

Current Status - UK and local

UK Biodiversity Status: Priority (Red-listed) Species of Conservation Concern

LBAP Partnership area Status: Local Priority Species

The Hen Harrier, because it is rare and vulnerable, has statutory protection under Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive, Appendix II of the Bern Convention, and Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. It is a crime to disturb a Hen Harrier by approaching or visiting an active nest site, from the building stage right through till the young have fledged and left the nest.

The Partnership area is particularly important for these birds. Following a nationwide survey in 1998, the UK Hen Harrier population was estimated to be in the region of 680 pairs, approximately three-quarters of these being in Scotland. Local surveys by the Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC) and Raptor Study Group (RSG) have revealed that the numbers of Hen Harrier attempting to breed in the Partnership area is within the range of 9-14 pairs annually (up to 2% of the UK breeding population). All of these were within the Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park (CMRP).

There is a small, scattered wintering population of up to ten birds throughout the Partnership area. A few remain over winter on the moors of the Regional Park. Occasional sightings also occur on farmland (mainly upland rough grazing), as well as at the Lochwinnoch RSPB Reserve and on recently afforested land in East Renfrewshire.

MAIN RANGE OF HEN HARRIER



Ecology and Management

UK habitats relevant to Hen Harrier conservation in the Partnership area include Upland Heath, Blanket Bog, Acid Grassland, Planted Coniferous Woodland, Fen, Carr, Marsh, Swamp, Reedbed, and Coastal Saltmarsh.

Hen Harriers are present in the UK all year round and in the breeding season are largely restricted to upland heather-dominated moorland. In the Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park this is often

interspersed with areas of upland grassland and rush-dominated flushes. The nest is built on or close to the ground in rank vegetation, normally heather.

At other times of year, Hen Harriers occupy a variety of open country habitats, including young forestry, often dispersing to winter on lower ground where prey is more abundant. Most of the birds migrate to wintering grounds in southern Scotland, Ireland or England, with some going as far south as France.

Hen Harriers prey largely on mammals and birds, such as voles or pipits, all of which are taken on or close to the ground. In the Partnership area the most frequently taken prey species are Meadow Pipits and Field Voles, with young Mountain Hares or Red Grouse, and Skylarks, featuring less frequently. Experimental supplementary feeding, to divert harriers from preying upon grouse chicks, has been attempted at one local nest site in two separate years. However in both years the harriers declined to take food offered, even during low vole population levels. The local SOC/RSG harrier workers believe this practice may be harmful to the birds, as the decomposing rabbit corpses attracted scavengers and potential predators to the vicinity of the nest site.

Factors causing loss or decline

During the 1800's and early 1900's, Hen Harriers became virtually extinct as a breeding species in mainland UK, being largely restricted to the Orkney Isles and the Outer Hebrides. This was largely due to persecution, mainly by those wanting to preserve grouse on shooting estates. Since around 1950, as a result of land-use change and a decline in gamekeeping, allied with protective legislation, Hen Harriers have returned to many former Scottish haunts. Their national recovery is, however, far from complete. Widespread persecution continues to restrict harrier numbers and distribution.

The fortunes of breeding Hen Harriers in the Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park have improved in recent years, and hopefully this situation will continue as a result of the Hen Harrier Species Action Plan.

- ★ Inappropriate grazing or burning regimes can result in a loss of quality habitat, which in turn reduces prime breeding and foraging areas for harriers. Some extensive areas of heather moorland in Renfrewshire have suffered from excessive burning in the past. On some moors the continuation of overburning has limited the development of mature heather banks, which the harriers require for nesting. Recent fires within the northern part of the Regional Park, particularly in 2002 and 2003, devastated large areas of heather moor, removing many suitable nest sites for harriers and seriously reducing prey availability.



Inverclyde
Renfrewshire
East Renfrewshire
LBAP



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HEN HARRIER (Circus cyaneus)

The Hen Harrier is one of our most spectacular birds of prey – and one of the rarest. They perform one of the most dramatic mating displays of the bird world when they launch themselves into their 'skydance' displays. The male bird performs spectacular aerial manoeuvres, often rising hundreds of feet above the ground before tumbling earthwards. As part of the courtship display, the male and female will often engage in dramatic mid-air food passes.

A medium-sized bird of prey, with long wings and tail, harriers hunt by flying low over the ground and catching prey by surprise or in a short pursuit. They are very graceful birds in flight, and the plumage of the male Hen Harrier is particularly striking, being a pale powder blue-grey with conspicuous black wing tips. The female's plumage is mainly brown with chestnut tones, and a noticeable white 'rump' patch above the prominently barred tail.

Unintentional disturbance of nests, by a variety of recreational or occupational pursuits, can adversely affect breeding success. The Regional Park Authority will take this into account in planning walking routes and events, as well as advising park-users, grouse-shooters, landowners, farmers and other land managers of sensitive areas at particular times of year.

Development proposals, including windfarm proposals, also have the potential to damage the moorland habitats and disturb Hen Harrier populations. Local Councils, together with Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and other statutory consultees, are consulted on such developments to assess possible impacts.

All possible measures should be investigated to mitigate any damage and compensate for potential impacts of such developments. In agreements or planning conditions, provision must be made for undertaking positive habitat management which can safeguard appropriate areas for Hen Harriers in the long term. In conjunction with the relevant local authorities, the Regional Park Authority has produced a map to highlight sensitive areas for potential wind farm developments within the Park area.

Opportunities and Current action

The Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park is in a special position to influence the status of Hen Harriers within its boundaries, especially on land publicly owned by Renfrewshire and Inverclyde Councils. There is considerable scope to amend moorland management, primarily through strategic control of muirburn, drainage and grazing regimes, to enhance the habitats for Hen Harrier and other moorland wildlife.

★ As part of its stated remit, Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park seeks to promote the conservation of Hen Harriers in partnership with landowners and land users. RSPB, CMRP and SNH have developed a Hen Harrier remote viewing facility at the Muirshiel Visitor Centre where the successful



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fledging of three birds was observed in 2003, and regular guided moorland walks were available to visitors.

★ The SOC and Raptor Study Group (RSG) have proposed that an area of moorland within the Park is managed primarily for the conservation of Hen Harriers, as well as for wider biodiversity objectives. The Regional Park is also working with the Heather Trust to promote heather recovery on the moors around Muirshiel.

★ The density of breeding Hen Harriers in the Regional Park over the five-year period of 1998-2002 indicates that it would meet the criteria for selection as a Special Protection Area under the terms of the Conservation (Natural Habitats Etc) Regulations 1994. Members of the South Strathclyde RSG, the SOC and staff from the Regional Park, under licence from SNH, monitor the breeding population and productivity of Hen Harrier on an annual basis.

★ Revision of agricultural incentive schemes may provide enhanced options for environmentally sensitive management of uplands, allied to the biodiversity priorities of this action plan. These may enhance financial incentives towards the control of grazing and promotion of the heather-dominated habitats that support Hen Harriers.

★ The Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park has used a Macaulay Institute Hill Grazing Model to improve grazing regimes, has organised seminars on the Rural Stewardship Scheme (RSS) for moorland areas, and chairs moorland management meetings comprised of a group of interested landowners, land users and conservationists.

Action Plan

Key priorities are to maintain and enhance Renfrewshire's breeding Hen Harrier population, and through protection measures and habitat enhancement, aim to increase the breeding population by 25% and improve productivity by 50% over a five-year period. The entire known breeding population is within the Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park, so the species could benefit from management agreements with local land owners and users. Staff resources of the park could continue to assist with ongoing monitoring of breeding success, and also with the development of habitat management projects.

Objectives

- Objective 1: Increase the breeding population and productivity over the next 5 years.
- Objective 2: Maintain and enhance key Hen Harrier habitat.
- Objective 3: Eliminate or reduce the number of sites failing due to human interference.
- Objective 4: Ensure that all relevant landowners and tenants are aware of Hen Harriers on their land and what they can do to help them.
- Objective 5: Establish size of breeding and wintering populations and their trends.
- Objective 6: Raise awareness of Hen Harriers and the need for their conservation.
- Objective 7: Review the action plan on an annual basis, commencing in 2005.

We will achieve these objectives by:

Summary of Actions / Targets	Delivery (Lead Partner in bold)	Timescale
Establish a population of 14-16 breeding pairs (approximately 25% increase over the past 5-year mean) of Hen Harrier by 2008, through implementation of the Species Action Plan.	RSPB , CMRP, SNH, RSG, SOC, MMG, PWLO, FWAG, LBAP Officer	2004-08
Develop management practices to protect and extend suitable nesting and foraging habitat within publicly owned land, and seek private landowners' help in restoring and protecting heather moorland throughout the LBAP area.	CMRP , MMG, RSPB, SNH, RSG, SOC	2004-08
Increase vigilance to detect and deter persecution of Hen Harriers.	RSPB , CMRP, PWLO, RSG/SOC, MMG	2004-08
Contact all landowners and tenants whose land supports Hen Harriers by spring 2004, and seek partnership working to further the objectives of the action plan.	CMRP , MMG, SNH, RSPB, FWAG	2004
Continue to run a programme of monitoring of breeding and wintering Hen Harriers during the lifetime of this plan.	RSG/SOC , CMRP	2004-08
Produce awareness strategy by 2005.	LBAP Officer , RSPB, RSG/SOC, Education Adviser	2004-05
Continue the remote viewing facility at Muirshiel Country Park initiated in 2003.	RSPB/CMRP , SNH, RSG/SOC,	2004 onwards
Record and monitor actions towards the objectives.	LBAP Officer All listed partners	Ongoing

Links with Other Action Plans

Dwarf Shrub Heath, Mires, Unimproved Grassland.

Further Information can be obtained from The LBAP Officer Tel.: 0141 842 5281