

BACKGROUND

Since November 2016, the GWCT has been the lead partner of a pioneering cross-border North Sea Region Interreg programme project called PARTRIDGE that runs until 2023. Together with 12 other partner organisations from the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Denmark (DK), Sweden (S), Scotland and England, PARTRIDGE is showcasing how farmland wildlife can be increased by 30% at ten 500-hectare (ha) demonstration sites (two in each country, except in DK and S). In the UK, the four PARTRIDGE demonstration sites (Rotherfield and the Allerton Project in England, and Whitburgh and Balgonie in Scotland) are all managed by GWCT staff together with their local partners.



Interreg North Sea project PARTRIDGE

We measured chick food insects using D-vacs.
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PROJECT AIMS

- GWCT-led North Sea Region (NSR) cross-border Interreg project involving England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Denmark and Sweden and is a demonstration of how to reverse farmland biodiversity loss at ten 500ha sites by 2020.
- Use the grey partridge as a flagship species for management plans at the demonstration sites.
- Influence agri-environment policy and showcase how to enthuse local stakeholders to conserve farmland wildlife.

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PARTRIDGE is a cross-border North Sea Interreg project that demonstrates how to reverse the ongoing Europe-wide decline of farmland wildlife using science-based management plans based on a bottom-up approach. The project is led by the GWCT in partnership with 12 partner organisations from seven nations. These work with more than 70 farmers organised in Farmer Clusters at 10 demonstration sites, assisted by around 40 hunters and several hundred volunteers.

The project's locally adapted management plans are tailored to the grey partridge, because existing evidence shows that partridge-friendly measures, in particular wild bird seed mixes and wild flower blocks, benefit farmland biodiversity in general. PARTRIDGE has therefore developed locally adapted flower mixes for all partner countries. In the UK, the seed mixes have been developed by Oakbank and Kings Crops, in collaboration with the GWCT. In 2019, at all four UK demonstration sites, we continued to trial our new mixes to further improve the already widely available seed mixes that qualify under agri-environment scheme rules. This benefits wild game and seed-eating farmland birds not only during the winter, but also in spring (when cover supply is at its lowest), during the nesting and chick-food foraging period in summer and into the autumn.

In early July 2019, we took standardised D-vac insect samples (five samples per habitat) in PARTRIDGE wild bird seed mixes (average 10 per site), and nearby winter wheat fields (five per site) at three demonstration sites – Rotherfield (UK), Assenede (B) and Oude Doorn (NL). Preliminary results indicate that the PARTRIDGE mixes contain significantly more insects than the winter wheat crops in all three countries, despite different weather and soil conditions. Also, the number and the type of insects in the PARTRIDGE mixes appear to be sufficient to provide food resources for grey partridge chicks. Earlier work in England by the GWCT has led to the construction of the Chick Food Index (CFI), which allows researchers to determine if insect numbers are enough to maintain breeding grey partridge numbers. On average, the PARTRIDGE mixes in the three demonstration areas exceeded a CFI value of 0.7 – the value needed to provide enough food for chicks to maintain breeding abundance.

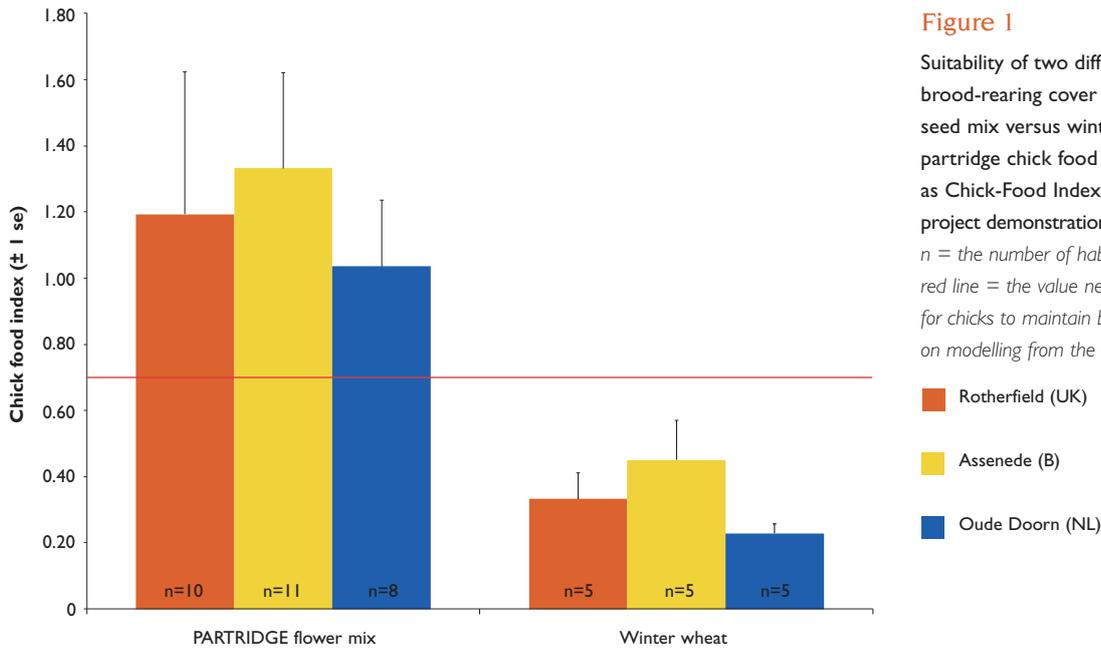


Figure 1

Suitability of two different habitat types of brood-rearing cover (PARTRIDGE wild bird seed mix versus winter wheat) for grey partridge chick food availability (expressed as Chick-Food Index) at three PARTRIDGE project demonstration sites in 2019

n = the number of habitats sampled per site, red line = the value needed to provide enough food for chicks to maintain breeding abundance, based on modelling from the GWCT's Sussex Study

- Rotherfield (UK)
- Assenede (B)
- Oude Doorn (NL)

The CFI in winter wheat on the other hand was significantly below the required value of 0.7, highlighting its unsuitability for insect-eating farmland wildlife in general.

To promote the PARTRIDGE approach more widely across the North Sea Region (NSR) and to lobby for improved agri-environmental schemes such as ELMS in England, or under the new Common Agricultural Policy in Europe, the project puts a very strong emphasis on communication activities and in-depth advice. Since the project began, we have held 160 farm walks across our 10 demonstration sites, directly informing more than 2,400 individual people about our farmland conservation measures. We also interacted with more than 870 organisations representing our main stakeholders (farmers, hunters, NGO's, research institutes, local, regional and national authorities). Our official PARTRIDGE webpage (www.northsearegion.eu/partridge) has had 50,000 unique page views since the project began (more than any other NSR project) and through our strategic communication activities including social media, TV and radio, conferences and symposia, we have reached an estimated five million people to date.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Farm walks have been held across all the demonstration sites informing more than 2,400 people about the conservation measures in place.

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