

Black grouse Habitats and land management



D Dugan (RSPB)



Mark Hamblin (rspb-images.com)

Black grouse are found on moorland, rough grazings, young conifer plantations and suitable native woodlands in upland areas of Britain, from Wales to Northern Scotland. Arable fields (stubbles) and inbye grasslands at the moorland edge may also be used.

Black grouse is one of the fastest declining species in the UK. The most recent survey revealed an overall decline of 29% in Scotland between 1995 and 2005, with populations in the south of the country experiencing the steepest declines. The range of black grouse in Britain contracted by 28% between two major bird distribution surveys (1968–72 and 1988–91). This is a big contraction, undoubtedly associated with the population decline.

WHAT DO BLACK GROUSE NEED?

Black grouse need a mosaic of habitats

Throughout the year, black grouse will use a wide range of habitats for nesting, feeding, lekking (displaying), chick-rearing, cover and shelter. Farmers, foresters, moorland managers and gamekeepers all play a vital role in safeguarding these habitats in the parts of Scotland where black grouse remain.

Long vegetation for nesting

Black grouse require long heather or areas of tall vegetation (>40 cm) for nesting and cover.

A range of food types throughout the year

Heather and blaeberry are important foods for adult black grouse throughout the year. In the autumn and winter, they will take buds from trees such as birch, and berries from rowan and hawthorn. At other times of the year, grasses, sedges, rushes and herbs might be eaten depending on local availability. Adult females benefit from eating protein-rich foods such as larch buds and cotton grass buds in the spring as this helps them to get into good breeding condition. Insects, including caterpillars and sawfly larvae, are an important food source for chicks (see back page for further details).

BLACK GROUSE - DIVERSITY OF FOOD TYPES



Food types chart images by D Dugan (rspb-images.com), Niall Benvie (rspb-images.com) and Jeremy Roberts (RSPB)

You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your land for wildlife from:

- RSPB**
Advisory Manager,
RSPB Scotland,
Dunedin House,
25 Ravelston Terrace,
Edinburgh EH4 3TF
Tel: 0131 311 6500
www.rspb.org.uk
- Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust**
Scottish HQ,
Couston,
Newtyle PH12 8UT
Tel: 01828 650543
www.gct.org.uk
- Forestry Commission**
Scotland,
Silvan House,
231 Corstorphine Road,
Edinburgh EH12 7AT
Tel: 0131 334 0303
www.forestry.gov.uk
- Scottish Agricultural College**
College,
Kings Buildings,
West Mains Road,
Edinburgh EH9 3JG
Tel: 0131 535 4000
www.sac.ac.uk
- Scottish Natural Heritage**
Great Glen House,
Leachkin Road,
Inverness IV3 8NW
Tel: 01463 725000
www.snh.org.uk
- NFU Scotland**
NFU Scotland, Head Office,
Rural Centre - West Mains,
Ingliston,
Midlothian EH28 8LT
Tel: 0131 472 4000
www.nfus.org.uk

Lek viewing
Care should be taken not to disturb lekking black grouse and never approach displaying birds on foot. Leks can be viewed from cars parked more than 300m away, if you set up before daybreak and do not disturb the birds by starting the engine or opening doors. When walking in areas that are used by black grouse, keep to footpaths and keep dogs on a lead. The full Code of Conduct can be found at www.blackgrouse.info/forbirdwatchers/code.htm. The RSPB Corrymony reserve in the Highlands offers black grouse viewing each spring – see the RSPB website for further details.

Shooting
● Avoid shooting black grouse.
● Brief guns on driven red grouse and pheasant days not to shoot black grouse.
● Given the current plight of black grouse, many grouse moor owners operate a voluntary ban. Some estates impose fines for accidental shooting.

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(Continued from previous page)

- Further information:**
- Help to maintain a mosaic of suitable habitats in the landscape and manage grazing levels to provide a varied vegetation structure.
 - Create and expand native woodland and look for management opportunities within existing forestry plantations.
 - Remove or mark high-risk fences.
 - Manage predation risk and consider targeted predator control to improve breeding success.
 - Seek advice on what management to undertake on your holding and how to fund it.

- RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:** Heather moorland management; Moorland grazing; Grip blocking.
- BAP website
www.blackgrouse.info
- RSPB website
www.rspb.org.uk
- GWCT website
www.gct.org.uk
- Scottish Government SRDP website
www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Rural/SRDP
- The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity; England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654
775-1556-08-09

MANAGING HABITATS FOR BLACK GROUSE

Habitat management for black grouse should focus within an area of up to 700ha around lek sites (1.5km radius from the lek). As black grouse require suitable habitat at a large scale, management across neighbouring land holdings could be crucial. Management carried out beyond this area could help connect lek populations and promote range expansion. The best way to manage for black grouse on your land is to walk the ground with an adviser and discuss options for management. This will help to establish the probable limiting factors for black grouse on your holding, therefore enabling management for black grouse to be prioritised.



Hard edges of forestry like this can be “softened” by thinning or by low density tree planting along the edge

Woodland

Conifer plantations

Pre-thicket conifer plantations can suit black grouse – the absence of grazing animals can allow good ground cover to develop for nesting, feeding and chick rearing. As plantations mature, the canopy closes, shading out ground vegetation and making the plantation unsuitable for black grouse. The following measures can be carried out to maximise the value of conifer plantations for black grouse:

- Restructure or thin edges of forests on the moorland edge or plant these areas at a lower density to give areas of scattered trees rather than a “hard edge”.
- Establish larch and native tree species along forest edges using species such as birch, alder, willow, rowan, hawthorn, juniper and Scots pine.
- Widen rides and create open ground within plantations, and use open ground and planting to connect black grouse habitats.
- To prolong the value of new conifer plantations, plant some areas at a low density, and/ or leave large gaps between blocks.
- After clear-felling, clear brash and delay or stagger restocking to encourage ground vegetation recovery.
- Restructure plantations to create age-class diversity – black grouse will use blocks up to 10–15 years old.
- Carry out deer management to encourage regeneration of the field layer.
- Swipe strips or patches in open areas to create a mosaic of heather within plantations.
- Create damp flushes in open ground, which can become rich in invertebrates for chicks.
- Safeguard lek sites in clearings and on tracks.



New native woodland schemes can provide high quality habitat for black grouse. Areas of internal open space help to prolong their value

Native woodlands

Semi-natural woodland and scrub on moorland fringes and along burns can provide habitat for black grouse. When creating and managing native woodlands:

- Plant some areas at low density, especially on the outer edges of the woodland, and maximise areas of open ground in new planting.
- Use species such as birch, alder, willow, rowan, hawthorn, juniper and Scots pine.
- Manage livestock grazing to avoid damage to native woodlands.
- Avoid using for pheasant shoots that may disturb black grouse.

Moorland/farmland

Black grouse use heather moorland and inbye habitats on hill farms, often lekking on permanent pasture at the moorland edge. Hill arable fields may provide shelter plus grain and/or weed seeds in autumn and winter.

- Use muirburn/swiping to create a mosaic of long and short heather. The Muirburn Code should be adhered to if burning is carried out.
- Manage livestock and deer grazing levels to help maintain a varied structural mosaic of heather and rough grass.
- Manage boggy/marshy ground to provide feeding areas for black grouse. Cotton grass is an important food for hens in early spring and invertebrate-rich wet flushes provide important chick-rearing habitats in summer. Retain and lightly graze existing wet areas and create new ones by, for example, grip blocking.

- Species-rich grasslands provide year-round food, supporting key food plants in autumn/winter and high invertebrate densities for chick-rearing in summer. Retain or create such grassland areas, and manage them to allow flowers to set seed.
- Many black grouse nest and rear their young in the grass/rush/sedge mosaic found on the “white hill” of the moorland edge. Lightly graze areas of white hill to give some areas over 30 cm in height.
- Adverse effects of bad weather on chick survival may worsen in tall, dense vegetation. Providing a mosaic of shorter and longer vegetation could lessen the effects of wet and cold weather in late May and June.
- Sow unharvested crops and retain arable stubbles. Spring cereals and weedy turnip crops may be particularly good.



Heather and blaeberry are important foods for adult black grouse



Marking fences can lower collision risk

Other management

Predator control

Ensuring the availability of good cover will reduce predation risk for black grouse. Co-ordinated and targeted legal predator control can improve breeding success and possibly adult survival.

Deer fences and stock fences

Fence collisions can be a cause of black grouse mortality. Deer fences should only be erected, maintained or renewed where there is no other viable means of deer control, and only after proper assessment of the risks. In addition:

- Remove redundant fences.
- Site new fences and mark existing fences (where continued use is considered essential) according to current best practice. See FCS Guidance Note 11 “Deer and Fencing”.
- Position stock fences clear of flight lines to and from leks and important feeding areas.

Lek sites

Patches of semi-improved grassland on open hills, and permanent pasture on the inbye can provide lek sites for black grouse.

- Avoid disturbing lekking areas between March and May.
- Ideal leks have an open aspect and are often grazed short. Aim to keep vegetation short at known lek sites.
- Avoid planting trees within 100 m, supplementary stock feeding, or erecting stock or deer fences near to lek sites.

(Continued on back page)