Raptor Persecution UK

In 2026, there wasn’t a single reported Hen Harrier breeding attempt on grouse moors in the North Pennines, North York Moors, Yorkshire Dales, Nidderdale & Peak District

RaptorPersecutionUK
November 20, 2026
News
gamekeeper, hen harrier, pole trap, shooting, spring trap, trap

Last month, Natural England published the number of Hen Harrier breeding attempts in England in 2026 (here).

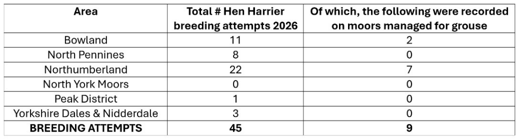
Natural England reported 45 breeding attempts, and said that *‘only 9 of those recorded 45 attempts were on moors managed for grouse, with the remainder across other moorland and water catchment locations (including but not limited to nature reserves)’*.

Skydancing is the courtship display of Hen Harriers. Photo by Pete Walkden

So once again, breeding Hen Harriers were absent from the vast majority of the estimated 150-190 grouse moors in England but did well on land managed for conservation, e.g. in Bowland on land managed by the RSPB for United Utilities (here), on the RSPB’s Geltsdale Reserve in Cumbria (here) and in Northumberland on land managed by Forestry England. In the Peak District, the only breeding attempt was on National Trust moorland.

I was interested in the locations of those nine breeding attempts on grouse moors so I submitted an FoI to Natural England to ask for a regional breakdown of this year’s breeding attempts on grouse moors.

Here is the information that Natural England supplied to me:



Area	Total # Hen Harrier breeding attempts 2026	Of which, the following were recorded on moors managed for grouse
Bowland	11	2
North Pennines	8	0
Northumberland	22	7
North York Moors	0	0
Peak District	1	0
Yorkshire Dales & Nidderdale	3	0
BREEDING ATTEMPTS	**45**	**9**

These data are stark. Just two breeding attempts on grouse moors in Bowland and seven in Northumberland. Not a single breeding attempt on the many grouse moors in the North Pennines, North York Moors National Park, Peak District National Park, Yorkshire Dales National Park or Nidderdale.

So much for the credibility of the often-heard assertion from the grouse shooting industry that ‘Hen Harriers do better on grouse moors than on RSPB/ conservation land’. The data clearly don’t support that claim.

According to Natural England’s lame press release last month, the explanation given for the continued absence of Hen Harrier breeding attempts on most grouse moors is “*Conflicting land management priorities*“. What Natural England couldn’t bring itself to say, in plain language, was that means crime, committed by criminals, on grouse moors.

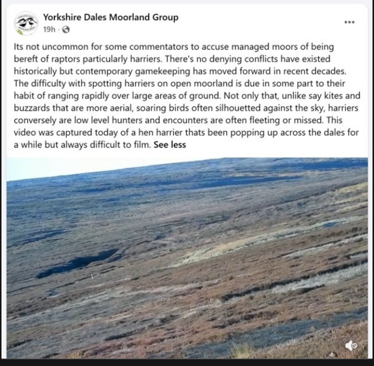
The grouse shooting industry won’t admit to this directly (because persecution is indefensible and a public relations disaster, and the industry knows it) but instead the Moorland Association has recently stated that it will apply for a licence to brood meddle Hen Harriers again in 2027, which is virtually an admission that Hen Harriers cannot be tolerated on grouse moors. Having a government licence to remove the harriers is a far better PR strategy for the industry than having to deal with the massive reputational damage caused by removing (killing) them illegally.

Although, given that Hen Harrier breeding attempts on grouse moors in England are not even in double figures, I’m not sure how the Moorland Association will try to persuade Natural England of the need for a brood meddling licence, nor how Natural England could justify it.

The previous brood meddling licences were issued on the (dodgy, IMHO) basis of being part of a so-called ‘scientific trial’, but that seven year trial ended in 2024 and the results showed that the licensed removal of Hen Harriers from grouse moors did not stop the illegal persecution of Hen Harriers (e.g. see here).

The Moorland Association’s previous attempt in 2025 to obtain a further brood meddling licence was rejected by Natural England and Defra. There’ll be a lot of us watching the next licence application with great interest.

Meanwhile, I thought blog readers might be amused by this recent post on social media by the Yorkshire Dales Moorland Group (a regional group of grouse moor gamekeepers whose propaganda knows no bounds) -:



Yorkshire Dales Moorland Group
19h ·

Its not uncommon for some commentators to accuse managed moors of being bereft of raptors particularly harriers. There's no denying conflicts have existed historically but contemporary gamekeeping has moved forward in recent decades. The difficulty with spotting harriers on open moorland is due in some part to their habit of ranging rapidly over large areas of ground. Not only that, unlike say kites and buzzards that are more aerial, soaring birds often silhouetted against the sky, harriers conversely are low level hunters and encounters are often fleeting or missed. This video was captured today of a hen harrier thats been popping up across the dales for a while but always difficult to film. **See less**

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- spaghnum morose on In 2026, there wasn’t a single reported Hen Harrier breeding attempt on grouse moors in the North Pennines, North York Moors, Yorkshire Dales, Nidderdale & Peak District
- sog on In 2026, there wasn’t a single reported Hen Harrier breeding attempt on grouse moors in the North Pennines, North York Moors, Yorkshire Dales, Nidderdale & Peak District
- Keith Dancey on In 2026, there wasn’t a single reported Hen Harrier breeding attempt on grouse moors in the North Pennines, North York Moors, Yorkshire Dales, Nidderdale & Peak District

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Difficult to film, or difficult to shoot? It seems clear that gamekeepers often struggle to shoot Hen Harriers as easily as Buzzards or Red Kites, probably due to the species' different foraging techniques, which is probably why gamekeepers have developed techniques for getting close to Hen Harriers to give them a better chance of shooting them. For example, using plastic decoys to draw the Harriers in close (e.g. here), or setting spring traps on or close to their nests (e.g. here, here, here), or setting pole traps in areas where they're foraging (here), or sitting out at roost sites waiting for the harriers to come in (e.g. here, and here), or even walking through the roost with two dogs and a gun after dark (e.g. here).

I daresay that some members of the Yorkshire Dales Moorland Group have first-hand experience – was recently convicted gamekeeper Racster Dingwall a member? You remember Racster Dingwall, caught on an RSPB covert camera sitting out at a Harrier roost site on a grouse moor in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, casually chatting with two colleagues about how they'd shot and killed Buzzards and Ravens that day, before shooting towards one Hen Harrier coming in to roost (but being careful not to kill it because it was fitted with a satellite tag) and then conspiring to shoot and kill another Hen Harrier coming in to roost, this one without a satellite tag. Many of us believe this untagged harrier was shot and killed but Dingwall was not charged with that offence (see here for an explanatory blog).

Yorkshire Dales moorland gamekeeper Racster Dingwall (left) leaving court in January 2026 following his conviction for conspiring to kill a Hen Harrier (photo by Ruth Tingay)

Dingwall's conviction undid all the good work (propaganda) that the Yorkshire Dales Moorland Group has pumped out over the years to try and disguise the fact, according to the RSPB, that:

"*This area* [Yorkshire Dales National Park]*– dominated by grouse moors – is the epicentre for Hen Harrier persecution in the UK. Since 2016, in this area four confirmed persecution incidents involving RSPB and Natural England satellite tagged Hen Harriers have taken place and 13 satellite tagged Hen Harriers have suspiciously disappeared – all suspected to have been persecuted (2016-2025)*" (see here).

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22 thoughts on "In 2026, there wasn't a single reported Hen Harrier breeding attempt on grouse moors in the North Pennines, North York Moors, Yorkshire Dales, Nidderdale & Peak District"

Pingback: Natural England publishes 2026 Hen Harrier breeding attempts – only 9 (of 45) were on grouse moors – Raptor Persecution UK

JJS
November 20, 2026 at 8:13 am

Quite shocking statistics. Surely no person or body/association can defend these? On another note did Mr Dingwall lose his shotgun and firearms certificates over his conviction? If not, why not?

Reply

spaghnum morose
November 20, 2026 at 12:03 pm

[Ed: first para deleted but I'd be VERY interested if you hear the name of the estate].

Anyone who has the time and inclination can do research on websites and open social media and see a number of convicted keepers still merrily smiling for the cameras at country shows and events proudly in their estate tweeds. The convict from one blatant case can be seen posing for a photo with a politician who has been instrumental in related legislation! With very few exceptions, the driven grouse shooting community from billionaire owner to the pickers-up and all in between (note, that this is not all people that shoot in the UK!), do not give a flying f-k about people killing raptors – they only care about the issue when dead stuff is found & makes headlines and especially when somebody from among them actually gets CAUGHT killing raptors. It's the getting caught bit that is their problem issue!

Reply

Brion james
November 20, 2026 at 8:30 am

When is defra, and natural England, national trust, etc going to push for a complete ban on shooting anything that moves.

We have lost far to many birds of prey for it to be an accident, and hen harriers have been persecuted for to many years.

With modern technology, and the ability to create amazing scenery, we are able to make an environment, within a building that will allow these barbarians to continue to shoot stuff, but not killing anything, this would be a better solution for all, especially wildlife.

With ai, a big room can be turned into a lifelike wilderness, with all kinds of game birds flying about on walls covered in screens, and these barbarians can weild guns to their hearts content, and shoot as many game birds as they like, and none will escape into the wild, no raptors will be killed by accidently on purpose incidents.

Job done.

Reply

Coop
November 20, 2026 at 10:28 am

Better still, a *small* room, i.e. a prison cell.

Reply

loudlyzanydf52bf853d
November 20, 2026 at 8:30 am

Sickening that you have to press Natural England for this information – clearly they are trying to suppress it. There should be a national vote of no confidence in Natural England – it's working against Hen Harrier – not for them.

Why can't we set up a national voluntary network to monitor England's grouse moors and catch the gamekeeping bastards at it?it just goes on and on and on and infuriates me!

Reply

Dave
November 20, 2026 at 10:34 am

Thats not quite true!, i live on the edge of bowland, and have volunteered on occaisions, to help monitor harriers. The united utilities land is shot over!, but regulated better. Grouse shooting brings large amounts of revenue to the area, and if controlled properly is fine. There needs to be a rigid set of rules, where harriers have full protection, hand in hand with regulated shoots.

Reply

RaptorPersecutionUK
November 20, 2026 at 11:00 am

Thanks for your comment, Dave. Which bit do you think is "not quite true"?

Reply

Dave
November 20, 2026 at 12:12 pm

The bit about harriers not breeding on grouse shot land, the uu land is a controlled grouse shoot. Its the privates that are the problem. I know i live there.

Reply

Keith Dancey
November 20, 2026 at 1:39 pm

"The bit about harriers not breeding on grouse shot land, the uu land is a controlled grouse shoot. Its the privates that are the problem."

But the report clearly states: "Just two breeding attempts on grouse moors in Bowland and seven in Northumberland."

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Reply

Dave jones
November 21, 2026 at 10:57 am

Sorry mate thats misinformation as a lot is in heated debates. 9 pairs of harriers successfully bred on uu land in bowland, im part of the studies going on there. 1 pair bred on a nearby private estate, just to pacify us i guess. Lord knows how many will survive to be adults!, after they disperse, many of our tagged birds are shot elsewhere. My gripe is not with strictly managed moors and shoots, each to their own. We need to compromise!, come down hard on raptor persecution, and i mean HARD. Then back off with all this anti crap, come down hard on them also. Its a tough ask i know!, but the right path to take.

Reply

Keith Dancey
November 21, 2026 at 12:15 pm

“Sorry mate thats misinformation as a lot is in heated debates.”

That information comes from Natural England, as clearly pointed out by Ruth.

“9 pairs of harriers successfully bred on uu land in bowland, im part of the studies going on there.”

The Natural England report states, again quite clearly, that there were 11 breeding attempts in Bowland, of which 2 were on grouse moors.

You need to provide evidence where those figures are wrong.

In response to “Which bit do you think is “not quite true”?” you replied “The bit about harriers not breeding on grouse shot land”

There isn’t ‘a bit’ ***anywhere*** in the report which says Hen Harriers **have not bred** on ‘grouse shot land’.

Please read it again.

Reply

spaghnum morose
November 21, 2026 at 1:50 pm

If we are wanting to digress to talking about Bowland. Then from what I have tried to find out, grouse shooting on UU land occurs but the management effort “for grouse” is only modest – probably something I might approve of. And they have successfull Harrier nests. Along the road from there you have one of the top proper “grouse moors” there is, anywhere. Intensive, hardworking keepering And they shoot a serious amount of grouse by all accounts. I am told that Gunnerside holds the bag average records, but that Abbeystead isn’t far behind. Either way – it is a huge estate with “the best” management for grouse.

But here’s a question –

How many successful Harrier nests at Abbeystead over the years?

Very, very few.

Reply

Braydon Forest & Beyond
November 20, 2026 at 4:06 pm

If you will look at what Ruth actually wrote you will see that she acknowledges 9 breeding attempts on grouse moors.

Reply

spaghnum morose
November 20, 2026 at 7:27 pm

The above little thread gets absolutely to the heart of the problem. The difference between “just moors” that grouse shooting may or may not take place on along with other land uses, and true “grouse moors” where the main driver of land management is driven grouse shooting. There is potentially a spectrum of management models with moors throughout that spectrum, but in practice wherever in the uplands it is economically viable to obtain and control land for intensive DGS, and where it is do-able in management terms – then that is almost always what is done. It’s pure Gordon Gekko principles (and sometimes literally the real life Gordon Gekko owners) that prevail unless restrained for other reasons. Harriers and other “vermin” are just inconvenient rubbish or “shite” , as referred to in that world, to be efficiently swept aside in the name of maximising returns on capital.

Reply

Murmur
November 22, 2026 at 4:53 pm

This claim about “lots of money” coming from shooting is frequently made, but is rarely backed up by any hard evidence.

Can you provide a source for your claim and some actual figures we can examine?

Thank you.

Reply

Swaledale
November 20, 2026 at 8:14 pm

As always, clear and challenging.

So how can we, on the outside, challenge their business directly. The fewer ordinary people and companies that take part is the achilles heel to their business model. You do not have to convince the die hards !

IMO persuading NE, Defra and the Government to change their stance by standing up to the shooting industry for once. They need to enforce the current laws on a much stricter basis and introduce legislation to hold the shooting industry to a much stricter regime. In the end it is the wider electorate that holds the massive democratic power not just an entitled, shot gun owning and wealthy few.

Reply

spaghnum morose
November 21, 2026 at 4:59 pm

Hi Swaledale,

“So how can we, on the outside, challenge their business directly”

My thoughts – “just” (small word I know, but significant commitment) keep on doing what I know you and everyone is doing in our own ways , encourage more people to get on the case too, never accept lies and keep helping in any way with the building of the quality and depth of information that is out and share it with everyone you can. Keep shaming the people involved and those complicit in turning blind eyes, and the public bodies and police who do nothing substantial / are still very slowly lacing up their boots.

Never back down – they won’t, unless forced too. I personally won’t back down (roll on retirement I will crank it up!) – until wildlife crime on shooting estates is TRULY a very rare “bad apple” thing and is not, as it is now – a bona fide but publicly unspoken land management methodology.

And if anyone has few quid spare, tip in to the direct fund for RSPB Investigations, to get more cameras out there and more evidence and court cases in the public eye.

👍

Reply

Jimmy
November 20, 2026 at 9:19 pm

What is holdling back this Labour government tackling this Mafia industry once and for all??

Reply

Keith Dancey
November 21, 2026 at 10:39 am

“What is holdling back this Labour government tackling this Mafia industry once and for all??”

Same as always has been: they are overwhelmingly an urban political movement with no history of interest in wildlife.

Reply

Murmur
November 22, 2026 at 5:00 pm

Labour have next to never been interested in any environmental issues, so I’m not sure why they would suddenly start now.

Reply

sog

November 21, 2026 at 1:47 pm

After the chicks have been removed from their natal nests, do the parents survive? Might they make another breeding attempt that year

Reply

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