

New team appointed for unique moorland conservation project

The project partners of the Langholm Moor Demonstration Project are delighted to announce that Simon Lester has been appointed the new Head Gamekeeper of this inspiring 10-year conservation project.

Simon Lester was Head Gamekeeper on the Holkham Hall Estate in Norfolk , where a team of eight gamekeepers is dedicated to wild game, conservation and countryside management. Simon has been a gamekeeper for more than thirty years and was head keeper at Belvoir Castle before joining Holkham five years ago.

The Langholm Moor Demonstration Project is a unique partnership with Buccleuch Estates, Scottish Natural Heritage, The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (formerly The Game Conservancy Trust), RSPB and Natural England.

The Project aims to demonstrate whether the needs of an economically viable grouse moor can be met alongside the conservation needs of protected raptors, especially the hen harrier.

In addition to Simon Lester's appointment, the project partners have recently recruited a Project Manager (Graeme Dalby) as well as four additional keepers. This experienced team will be responsible for establishing Langholm Moor as a thriving grouse moor, which will include meeting the site's nature conservation objectives of improving the condition of the heather-dominated habitat through heather burning, bracken control and appropriate stock management.

The gamekeepers will also carry out legal predator control of foxes, crows, stoats and weasels and diversionary feeding of nesting harriers. In addition, the creation of good habitat conditions for hen harriers and other breeding birds will be an important aspect of the project.

The Head Keeper role will offer huge challenges over the coming years, particularly as its progress will be watched closely by conservationists, politicians, and moorland owners. However, Simon is very much relishing the challenge and said, "I have always been passionate about wild birds and nature and the predator/prey relationship is the biggest challenge facing conservationists. I come to the job with an open mind and as we will be starting from scratch the project offers a considerable challenge. When the project ends I hope that my particular role will have helped to move this long-standing debate forward by offering a viable solution that benefits all."

The new appointment has been widely welcomed by those interested in the future conservation of the uplands. Lindsay Waddell, Chairman of the National Gamekeeper's Organisation said, "The NGO is delighted that the project has appointed someone of the stature and standing in the gamekeeping profession as Simon Lester. The partners have made an excellent choice and I am sure Simon will bring all his experience to bear on the work of the project in the coming years."

Profession Colin Galbraith, of SNH and chairman of the project partnership commented, "The management of Langholm Moor has been one of the most keenly debated conservation issues in the country in recent years and we were keen to appoint a high calibre keeper who would understand the complexities and demands of this high profile project. I believe that Simon's experience and extensive knowledge of conservation issues will equip him well for the challenges ahead."

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Notes to editors:

To see the progress of the project please visit its dedicated website at :

www.langholmproject.com

1. Langholm Moor in Dumfriesshire, owned by The Buccleuch Group, was the main one of six sites for the 'Joint Raptor Study', that ran between 1992 and 1997, investigating the relationships between hen harriers, peregrines and red grouse. The Estate stopped grouse shooting in 1998. By 1997 numbers of hen harriers had peaked at 20 breeding females (although their population has subsequently stabilised at 4-5 breeding pairs today), and red grouse numbers declined to 45 per km². The findings of the 'Joint Raptor Study' have subsequently been published in leading ecological science journals.
2. Monitoring of raptor, grouse and other bird interests has continued on the moor since 1997. In 1998 and 1999 a research trial using diversionary feeding of hen harriers showed a marked reduction of red grouse chicks taken by hen harriers 'fed' with alternative food. This work will be explored further to see if it can help protect red grouse from predation by hen harriers.
3. One outcome of the Joint Raptor Study was for SNH to form the Moorland Working Group to try and develop consensus on moorland-raptor issues. That group comprised members from The Game Conservancy Scottish Research Trust (GCSRT), Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the (then) Scottish Landowners' Federation, Buccleuch Estates (which owns Langholm) and SNH. In 1998, the Group signed a Statement of Intent, '*Action for Scotland's Moorland*', which also bore the signatures of nine further supporting organisations. In 2002, the Moorland Working Group gave way to Scotland's Moorland Forum, involving 24 organisations.
4. In 2005, in an effort to move forward the "Langholm" debate, the Langholm Project Group was formed, chaired by SNH, and comprising Buccleuch Estates, the GWCT, RSPB and Natural England. That group agreed the detailed Demonstration Project Plan. The main aim of the project is to restore moorland habitats, reduce conflicts, and create the other conditions, which allow the SPA conservation status to be maintained, and to meet a target of at least 1% (currently 7 breeding females) of the UK population of female hen harriers. In short, to establish Langholm Moor as a driven grouse moor that meets the nature conservation objectives for the SPA and SSSI.
5. The project will be managed by a Board comprising senior staff of the partners, and will be advised by an independent panel of eminent scientists. The "on the ground" management of the project will be carried out by five keepers, a senior ecologist, two part-time ecologists and a project manager. The scientists will be secondees from Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust and the RSPB.
6. The Project is being funded by a partnership of SNH (£973,491); Buccleuch Estates (£973,491); Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (£973,491); RSPB (£336,096); and Natural England (£168,052). These figures assume an annual inflation rate of 2.5%.
7. The Langholm Moor Demonstration Project will help to inform the work of Scotland's Moorland Forum and the discussions being organised by the Environment Council on behalf of Natural England and its partners on ways to reconcile the management of grouse with the conservation of hen harriers

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