Europe’s grey partridge population at just 6% of 1980 levels, says new bird atlas

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94% of the European grey partridge population has been lost since 1980, according to a remarkable new bird atlas. The European Breeding Bird Atlas – EBBA2*, one of the most ambitious biodiversity mapping projects ever undertaken, documents changes in breeding distribution of all European bird species. The atlas, published in December, confirms that this key species has suffered one of the steepest declines of all farmland bird species.

Dr Francis Buner, senior conservation scientist at the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), who co-authored the grey partridge species account in the EBBA2, commented: “The dramatic decline of the grey partridge across its entire Western European range should act as a wake-up call to us all. Europe’s farmland biodiversity is under severe threat with unprecedented declines and even complete losses to wildlife in all corners of the EU and the UK. Europe’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) clearly failed to take care of the fundamental entity that allows for a healthy life on our planet - biodiversity. Following Brexit, the UK now has a chance in a lifetime to move on from the unsustainable policy regulations imposed by the CAP and implement its own green policies to undo the damage before it will be too late”.

The stark facts of the grey partridge’s decline are well-known to the GWCT, which has been involved in charting the fate of the species through its Partridge Count Scheme since 1933. Considered a ‘barometer of the countryside’, the grey partridge is an indicator of arable farmland eco-system health and biodiversity: where grey partridges thrive, other wildlife will follow.

Their decline is due, says Francis, “to a combination of factors including intensified agriculture, especially the shift from small-scale mixed farming to large-scale winter cropping, increases in pesticide use reducing insect food for partridge chicks and increased predation because of a reduction in predator control.”

GWCT scientists believe that the future of the grey partridge lies in the hands of individuals on the ground through the management measures they can implement. The Trust provides evidence-based guidance to land managers on management measures for conserving the grey partridge. The Partridge Count Scheme enlists the voluntary help of farmers, gamekeepers and landowners to collect information on the annual abundance and breeding success of grey partridges across the UK. Participation in the count scheme also helps land managers see the effects of their conservation efforts.

The GWCT is also the lead partner in the pioneering cross-border PARTRIDGE** project, working with 12 organisations in countries across Europe. The project uses ten demonstration sites, including four in the UK, to show land managers and policymakers how farmland biodiversity can be reversed, using the grey partridge as the flagship species to measure success. Its aim is to influence agri-environment policy and enthuse landowners and managers to conserve farmland wildlife.

The PARTRIDGE project also recently published *Farming with Nature*, a practical guide based on scientific research, to how conservation efforts aimed at the grey partridge can benefit farmland biodiversity more generally.

Notes to Editors

*** The European Breeding Bird Atlas – EBBA2***

The European Breeding Bird Atlas Volume 2 was published in December 2020 by the European Bird Census Council. It documents changes in breeding distribution of all European bird species. More information www.ebba2.info/

- EBBA2 covered 5 years of fieldwork in more than 50 European countries, including the European part of Russia, Caucasus and Turkey, between 2013 and 2017.
- The project of EBBA2 conducted the mapping of more than 500 breeding species in more than 5000 squares 50×50 km large.
- 120 000 volunteer fieldworkers were involved in the data collection process.

****Interreg PARTRIDGE Project**

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The GWCT is lead partner of the North Sea Region Interreg programme project called **PARTRIDGE (Protecting the Area's Resources Through Researched Innovative Demonstration of Good Examples)** that will run to 2023. Together with twelve other partner organisations from the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Scotland and England, the project is showcasing how farmland wildlife can be restored by up to 30% at ten 500-hectare demonstration sites. In the UK, the four PARTRIDGE demonstration sites (Rotherfield Park and the Allerton Project in England, and Whitburgh and Balgonie in Scotland) are all managed by GWCT staff together with their local partners.

The project's aims are:

- Demonstration of how to reverse farmland biodiversity loss at ten 500ha sites by 30% by 2023.

- Use the grey partridge as a flagship species for management plans at demonstration sites.

- Influence agri-environment policy and showcase how to enthuse local stakeholders to conserve farmland wildlife.

More information is available at
gwct.org.uk/research/species/birds/grey-partridge/interreg-partridge-project/

'Farming with Nature'

Co-authored by Dr Julie Ewald, Dr Francis Buner and Dr Jen Brewin and published by the GWCT. Available from www.gwctshop.org.uk for £12.

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust – providing research-led conservation for a thriving countryside. The GWCT is an independent wildlife conservation charity which has carried out scientific research into Britain's game and wildlife since the 1930s. We advise farmers and landowners on improving wildlife habitats. We employ 22 post-doctoral scientists and 50 other research staff with expertise in areas such as birds, insects, mammals, farming, fish and statistics. We undertake our own research as well as projects funded by contract and grant-aid from Government and private bodies. The Trust is also responsible for several Government Biodiversity Action Plan species and is lead partner for grey partridge and joint lead partner for brown hare and black grouse.

ISDN radio broadcast line - at our Fordingbridge HQ we have an ISDN radio broadcast line, allowing us to conduct interviews remotely.

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