



The Rotherfield Demonstration Project

The number of spring grey partridge pairs in 2019 was the highest since the project began.
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BACKGROUND

The project started in 2010 to demonstrate grey partridge recovery from zero, together with the benefits for other wild game and wildlife. It aims to be applicable to a wide range of landowners and other stakeholders wishing to recover grey partridges where they have gone extinct. Grey partridge reintroduction is based on GWCT guidelines, which follow international guidelines.

The Rotherfield Demonstration project in east Hampshire demonstrates how to recover grey partridges in an area where they went extinct in the early 1990s and shows how management tailored to grey partridge conservation benefits farmland wildlife in general. The project began in 2010 with the Trust's gamekeeper working on c. 700 hectares (ha) (Trust side) and the estate's gamekeeper on an adjacent c. 700ha (Estate side). Since the estate entered a 10-year Higher Level Agri-environment Scheme contract with Natural England in 2011, wildlife-friendly habitat tailored to grey partridges gradually increased to more than 15% in the most enhanced 100ha partridge recovery core area, alongside intensified legal predator management. Habitat improvements were focused on increasing the number and quality of wild bird seed mixes, cultivated uncropped margins, beetle banks, overwintered and extended overwintered stubbles, together with the implementation of a long-term partridge-friendly hedgerow management plan. Furthermore, block cropping has given way to a more diverse cropping plan, especially in the core partridge recovery area.

Since 2016, 500ha of the Trust's project area became part of the PARTRIDGE Interreg project (see pp. 56-57). As a result, the Rotherfield project received increased attention from a wide range of rural stakeholders. In 2019, more than 100 people visited Rotherfield (431 since 2017) on farm walks – including policy advisors from Natural England – to learn more about the management measures needed to recover grey partridges and the wider benefits to farmland wildlife generally.

On the Trust side, we counted a minimum of 27 grey partridge pairs in spring 2019. Only five pairs produced a brood, probably as a result of a very wet week around peak hatching time in mid-June, and despite suitable insect-rich foraging cover in the core area. The autumn count confirmed 63 wild grey partridges (26 males, 20 females and 17 young). On the Estate side, all three spring pairs recorded produced a brood, but only 10 young in total.

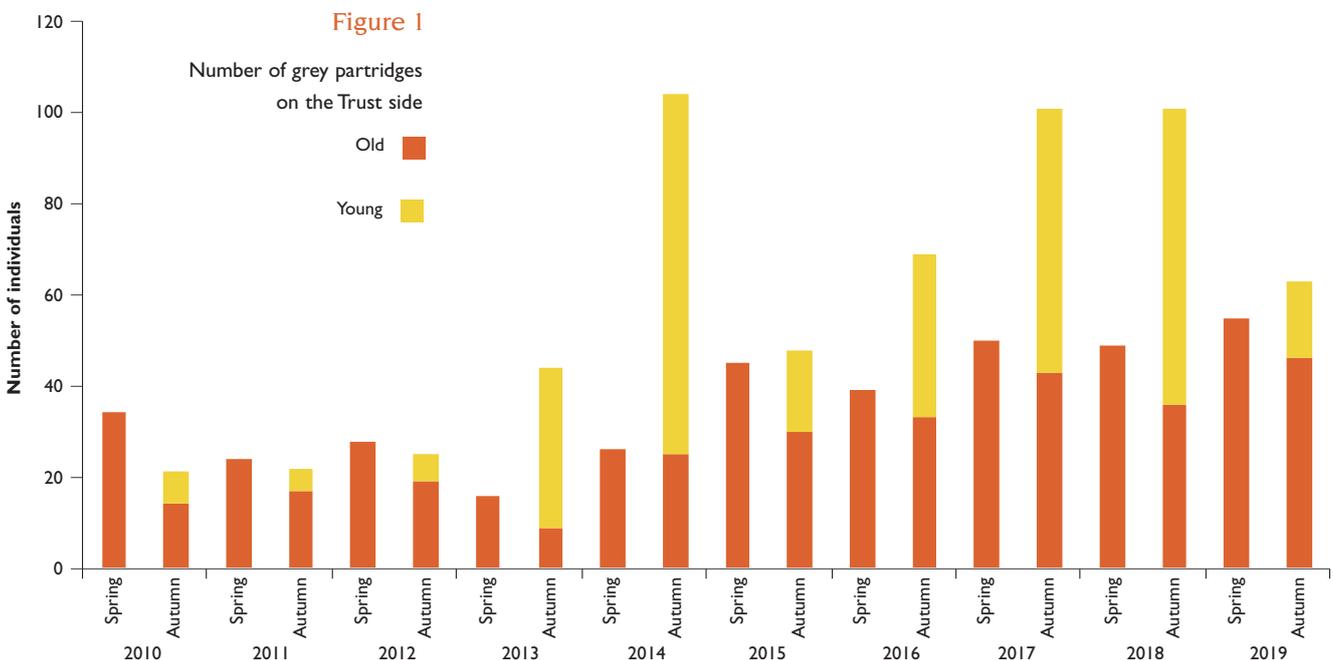


TABLE 1

Gamebird recovery at Rotherfield, split between the Trust and Estate side

Year	Spring pairs*			Autumn stock**		
	Trust	Estate	Total	Trust	Estate	Total
Grey partridge						
2019 (2018)	27 (24)	3 (2)	30 (26)	63 (101)	17 (12)	80 (113)
Red-legged partridge						
2019 (2018)	46 (44)	28 (9)	74 (53)	119 (202)	45 (52)	164 (254)
Pheasant						
2019 (2018)	Hens 272 (207)	158 (96)	430 (303)	396 (347)	256 (145)	652 (492)
	Cocks 187 (170)	132 (92)	319 (262)			

* For grey and red-legged partridges in spring, the numbers given are pairs; for pheasants, numbers of cocks and hens are tallied separately. ** Autumn stock is the number of cocks, hens and young combined (released cocks excluded). On the Trust side, 600 wing-tagged cock pheasants have been released each year since 2011, on the Estate side 600 wing-tagged cocks have been released since 2018; they are excluded from the autumn totals.

Like their grey 'cousins', the red-legged partridges had one of their worst breeding seasons since the project began. On the Trust side, 46 spring pairs produced only nine broods, with 17 young in total (in 2018, 24 broods produced 100 young). On the Estate side, none of the 28 spring pairs produced a brood (in 2018 seven broods had 19 young, out of nine spring pairs).

The habitat and predator management measures put in place for grey partridges since 2010 have resulted in noticeable increases in numbers of farmland songbirds of conservation concern. On the Trust side, all red- and amber-listed farmland birds that are found breeding in the project area (including yellowhammer, skylark, linnet, dunnock, song thrush, bullfinch and tree pipit), which are declining nationally, have increased at Rotherfield by an average of 60% over the past nine years (based on April, May and June counts along a 10km transect). In 2019 we recorded 94% more birds of conservation concern than at the start of the project (the second highest increase since the project began), or 40% more than in 2018.

Similarly, brown hare numbers increased 2.3-fold, from an average of 23.5 hares/100ha in 2017 to 53.2 hares/100ha in 2019. Hares were counted along a 19km transect, three to four times between December and January using two hand-held Tracer 170mm spot lamps.



KEY FINDINGS

- In 2019, the number of grey partridge spring pairs on the Trust's demonstration area was 27 pairs, three more than in 2018, and the highest since the project began.
- On the Trust's area, the grey partridge autumn stock was 63 birds, 38 fewer than in 2018.
- In 2019, farmland birds of conservation concern were up 94% compared with the baseline year in 2010, with an average increase of 60% since the project began.
- Hare numbers were up 130% since counting began in 2017.

Francis Buner
Malcolm Brockless
Nicholas Aebischer



Brown hare numbers have increased 2.3-fold to 53.2 hares per 100 hectares. © Markus Jenny

Figure 2

Recovery of farmland songbirds of conservation concern during the breeding season (April-June) on the Trust side. The index of the baseline year 2010 is set at 100%. The index of 194 in 2019 for example, means that numbers have increased by 94% compared with the baseline year