This Christmas give the gift of nesting and brood rearing cover to grey partridges

Tuesday 14 December, 2021

The grey partridge's annual appearance in festive carols and cards is a good reminder to make plans for habitat improvements to help this much-loved farmland bird throughout the year.

Despite its elevated position in one of our favourite Christmas carols, the grey partridge (*Perdix perdix*) is unlikely to be found in a pear tree, being a ground dweller. Unfortunately for the partridge, this lifestyle choice also makes it very vulnerable. The grey partridge is one of Europe's fastest declining bird species - numbers have plummeted by 95% since 1970, earning it a place on the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern. The decline is thought to be largely due to the intensification of agriculture, causing the loss of much of the habitat where it nests, feeds and shelters from predators and the weather.

The impact of the weather on this species cannot be underestimated. "This year grey partridge chick survival rates in the southeast of England have dropped significantly," said Dr Julie Ewald from the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT)'s Partridge Count Scheme. "We think this is due to the very heavy rain in that part of the country in June 2021, the peak hatching time for partridges. Further north, where June was drier, partridge chicks have done much better, particularly in Scotland.

"This Christmas, the best gift that farmers and land managers can give to the grey partridge is to make a management plan to provide them with nesting cover and food sources," continued Julie. Partridge breeding success is closely associated with the availability of good cover, to help protect nests and new broods from weather and predators, and help the birds survive. The chicks also rely on protein-rich insects for the first two weeks of their life.

"We are asking land managers to please think about how they can provide this vital support. Low-input crops, conservation headlands and wild bird cover crops that include a variety of species, with vegetation that holds insects in June and July, can all make a big difference," continued Julie. "These chick-food resources should be sited next to nesting habitat, such as hedges or beetle banks, where grey partridge hens can find safe cover. Legal predator management during the breeding season is also useful, and habitat that provides protection from predators and food in winter, supplemented with overwinter feeding, will help partridges make their home on your land. Planning for grey partridges' year-round requirements will give the best chance of success – after all, a partridge is not just for Christmas."

The presence of grey partridges is an effective barometer of wider farmland biodiversity, and where they are doing well due to successful management, so will many other farmland species. The GWCT is one of the leading organisations researching the causes of the decline of the grey partridge, and what can be done to reverse it. The GWCT's Partridge Count Scheme (PCS), which was established in 1933, asks volunteers to collect information on the annual abundance and breeding success of grey partridges. It also provides practical advice to farmers and land managers on cost-effective conservation measures that can make a real difference.

"For a local population to be sustainable, every grey partridge needs to produce an average of 1.6 surviving chicks per year – a 1.6 young to old ratio (YTO). At our Interreg PARTRIDGE project site at Balgonie in Fife, Scotland, there were an amazing 3.5 YTO this year, but further south in Hampshire we only counted 1 chick per adult and on the Sussex Study area the YTO was 1.6. Early figures coming in from partridge counts across the country appear to be in line with these results, showing higher chick production in the north and lower in the south, reflecting weather conditions during the chick rearing period."

"I would urge anyone with even a few pairs of grey partridge on their land to sign up for the Partridge Count Scheme," concluded Julie. "We rely on our volunteers to help us understand how partridge and other wildlife are faring, on a local and national level. Joining will give you a chance to monitor how your grey partridge are doing, giving you a clearer picture of the health of your land, and you will have access to county groups and farmland wildlife related information."

More information about the **Partridge Count Scheme** is available at gwct.org.uk/partridge, where a range of free guides to supporting grey partridges can also be downloaded.

For a more in-depth look at grey partridge conservation and lots of practical advice, the **'Farming with**

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Nature' booklet, co-written by Drs Julie Ewald, Francis Buner and Jen Brewin, is available from the GWCT Shop at gwctshop.org.uk or to download free from https://northsearegion.eu/media/14112/vbn_partridge_booklet_english_final_lr.pdf

Notes to editor:

The GWCT Partridge Count Scheme is a monitoring programme which has been running since 1933. More information at https://www.gwct.org.uk/partridge .

More information on the Interreg PARTRIDGE project: https://northsearegion.eu/partridge/

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust gwct.org.uk – 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.

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