

Hen Harrier (female)
Photo: Mike Brown



The last of the skydancers

Hen Harriers are facing extinction in Ireland. Raptor Conservation Officer **John Lusby** reports.

Knowledge gaps can be one of the main obstacles to effective conservation of bird species, and particularly so when it comes to birds of prey. This excuse cannot be applied to Hen Harriers, however. Thanks to extensive research and dedicated monitoring over the past two decades, our understanding of the conservation status and ecology of the Hen Harrier arguably exceeds that of any other bird in this country.

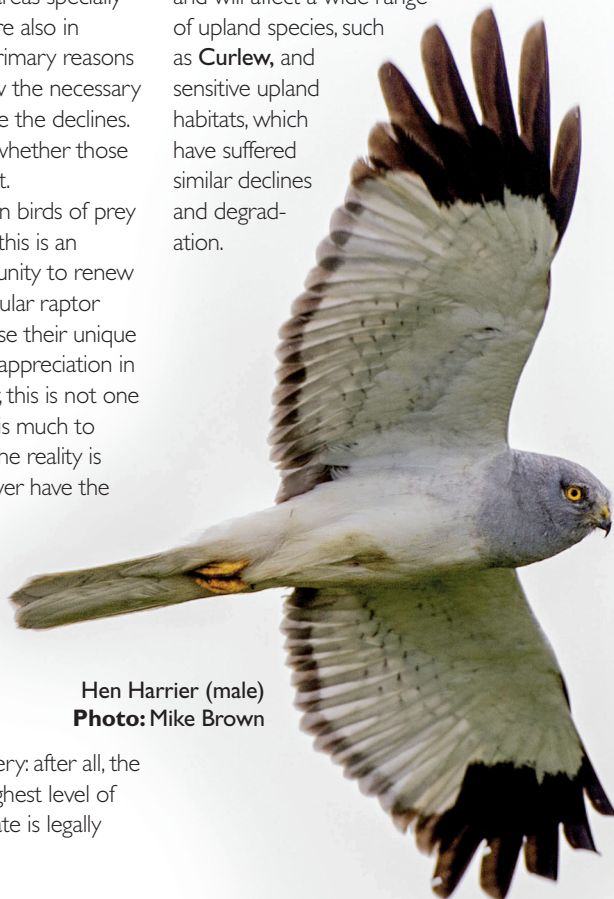
We know that Hen Harrier populations in Ireland are in decline. We are fully aware that Hen Harrier populations within areas specially designated for their protection are also in decline. We have identified the primary reasons for these declines. We even know the necessary steps required to halt and reverse the declines. The only unknown remaining is whether those in power will do anything about it.

I have written many features on birds of prey over the past few years. Typically, this is an enjoyable experience, an opportunity to renew my own appreciation for a particular raptor through attempting to characterise their unique charisma and instil a little of that appreciation in others along the way. Regrettably, this is not one of those articles. Although there is much to appreciate about Hen Harriers, the reality is that fewer and fewer of us will ever have the opportunity to do so.

The title of this piece is not an exaggeration. The Hen Harrier is one of Ireland's rarest breeding birds, and it is getting rarer. As bleak as this prognosis may seem, you could be forgiven for thinking the odds are stacked in favour of its recovery: after all, the species has been afforded the highest level of protection in this country, the State is legally

committed to ensuring its populations are maintained and enhanced, and a significant body of scientific evidence provides a clear pathway to achieving this. The next steps should be abundantly clear.

Unfortunately, standing in the way is something just as powerful: *the lack of political will*. It is at this virtual road-block that the fate of Hen Harrier conservation has played out through the **Hen Harrier Threat Response Plan** and political deliberations for over three years. The decisions ultimately made will have ramifications far beyond the Hen Harrier itself, and will affect a wide range of upland species, such as **Curlew**, and sensitive upland habitats, which have suffered similar declines and degradation.



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The Hen Harrier is listed in Annex I of the EU Birds Directive and, because of this, Member States of the European Union are required to protect and conserve it. These obligations involve key actions to designate **Special Protection Areas (SPAs)** for the bird and to monitor harrier's populations.

The most recent national survey of the species, which was carried out in 2015, estimated between 108 and 157 breeding pairs of Hen Harriers nationally. Assessment of trends in the areas monitored over the preceding 15 years reveals *ongoing population declines*, with overall recorded losses of 33.5%.

Designated areas

In 2007, as required under the EU Birds Directive, Ireland designated six sites as SPAs based on their importance for breeding Hen Harriers. These included upland areas in counties Clare, Cork, Galway, Kerry, Laois, Limerick, Monaghan, Offaly and Tipperary, together making up 2.3% of the total land area of the Republic of Ireland. It was hoped that these designations would provide the starting point for a Hen Harrier recovery.

Alas, designation in isolation does not ensure success; it must be accompanied by appropriate management and engagement with landowners and stakeholders, which, until very recently, have been lacking. Now, almost ten years after these sites were designated, in the absence of Management Plans or Conservation Objectives, *the SPAs have not performed*. In fact, Hen Harrier populations have actually declined within the SPA network, with an overall loss of 26.6% recorded since 2005.

Management of the SPA network has clearly fallen short in terms of conservation, but has also failed the landowners. The upland areas which make up the network are some of our most

important areas for wildlife, but also some of the most challenging to farm. Many landowners have transitioned from traditional farming to forestry to avail of tax-funded incentives to plant their lands. As a result, commercial forest plantations now dominate much of the upland landscape.

Research has shown that Hen Harrier breeding success drops below a self-sustaining level when forest cover in the landscape is greater than 40%. At present, plantation forest covers 53% of the land area of the SPA network. A ban on additional planting within the SPAs therefore was, and remains, entirely necessary to preserve the remaining integrity of these areas.

Even in the absence of further land-use change, forest maturation over the next decade will result in a substantial decrease in areas of suitable habitat available for Hen Harrier.

Afforestation is the primary threat to Hen Harriers

We know that afforestation in the uplands is the primary threat to Hen Harrier populations, yet for too long no support for alternative, sustainable land management has been made available, leaving many farmers justifiably disillusioned with 'conservation.' Much of the inevitable backlash has been targeted at the Hen Harrier: It is depressingly ironic, and indicative of severely failed policy, when a bird which symbolises a healthy upland landscape is viewed as a threat to farming livelihoods.

I was recently struck by just how horribly wrong things have gone. I was giving a talk on birds of prey to a group living close to one of the most important remaining areas for Hen Harriers. It was going great, the audience was

engaged, enthusiastic and full of questions as the focus moved from one raptor to the next. When it came to Hen Harriers, however, I noticed a sudden change in mood among some; just the mention of the bird seemed to stir some obvious negative reactions. I was in a primary school, talking to a group of children in 2nd class.

Changing attitudes towards Hen Harriers is important; however, this would be a natural by-product of **effective agri-environment schemes** which work for the farmer and biodiversity. The **Green Low-carbon Agri-Environment Scheme**, which came into effect in 2015, includes a measure which aims to promote the maintenance and creation of suitable habitat for Hen Harriers. It may help to alleviate some of the pressures on landowners within the SPAs; however, the prescriptions are unlikely to be sufficiently targeted to make a real difference for Hen Harriers.

There has been further positive progress, however, with the recent announcement that a **locally-led agri-environment scheme** for Hen Harriers will be rolled out in 2017. Regardless of how effective this scheme turns out to be, by definition of the fact that farmed lands now cover less than half of the SPA network, it can only offer a solution to part of the problem. It would be naïve not to acknowledge that there is a range and complexity of factors which impact Hen Harrier populations, but it would be even more dangerous to ignore the primary threat: **afforestation and maturation of forest.**

The National Parks and Wildlife Service commenced its **Hen Harrier Threat Response Plan** in June 2013; this was due to end by June 2015 but is currently ongoing. The objective is to implement an appropriate framework to **'cease, avoid, reverse, reduce, eliminate or prevent threats on the Hen Harrier.'**

We will be the first to support an effective threat response plan, but we are also prepared, alongside other conservation organisations which have also provided significant input to this



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process, to fight for biodiversity should the outcomes of the plan fall short of its objectives, as we fear it might. We may well be calling on your support to assist us.

➔ For further information on Hen Harriers and to find out about our range of education, policy and monitoring work on Hen Harriers, visit our webpages at <http://bit.ly/2hGPjt6>.



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What BirdWatch Ireland is doing

With funding from the Irish Environmental Network (IEN), in addition to inputting to the Hen Harrier-Threat Response Plan, BirdWatch Ireland has worked towards increasing awareness of the species and its cultural and ecological importance through an **education video, online booklet** and **factfile**, which will be circulated in 2017.

Primary school **educational materials** have also been developed in association with the Heritage Council and the county councils in Galway, Clare and Tipperary. Additional funding has allowed for the development of work on advocating for Hen Harrier conservation with the Government.