

WEEKENDS AWAY FOREST OF BOWLAND

Purple haze

A miracle is taking place in a quiet corner of Lancashire – one of our rarest raptors, the hen harrier, is coming back. **Louise Tickle** climbed up onto the heather moorlands of the Forest of Bowland to find out more.

SLOWLY, WE CRAWLED uphill in the Land Rover along a rough, stony road that cut between two high fells, listening intently to the irregular pulse of Stephen Murphy's radio receiver. An expert employed by Natural England to monitor the Forest of Bowland's hen harriers, Stephen had given up his Saturday to meet me early that morning in the lovely village of Slaidburn, and just after 8am we headed off in search of the female harrier he had seen 'sky-dancing' only the day before. Would she still be there today, I wondered – it was asking a lot to see such a rare British bird on my first attempt.

She was known as Bird 535, and Stephen had watched her fledge just eight months earlier. Now she had returned to breed half a mile from where she'd hatched, and Stephen believed that her flirty tumbling and swooping indicated she was on the lookout for a mate.

Sighting such a rare raptor is never guaranteed, even in the company of an expert, but fortunately Bird 535 had been fitted with a tiny radio transmitter before she fledged. At just 1/30th of her bodyweight, and attached to an individually tailored Kevlar harness, the transmitter is a nifty piece of kit. As we crested a small rise in the road, the pulse grew louder.



A female hen harrier: a flirty bird.

At first she was invisible, camouflaged against the green-brown background of the heather, but then Stephen spotted her and eventually I, too, found her in my binoculars. She was leaping from one heathery tuft to another – 'heather hopping' in scientific lingo – wings half-splayed and fluttering, elegantly powerful as she declared this her nesting territory and dared a male to come and meet her.

Despite the gusting wind, I hung out of the car window, freezing fingers pressing binoculars to eyes that sprang tears almost instantly in the chill. But I was entranced. She seemed so confident of her place in these windswept hills, so sure that her aerial prowess would attract that all-important mate.

With 15 of the 19 breeding females in the whole of England living in Bowland, this is one of the best places to catch a glimpse of a hen harrier. Last year, 22 chicks were fledged, up from only 10 in 2002.

OUT ON THE MOORS

The Forest of Bowland isn't well known. Most people hurtle up the M6 on their way to the Lake District without even knowing it's there, but take a detour between junctions 31 and 34 and you'll find yourself in dramatic fell country. And, at least for the moment, you'll have it to yourself, despite it being designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Confusingly, there aren't that many trees in Bowland (it was once a royal hunting forest and a

large slice is still owned by the Duke of Westminster), but you'll still find plenty of wildlife that has made these remote gritstone fells and verdant green farmland its home. That same morning, I watched a peregrine hunting over the quarry where it had built its nest and listened to curlews burbling their distinctive call. There are merlins, golden plovers, ring ouzels and whinchats here, too, if you take the time to look.

Steep-sided valleys clench the rivers Ribble, Hodder, Wyre and Lune tight in their stony grasp. There are patches of ancient

woodland, endless lengths of drystone wall and villages such as Dunsop Bridge, Downham and Newton dotted sparsely across the countryside. Private estates – the Queen is also a landowner here – cover much of the area, and some people argue that the commercial grouse shooting that takes place on the moors has ensured the continued health of the upland heather habitat upon which the hen harrier depends.

HARRIERS ON THE RISE

Hunted almost to extinction in the late 19th century, harriers have



Heather moorland – here by Gisburn Forest near Slaidburn – is a main attraction of the Forest of Bowland, not only for its beauty, but because it supports the red grouse on which the area's hen harriers predate.



“If hen harriers keep getting disturbed by walkers, the female may be forced to leave the nest to hunt. The eggs could get cold or eaten. It’s easy for a nest to fail.”

Natural England’s Stephen Murphy on why visitors to the Forest of Bowland must be sensitive when walking its spectacular, heather-rich hills.

traditionally been detested by gamekeepers because of their impact on red grouse numbers. Indeed, the Moorland Association estimates that a single breeding pair will take out 300 birds in a year, which could be worth about £20,000, so there’s no denying they have an impact. But Stephen Murphy is keen to emphasise that, in Bowland at least, keepers on the big shooting estates now let the harriers breed unmolested.

“The first thing I did when I started this job was to meet the gamekeepers,” he told me. “I’ve taken my lads out as beaters on a

Bird 535 was leaping from one heathery tuft to another – ‘heather hopping’ in scientific lingo.

shoot, and I’m proud of the rapport I’ve built up. I can even drop into keepers’ houses for a brew. The main threat we now face is open access [under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000].”

We watched as a lone walker made his way unassumingly up the road towards us. And, as Stephen

predicted, Bird 535 flew off, disappearing over the far ridge. The beeping faded to silence and we didn’t see her again. The encounter demonstrated how the right to roam, though hailed as a great triumph by many, creates some problems for those working at the sharp end of conservation.

The real problem comes when the female is sitting on her eggs, Stephen explained. The male has to feed her, and this happens in a breathtaking food-pass performed by both birds in mid-air. “But you get one walker coming up that road, and the male won’t bring in

the kill,” he said. “That’s fine if it’s just one person, but say the birds have settled, and 15 minutes later someone else comes along. If they are continually disturbed, she’ll eventually get so hungry that she’ll be forced to leave the nest to hunt for herself. The eggs could get cold or eaten. It’s easy for a nest to fail.”

Last summer, a CCTV camera was trained on one harrier nest, showing footage of the chicks hatching, being fed and fledging. If the technology allows, live pictures will again be beamed direct from a harrier nest into the nearby Beacon Fell Visitor Centre. ▶

Geoff Simpson

FOREST OF BOWLAND Plan an idyllic day, weekend or even a week in the Forest of Bowland with our handy guide.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

THINGS TO DO

» **Bowland Festival**, from 2-17 June 2007, offers RSPB-led moorland safaris to see hen harriers, short-eared owls, curlews, merlins and peregrine falcons. Plus guided wildflower rambles, night-time bat and moth walks, badger encounters, talks on the medicinal uses of plants and drystone-walling workshops. Booking essential. A small charge applies to cover costs. ☎ 01200 420301; www.bowlandfestival.co.uk

» For more information about taking part in Lancashire Wildlife Trust's **hare survey**, contact Jane Ashley. ☎ 01772 324129; www.lancswt.org.uk

CONTACTS

» For information on Natural England's **hen harrier** project, contact Stephen Murphy. Email: stephenmurphy@naturalengland.org.uk

» **Forest of Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty** www.forestofbowland.com

» **Beacon Fell Country Park** ☎ 01995 640557; www.lancashire.gov.uk/environment/countryside/sites/beaconf.asp

PLACES TO STAY

» **Bleasdale Cottages**, Lower Fairsnape Farm. ☎ 01995 61343; www.bleasdalecottages.co.uk. Spacious self-catering accommodation on an 80-hectare farm for 2 to 8 people. Also B&B in newly converted farm buildings heated by an environmentally-friendly wood pellet boiler. Excellent disabled access. Good for brown hares, lapwings, curlews and oystercatchers. There is a wildlife lake and farm walks.

WHERE TO EAT

» **The Three Fishes**, Mitton, uses local Lancashire produce from within a 40km radius. ☎ 01254 826888; www.thethreefishes.com

FURTHER READING

» **Family Walks in Bowland** by Jack Keighley (Cicerone Press, ISBN 1852842512, £5.99, code W0707/19).

» **Forest of Bowland: With Pendle Hill and the West Pennine Moors** by Andrew Bibby (Francis Lincoln, ISBN 0711225028, £7.99, code W0707/20).

» Buy these books on p91, quoting the relevant code.

THE NAVIGATOR



LOCATION The Forest of Bowland covers 800km² of Lancashire and Yorkshire. With Preston and Blackburn to the south, the Ribble Valley to the east and Yorkshire Dales to the north, it is an overlooked and little-visited area. **WHEN TO VISIT** Any time between April and July is best for hen harriers, red grouse and waders. April to October is good for hares.

TOP SPECIES TO SEE



HEN HARRIER

WHEN March and April, when the female is advertising for a mate with her sky-dancing display. In June and July, you may see males passing food to females in mid-air.

WHERE Heather-covered upland fells.

HOW Go quietly and stay on the tracks. If you see a harrier on the ground, don't walk over the heather for a closer look, because it may be sitting on eggs. Don't stay in one place for too long because it could affect a bird's breeding success. Better still, go on one of the RSPB's guided moorland safaris during the Bowland Festival (June each year), which help to limit the impact of visitors on the birds.



BROWN HARE

WHEN February to October. The best times are early morning or late afternoon, when the adults are feeding. Seeing them in winter is harder because numbers are lower.

WHERE Lower Fairsnape Farm, Bleasdale, is one of the best places to see hares in the whole of Lancashire. Sightings are virtually guaranteed.

HOW Look along field edges, as well as in the middle of grassy lowland areas. Hares are not always immediately obvious (especially when camouflaged against grassy tussocks), but their red-tinged fur is easily seen against a green background when highlighted by sunshine.



CURLEW

WHEN Spring and summer. Curlews start leaving their moorland breeding grounds in June, and most will have left by the end of the month, but a few may stay until September.

WHERE Look for them on damp, unimproved farmland and moorland. It's estimated that the Forest of Bowland holds between 6 and 8 per cent of the UK's breeding curlew population.

HOW Try the 5km circular walk that starts from the Bull Beck picnic site. You will need OS Explorer OL41 *Forest of Bowland and Ribblesdale*. Further details from www.forestofbowland.com/wrc/walkmap_annaghlyll.asp



LAPWING

WHEN Late March onwards, when the females are on eggs. Like curlews, most lapwings will have gone by the end of June, but a few stay for a month or so longer.

WHERE The hide at Lower Fairsnape Farm, Bleasdale, is a very good bet. Otherwise, look on damp, boggy lowland areas, which the birds need to nest and rear their young.

HOW You can also look out for them on the 8km circular walk around Littleedale in Bowland near Caton. You will need OS Explorer OL41 *Forest of Bowland and Ribblesdale*. Directions at www.forestofbowland.com/wrc/walkmap_littleedale.asp



RED GROUSE

WHEN All year round, but spring and summer are probably best. The shooting season lasts from 12 August to 10 December.

Heather is burnt from October until March or April to encourage new growth.

WHERE Any heather moorland that is managed for commercial shooting. Try Fairsnape, Wolf or Saddle Fells, which can be accessed from the village of Chipping.

HOW Walk in any heather-covered upland area and you're bound to hear this plump, reddish bird's throaty call. When disturbed, it will rocket upwards in alarm from its hiding place in the heather before flying away with fast-whirring wingbeats.



A summery buttercup meadow in the Forest of Bowland's lowlands provides a contrast to the heather-covered moors.

AA World Travel Library/Alamy

"People want to see harriers, of course they do – they are beautiful birds. But we have a responsibility to use the access freedom wisely," Stephen said.

HARES AND GRACES

We left Bird 535 to attract a mate in peace, and I headed to Lower Fairsnape Farm in Bleasdale. Tucked into a dip under Fairsnape Fell, Anne and Robert Gardner's farmland and eco-friendly accommodation is now managed almost entirely for conservation, and I had been promised breeding lapwings and other waders in abundance and brown hares by the dozen in the fields.

My first encounter was with a dead hare, however. Its ribcage had been picked clean and its strong, muscular legs were stretched out taut, but there were plenty of live ones loping along the field edges, their distinctive black-tipped ears and tawny fur glowing in the late afternoon sunshine. Over the course of an hour's amble, we saw

five or six nibbling assiduously at tufts of fresh spring grass.

I was with Jane Ashley of the Lancashire Wildlife Trust. Every April, Jane runs a training day for volunteers who want to help survey the county's hares. Each person is given a square kilometre to monitor, and taught where they are likely to see the hares and how to make sure their count is as accurate as possible.

"Hare populations tend to crash in winter, so they're far less easy to

see then," she explained. Hares breed from February right through to October, and a female might raise three litters of up to four leverets a year. Only the previous week, Jane had seen hares boxing on the farm – not, of course, males fighting each other, but females giving pushy suitors the brush-off.

OWL ON THE PROWL

The next morning I climbed high onto the moor once again, looking to see if Bird 535 would sky-dance

for me. But she wasn't in the mood – or maybe she'd attracted a mate – so in surprisingly hot early April sunshine, I climbed high up onto the fells, where I flushed numerous red grouse into panicked, whirring flight.

I'd read that Bowland's damp, peaty uplands were home to the romantic-sounding cloudberry, rare bog rosemary and round-leaved sundew. But trying not to sprain an ankle or disappear neck-deep into a peaty swamp was more of a priority than searching for small flowers, so I can't say I saw any of them. It was nearly 6pm by the time I finished my walk, and though hungry and thirsty, my spirits were raised by the sight of a short-eared owl flying overhead in the early evening sunshine, hunting deftly for its dinner. It definitely had the right idea.



Oystercatchers are one of many species of wader that breed on Bowland's farmland.

Ann & Steve Toon/Alamy



A former press officer for the RSPB, Louise Tickle is now a freelance journalist specialising in social and environmental issues.