'. Its tag was found and an expert analysis showed that it had been cut off. There have been details of its vicinity – I assume the RPB knew it, it turns out to be a Hen harrier called Arwyr. tagged in the Clwydian Range in 2019. Arwyr's last fix on the RSPB's Hen harrier database is 'Fate unknown', which is why I haven't appeared on my roll call of Hen Harrier/Peregrine victims. I'll need to add her. The tag data will be consistent with a 'cut off'.

2020 – Another cage trap was reported to the police who concerned about its legality. It was found in the area where a similar trap had been reported in 2015. This time a gamekeeper was charged and fined for the Lakeland Game Fair.

2020 – Hen harrier Rhiwlas, a bird ringed as a chick at Bowscale in Lakeland, disappeared, presumed illegally killed by the Crown Prosecution Service (here).

2022 – A team called Wildlife Guardian discovered a quad bike parked up in the remote, remote, and camouflage netting and 'arrow with dead birds' lies. Wildlife Guardian, a well known group, said that the location contained 'a lot of crime'.

2023 – The satellite-tagged Hen harrier that hatched on National Trust land in The Peak District in 2023 disappeared. The tagged Hen Harrier was found, having been 'deliberately cut off'.

2023 – North Wales Police launch an investigation after the Green British Foundation obtained photographs of a Buzzard being killed by trapping and setting snares at a site just next to Ruabon Moor, two years after incident in Denbigh (here).

I'm pretty sure that Ruabon Moor hasn't been identified as a persecution hotspot by the police nor national Hen harrier Taskforce, although I don't know for certain because they don't publish hotspot maps. I'm pretty sure. When the Taskforce launched in 2004 it was stated that:

'The Hen Harrier Task Force is an initiative led by the UK National Wildlife Crime Unit and supported by seven police forces (Cumbria, Derbyshire, Durham, Northumbria, North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire),'

which suggests the focus of the Taskforce is on grouse moor areas in northern England, not in north Wales.

Given that five tagged Hen harriers have 'disappeared' on or close to Ruabon Moor since 2019, I'm pretty sure that the Hen Harrier Taskforce would say one likely hen harrier, just one, has been killed, and deliberately cut off. It seems to me that the focus of the Hen Harrier Taskforce needs to be reviewed.

UPDATE 10.JPEG: 145 Hen harriers confirmed 'missing' or illegally killed in UK since 2006, most of them on or close to grouse moors (here).

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