

Crossing borders for partridges



A new PARTRIDGE project aims to increase farmland wildlife on 10 sites by up to 30%. Francis Buner reports on this pioneering project

Since November 2016, the GWCT has led a new pioneering cross-border project within the North Sea Region Interreg programme called PARTRIDGE. Together with 10 other partner organisations from the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Scotland and England, the project showcases best management practice for grey partridges (provision of high-quality habitat, winter feeding and predation management) at 10, 500-hectare demonstration sites. With two sites in each country, the aim is to show how the abundance of farmland wildlife

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can be restored by up to 30% by 2020. The project also aims to influence post-Brexit agri-environment policy as well as the current Common Agricultural Policy for the post-2020 period.

To achieve the predicted 30% increase in farmland wildlife, PARTRIDGE will provide at least 7% quality habitat at the 10 demonstration sites. One of the best habitats for the project's key farmland wildlife species, the grey partridge, is wild bird seed mixes. They provide suitable habitat all-year round, most importantly during the nesting, brood-rearing and winter periods. Therefore, they are PARTRIDGE's most important habitat measure, supplemented by beetle banks, winter stubbles and arable margins.

Since the project began, the biggest challenge has been to encourage enough farmers at the project sites to implement the habitat measures tailored to grey partridges. PARTRIDGE has already achieved major milestones on the way to partridge recovery. At all 10 sites the necessary habitat improvements to achieve the 7% target are well underway, with most sites expected to surpass the target by 2018. In the Netherlands, wild

bird seed mixes and beetle banks have been established for the first time and in Belgium, new much improved mixes are being trialled. These habitat measures have long been part of the English agri-environmental schemes thanks to the GWCT's evidence-based lobbying efforts. This project hopes to improve the quality of habitat provided and ensure their inclusion in schemes of the other EU member states.

The project's second key aim is to publicise the management activities needed at a local level to increase farmland wildlife in general. This is because the abundance of farmland wildlife continues to decline across Britain and continental Europe, despite best intentions to reverse this trend at the top European level. Target 3a of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2020 is to: 'Increase the contribution of agriculture to maintaining and enhancing biodiversity'. However, hardly



Main: Cross-boundary information sharing and collaboration is at the heart of the PARTRIDGE project. The project partners visited one of the German sites, to learn about wild bird mixes and how they are managed by the local farmers. © Francis Buner

Above: Events such as farm walks at the PARTRIDGE sites form an integral part of the project. Visitors inspect a new wild bird seed mix established at 'Oude Doorn' in the Netherlands. © Jochem Sloothaak



Supplementary feeding © Jochem Sloothack; grey partridges. © Jos Schenkeveld

a week goes by when the press doesn't mention the continuing decline of farmland wildlife across Europe, including red-listed species. This makes for depressing reading, especially as the factors responsible for farmland biodiversity loss are well understood: a combination of habitat loss, intensive agriculture and predation.

So, what is going wrong? Well, there is the Common Agricultural Policy, which every five years tries to address the issue anew but keeps failing every time. First because the good intentions under Pillar One don't reach far enough and second because they are typically immediately watered down by the powerful farmer lobby, especially in France. Pillar One deals with direct farmer subsidies which are coupled to basic environmental measures. Under the current greening criteria farmers must, for example, ensure that 5% of their land is set aside as an Ecological Focus Area (EFA), instead of being used for farming. This doesn't work in practice as most farmers can easily cobble together existing non-productive land already out of production under this rule without having to change anything. Each member state is then asked to design its own agri-environmental scheme. Every country has developed its own scheme (with little cross-border consultation) and most have ended up with measures that are unable to reverse biodiversity loss even on a local scale.

England has one of the best and most thought-through schemes available in the EU. The current Higher Level Stewardship scheme – which the GWCT helped to shape – has reversed biodiversity loss in many local cases (for example at the Allerton Project at Loddington, the Royston Grey Partridge Recovery Project, the Rotherfield Demonstration Project and the Norfolk Estate Project, near Arundel, on the Sussex Study area). Nevertheless, English farmland wildlife keeps declining on a national level. Hence one could argue that even the most successful scheme in Europe doesn't address the problem successfully.

The PARTRIDGE project has a large emphasis on communication activities to highlight the urgency of stopping the continuing loss of farmland wildlife or, more broadly, farmland biodiversity. More than 100 public farm walks will be held by 2020 across the 10 sites. At each site a Farmer Cluster group will be established and specific farmer walks organised. These sites will be designed to showcase best practice to local, regional and national decision makers and agencies, especially those involved in agri-environment schemes and agro-policy in general. All these activities have started at most of the demonstration sites, and the project partners are confident that their high aims and expectations will be achieved. 🌱

Top right: The grey partridge is the driving force of the project. Management measures tailored to the needs of partridges will showcase how farmland wildlife can be increased by 30% by 2020; supplementary winter feeding, especially during the hungry gap between January and March, is an important management measure for partridge recovery.



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