

## **APPENDIX 15 - BLACK GROUSE CONSERVATION IN THE NORTH CHEVIOTS AND NEW NATIVE WOODLAND CREATION PROJECTS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The UK black grouse population is in serious decline and has declined in range by 28% between 1968-72 and 1988-91 and in number by 75%. The total UK population was estimated at 6500 lekking males in 1996 compared to estimates of 3 times this number 6 years before.

The black grouse is a 'red list' species of high conservation concern and a priority for the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. The species is protected under Game Acts II/2 of the EC Habitats Directive, and Appendix III of the Berne Convention.

It is set against this context that significant research has taken place in the North of England in the last 10 years, combined with large scale habitat improvements via higher level stewardship and native broadleaf planting.

Within the North Pennines area the population stabilised between 1998-2002 at 800-850 males and since then the population has increased slightly to over 1000 males.

### **HISTORY OF BLACK GROUSE IN THE AREA**

Within the area of the North Cheviots ( See Map ) black grouse have existed at low densities for the last 40-50 years. In line with many other populations in the UK the numbers of birds has peaked and declined depending on habitat suitability, predation and grazing regimes.

The population probably peaked in the late 1960`s and early 70`s as several large areas of former sheep grazing such as Threestoneburn, Kidland, Uswayford and College Valley were fenced, cultivated and converted to conifer plantation. This provided an immediate improvement in habitat as once the sheep were removed the vegetation grew and the young trees provided food and ground cover.

Information is available from historical records regarding Threestoneburn that in the 1970`s upto 12 male black grouse were recorded at the former lek site 200m to the west of Threestoneburn House.

This time in the 1970`s probably saw the population at its height for as the conifer plantations closed canopy as they matured the habitat available deteriorated and the number of sheep grazing the surrounding moorland increased further damaged the habitat as the heather/bilberry/grass mosaic was replaced by grassland.

By the mid 1990`s the population was restricted to a handful of birds left at Threestoneburn, Uswayford and Commonburn and the small remnant population at Threestoneburn finally became extinct in 2001.

### **NORTH CHEVIOT BLACK GROUSE PROJECT**

In 1998 a number of local land-owners including Northumberland Estates, College Valley Estates, Lilburn Estates and Yeavinger formed the North Cheviot Black Grouse Project. The aim of this group was to endeavour to instigate habitat improvement works to benefit the small residual population and if necessary begin a re-introduction programme.

This period coincided with the conversion of much of the surrounding hill sheep grazing land to a more balanced managed grouse moor/sheep grazing regime. The number of sheep was reduced to allow the gradual recovery of the moorland to develop a heather/bilberry/grass mosaic.

The group received advice and support from the Game Conservancy Trust and the National Park Authority, Forest Enterprise and other neighbouring landowners became involved.

Between the groups formation in 1998 and 2004 over 200 ha of conifer plantation has been converted to moorland habitat and over 300 ha of native broadleaf woodland has been created to provide black grouse habitat.

In addition to the habitat improvement works it was decided to re-introduce black grouse. Various methods were proposed and in 2002 eggs collected from donor estates were put under red grouse hens. The overall results were disappointing but 2 female poults did survive, bolstering the small remnant population.

In addition to this modest success it was decided to release some adult males in 2004. Only 4 wing tagged males were released, but they all survived and were seen in the College Valley area

## **HABITAT IMPROVEMENT WORKS**

### **- COLLEGE VALLEY**

In 1997/98 College Valley estates felled 3 conifer plantations in the valley to the south of Mounthooly. These areas were replaced with an 80 ha new native woodland planting scheme comprising primarily birch, alder, willow, oak and rowan.

### **- WOOLER COMMON/COMMONBURN**

In 1999 Lilburn Estates bought 180 ha of predominantly conifer plantation from the FC. Permission was granted to convert 150 ha of this area back to moorland and in addition to this a further 140 ha of predominantly native broadleaf woodland was planted, much of which was specifically designed for black grouse habitat.

### **- LANGLEEFORD**

In 2000 20 ha of native broadleaf woodland was planted and additional areas of existing woodland was fenced to exclude stock.

### **- FC THREESTONEBURN FOREST**

Small scale habitat improvements were carried out in 2001 to remove conifers from small wetland areas.

### **- LINHOPE ESTATE**

Between 2000 and 2004 40 ha of new native broadleaf woodland was established in the valley to the south of Threestoneburn Forest.

### **- ILBERTON DODD FARM**

Between 2000 and 2002 40 ha of new native broadleaf woodland was planted on the farm to the west of Threestoneburn Forest. This coincided with the conversion of the remainder of the farm from sheep grazing to a more balanced mixture of managed grouse moor and extensive grazing.

- **YEAVINGERING**

Small scale planting and reduced grazing pressure to encourage habitat improvements.

- **BRANDON ESTATE**

In 2000 an area of 50ha was fenced and 60% of this area planted with native broadleaves and woody shrubs to enhance the habitat for black grouse.

In addition to these key habitat improvements it is also important to consider that much of the area in the North Cheviots is now managed as grouse moor for red grouse shooting. Within this area 8 gamekeepers are employed and as part of their duties they control predators such as foxes, crows and stoats. As well as benefiting the red grouse this makes an important difference to survival rates in black grouse also as can be seen from the details mentioned below.



Above – Developing Black Grouse habitat in the College Valley

## **CURRENT SITUATION**

From an all point low in the late 1990`s when the population of black grouse in the North Cheviots was restricted to a lek site at Uswayford and another at Threestoneburn the situation has improved.

During the period 2000-2002 the populations at the lek sites above died out but small numbers of black grouse appeared at Commonburn and in the College Valley. Large scale habitat improvements had taken place in both of these areas and new lek sites developed. This small population was bolstered by releases in 2002 & 2004 and in 2005 9 birds were seen in the College Valley and a further 3 in the Langleeford/Commonburn area.

In 2006 there were 2 established lek sites, one at Mounthooly in the College Valley numbering 4 males, whilst 2 males were present at Langleeford.

Females were also seen in both locations indicating a growing population.

In spring 2007 lekking males were present at both above sites and 2 additional males established a new lek site at Ilderton Dodd, only 2km from the historical lek site at Threestoneburn House.



Above; Developing black grouse habitat at Ilderton Dodd Farm, with Threestoneburn in the background.

## **THE FUTURE**

It can be seen from the above details that Black Grouse conservation can be a frustrating process and that even when the habitat is improving it can be a slow process for a small remnant population to recover. Although it must also be said that the species has proven to be resilient, surviving in small numbers in the locality (5-10 birds) for many years. It now seems apparent that to ensure that the population continues to increase the habitat work had to continue, predator control needs to intensify and the current extensive grazing regimes continue.

With the proposals to convert the afforested area of Threestoneburn Forest area to blanket bog and heathland habitat, combined with the new native broadleaf planting proposed this can only benefit the black grouse further, adding an important piece of the jigsaw in terms of habitat improvements in the North Cheviots area.