

**September 20th 2007**

## **Major new project to explore novel approach to the conservation of raptors on grouse moors**

One of the most ambitious and innovative land management and conservation projects ever to be carried out in Britain is launched today (Thursday 20 September) by Scottish Minister for Environment, Michael Russell.

The Langholm Moor Demonstration Project will focus on the management of a substantial red grouse moor on Buccleuch Estates in Dumfriesshire. The moor includes around 7,000 hectares protected under European legislation due to its international importance for the hen harrier.

The Project has been established by a unique partnership with Buccleuch Estates, Scottish Natural Heritage, The Game Conservancy Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Natural England.

With an investment of more than £3m over a ten-year period, the Project will employ eight people. It aims to integrate the management of the moor for grouse, biodiversity and other land use interests. More than half of the funding for the Project comes from grouse moor interests, including Buccleuch Estates.

The Project will seek 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.

Launching the Project, Minister for Environment Michael Russell said: "There is no doubt that moor management for grouse plays a vital part in Scotland's rural economy. However, ensuring the welfare of our magnificent birds of prey - particularly hen harriers in this case - is essential for Scotland's biodiversity. I hope that grouse shooting and raptor conservation need not be mutually exclusive and look forward to seeing the results of the Langholm Project and am hopeful that it will play a significant role in the development of similar projects."

Professor Colin Galbraith of SNH, who chairs the Project partnership, said: "We have formed a unique partnership to help solve a unique problem. The coming years will see the partner organisations work together to manage Langholm Moor in ways which, we hope, will allow grouse to be harvested, while ensuring that the hen harriers and other wildlife flourish."

The management of Langholm Moor has been one of the most keenly debated conservation issues in the country in recent years. People from a number of key conservation and land management organisations have worked together to find the middle ground and to develop a viable way forward. The partnership now in place includes considerable experience and expertise in land and conservation management, and in scientific monitoring.

The overall aim of the project is to establish Langholm Moor as an economically viable grouse moor which also meets the site's nature conservation objectives. It seeks to extend and improve the condition of heather-dominated habitat through heather burning, bracken control and appropriate stock management to encourage heather recovery.

There will be legal predator control of foxes, crows, stoats and weasels, and diversionary feeding of nesting hen harriers (see notes), and habitat creation for hen harriers and other moorland breeding birds.

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### **Additional quotes:**

SNH Chairman, Andrew Thin, said: "This Project will, I believe, be instrumental in helping reconcile the economic viability of moorland with the conservation objectives of protected species and habitats. I am particularly pleased that grouse moor owners have stepped forward to support this project and demonstrated their commitment to the conservation of raptors as well as the management of grouse and their habitat."

Teresa Dent, Chief Executive of The Game Conservancy Trust said: "For the first time this project will fully test to what extent diversionary feeding might allow red grouse stocks to increase in the presence of breeding hen harriers. This is an essential step in finding a workable solution to this predation problem. We believe that game management and conservation go hand in hand. Those with an interest in enhancing and sustaining the biodiversity of the uplands will look forward to the project's findings."

Stuart Housden, Director of RSPB Scotland said: "We welcome the launch of the Langholm Demonstration Project. We, and many others, are concerned about the conservation of protected birds of prey on land managed for the shooting of driven grouse. This project will test measures to reduce the predation of red grouse by birds of prey, including diversionary feeding of hen harriers. The project will also bring substantial investment in habitat improvements, which should benefit grouse and other upland birds. We consider this partnership to be a genuine opportunity to review these methods scientifically, which may then have wider practical application in the future. We hope that this will then reduce the perceived conflict between birds of prey and sporting managers, which has dogged the debate in recent years."

Buccleuch Estate Manager, Mark Oddy, said: "Heather clad grouse moors are one of Scotland's iconic landscapes and one of the rarest forms of vegetation in the world. Well managed they support a very diverse range of wildlife and plants as well as making a significant contribution to the country's rural economic prosperity. The active management of moorland is very much about maintaining a balance of interests, sporting, farming and conservation, in the landscape and doing this requires major inputs of gamekeeper time and expertise. This project will help us to identify and demonstrate practical techniques to maximise environmental and economic benefits and has the immediate bonus of creating new jobs in the Langholm countryside."

### **NOTES**

1. Langholm Moor in Dumfriesshire, owned by Buccleuch Estates, 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 km<sup>2</sup>. 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), The Game Conservancy Trust (GCT), 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 GCT, 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 The Game Conservancy Trust and the RSPB.

6. The Project is being funded by a partnership of SNH (£973,491); Buccleuch Estates (£973,491); Game Conservancy 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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