

NORFOLK BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

NIGHTJAR

(Caprimulgus europaeus)

This nocturnal bird resembles the cuckoo in silhouette but with delicately marked silver and brown plumage. The male's night-time song is a distinctive "churring" noise, and the flight is soft and owl-like. It occurs in open wooded areas on heathland, and migrates August-September, returning in May.

Ref 2/S1	Tranche 2	Species Action Plan 1
Plan Author:	RSPB/ NCC	
Plan Co-ordinator:	Heathland BAP Topic Group	
Plan Leader:	RSPB/ FC	
Date: June 2006	Stage: Final draft	

The objectives and targets for the nightjar will be achieved through protecting, maintaining, restoring and re-establishing lowland heathland and associated foraging habitats; adopting sympathetic forestry management practices; and promoting extensive agricultural systems in the wider countryside. Population numbers and range will need to be monitored.

1. CURRENT STATUS

National Status

- The nightjar is a summer migrant that has been declining in numbers and range for much of the last century, particularly since the 1950s, reaching a low point of 2,100 males in 1981, with a decline in range of 52% between 1968-72 and 1992. There was a partial recovery in the size of the population which had reached 3,400 males in 1992. The last national survey of nightjars was in 2004 and revealed a total population estimated at 4,600 churring males, representing a 36% increase in 12 years. Nightjars showed only a 2.6% increase in occupancy of 10-km squares since 1992. The species now breeds mainly in southern England, but there are scattered populations as far north as central Scotland. It is probably now extinct as a breeding species in Northern Ireland where its former habitats included cut-over raised bogs. Lowland heathland and young forestry plantations are now the most important habitats. An increase in forestry clear-fells and forest management have assisted recent increases, with 57% of the total population found in forest plantations in the 2004 survey. In Europe, the species has been declining in numbers and range since at least 1950, especially in north-west and northern Europe.
- The nightjar is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Schedule 1 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, and is listed on Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive and Appendix II of the Bern Convention.

Norfolk Status

- The 1992 national survey found 223 churring males in 14 ten km squares in Norfolk; the majority were found in plantation woodland. A further survey carried out in Thetford Forest (Norfolk and Suffolk) in 1998 found 420 territories, a marked increase since 1988/89 when 293 territories were estimated.
- The 2004 national survey found 313 churring males in 14 ten km squares in Norfolk.

2. CURRENT FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE IN NORFOLK

- The area of heathland in the UK has undergone a dramatic reduction during the course of this century due to agricultural land claim, afforestation and development. It is estimated that 40% of England's lowland heathland has been destroyed since the 1950s.

- Where heathland lacks appropriate management, it will become unsuitable as nesting habitat due to invasion by scrub and trees.
- Nightjars require extensive areas of suitable feeding habitat, especially uncultivated land. The loss of such habitats within a few kilometres of the nesting area may result in a decline in the number of birds.
- It is possible that a decline in the availability of large insects caused by changes in agriculture and/or climatic change, may have affected nightjar populations.
- In commercial forests, nightjars nest in the young plantations, while there is still bare ground between trees. If no other suitable habitat becomes available in other new or young stands, local population declines could occur as the recently planted blocks mature.
- Although the recent increase in nightjar numbers in this region is dramatic, a long term decline is noted from the early part of this century. The causes of the decline nationally are also the most likely candidates for local decline in this period. Much of the recovery between 1981 and 2004 has been attributed to large scale felling of mature conifer plantations across the UK, leading to areas of clear-fell and new restocks. Also, the restoration of lowland heathlands for conservation is increasing the area of suitable habitat for nightjars. However, the increases in numbers may be reversed if the area of forestry clearfells and restocks declines in the future.

3. CURRENT ACTION IN NORFOLK

- 53% of the UK population (1992 survey) was found on SPA (JNCC SPA Review). This figure is likely to change as a result of the population increase since the 1992 survey and the extension of the SPA coverage to include Thetford Forest, where 12,700ha will be retained in suitable rotational clearfell.
- Nightjars occur on a number of heathland nature reserves which are managed partly for their benefit.
- The North Norfolk Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage (THH) initiative has restored 750ha and re-created 75ha heathland, which has assisted this species on a number of sites.
- Norfolk Wildlife Trust has purchased 110ha of afforested heathland adjacent to Grimston Warren for heathland re-creation.

4. ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

National

- Achieve an increase in the number of churring males to 4800 by 2016..
- Maintain the current range of nightjar (there were 269 occupied 10 km squares in 2004).
- Increase the range to 305 occupied ten km squares by 2016 (a 13% range increase in 12 years).
- In the long term (next 20 years), restore nightjar to parts of its former range in, for example, south-west England, west Midlands, north-west England, south-west Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Norfolk

- Maintain as a minimum 313 breeding pairs of nightjar in Norfolk in the existing 2004 range of 14 ten km squares.
- By increasing the area of suitable habitat, increase the possible breeding and feeding areas for the nightjar, and so provide scope for further population expansion in the county.

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.1	Policy and Legislation			
5.1.1	Include specific targets and management for the nightjar in Forest Design Plans across the species' current and former range.	Ensure the requirements of the nightjar are fully considered in all future reviews of the Thetford Forest Design Plan, and any other such plans covering the bird's former range in the county.	FE, NE	RSPB
5.1.2	Take full account of the requirements of the nightjar when considering felling and restocking proposals in its current and former range.	Ensure the requirements of the nightjar are taken into account when considering felling and re-stocking proposals.	FE, FC	
5.1.3	Incorporate specific targets and management for nightjars in MoD site management plans in appropriate sites across the species' former range.	Ensure appropriate habitat management and targets for the nightjar are incorporated into site management plans, particularly for sites managed by the MoD and Local Authorities.	NE, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT, MoD	
5.1.5	Support extensive low intensity agricultural systems within the historic range of the species through the appropriate agri-environment schemes.	Consider the requirements of the nightjar when reviewing agri-environment schemes in the county.	NE	RSPB, FWAG
5.2	Site Safeguard and Management			
5.2.1	Consider notifying important nesting and foraging sites at SSSIs.	Consider the notification of heathland sites important for nightjars as SSSIs. Ensure the appropriate management of all such SSSIs (existing and future).	NE	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.2.2	Designate as SPAs areas of 'special interest' that support nationally important populations of nightjars (subject to current guidelines) and encourage their appropriate management.	Confirm SPA designation of Breckland including the Breckland Forest SSSI, the Breckland Farmland SSSI and the suite of Breckland heathland SSSIs.	NE (in conjunction with BAP Partners)	
5.2.3	Seek to achieve 'favourable conservation status' of the nightjar by measures complementary to SPAs. This will include projects to maintain, enhance and restore heathland adjacent to SPAs (eg through agri-environment schemes).	Seek to achieve 'favourable conservation status' of the nightjar by measures complementary to SPAs. This will include projects to maintain, enhance and restore heathland adjacent to SPAs (eg through agri-environment schemes).	NE	Farmers/ Landowners
5.2.4	Protect nationally important localities for nightjars from damaging developments through the planning process.	Protect sites important for the nightjar from damage and further fragmentation, due to development and land use changes, through the planning system. This includes the incorporation of suitable policies into Development Plans and planning guidance.	LAs	
5.2.5	Incorporate suitable policies for the conservation of lowland heathland and other important nightjar nesting and foraging areas into Development Plans, Regional Government Strategies, Indicative Forestry Strategies and Heathland Strategies.	Promote the Regional Heathland Mapping Opportunity Project and Brecks and North Norfolk Re-creation Plans.	NE, FC, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT	
5.2.6	Seek to secure long-term funding for county heathland management projects.	Secure long-term funding for North Norfolk THH Partnership.	NE, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT, THH Partners	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.2.7		Review the management of land owned/managed (including nature reserves) by the BAP Partners for its suitability for nightjars, particularly Breckland heaths.	NE, FE, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT	
5.3	Species Management and Protection			
5.3.1	None proposed.	Ensure through appropriate restrictions and access management that new access rights to heathland under the CRoW Act do not have a negative impact on nightjar.	NE, Norfolk Local Access Forum	RSPB
5.4	Advisory			
5.4.1	Produce specific advisory material for the management of heathland and forestry plantations for nightjars.	Promote the suitable management, and where appropriate the re-creation, of forestry plantations and heathland for the benefit of the nightjar. Also promote the sympathetic management of agricultural habitats. This may be achieved through agri-environment, woodland management and heathland management schemes. Advice to be kept up-to-date as required in the light of continuing research activity.	FE, FC, NE, RSPB, FWAG, LAs	
5.5	Future Research and Monitoring			
5.5.1	Monitor changes to the numbers and range of nightjars through the national survey every 10 years (next survey due in 2014) as part of the statutory agencies/RSPB programme of scarce bird monitoring.	Contribute as required to the 10 yearly programme of scarce bird monitoring (next nightjar survey due in 2014).	FE, NE, RSPB, BTO, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.5.2	Investigate the availability of the nightjar's food supply.	Initiate local research into aspects of nightjar ecology as deemed necessary.	NE, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT	
		Continue research into aspects of habitat/forestry management and their potential impacts on nightjar populations.	FE, RSPB, NE, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT	
5.5.3	Evaluate the condition of heathland in the former range of the nightjar and the potential for remedial management.	Undertake a county-wide evaluation of heathland, giving consideration to the potential for remedial management, and consequent suitability for the nightjar and other heathland BAP species.	NE	
		Investigate the apparent decline in nightjar numbers on the Breckland heaths, and the factors contributing to this trend.	NE	
5.6	Communications and Publicity			
5.6.1	Use the nightjar as a species to promote the conservation of heathland.	Use the nightjar as a species to promote the conservation of heathland (and extensively managed farmland).	NE, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT	
		Use the nightjar as an example of how conservation and other land use practices, in this case forestry, can be successfully integrated.	NE, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT, FE, FC	
5.7	Links with Other Action Plans			
5.7.1	It is likely that the implementation of this action plan will also benefit the woodlark.	It is likely that the implementation of this action plan will also benefit the woodlark.	Heathland BAP Topic Group	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.7.2	The plan should be considered in conjunction with those for lowland heathland and lowland acid grassland.	The plan should be considered in conjunction with the Norfolk HAP for lowland heathland/ lowland acid grassland.	Heathland BAP Topic Group	

NORFOLK DISTRIBUTION

MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE

(This guidance is a general summary; for more detailed information or advice, please consult the references or contacts below.)

What do nightjars need?

Nightjars are summer visitors to Britain, arriving in mid-May. They raise usually two broods of one to two chicks in secluded patches of bare ground within low, often shrubby vegetation, before migrating south in September or October.

Foraging is mainly at dusk and dawn, and through the night when they need to, on moths and other large flying insects, which they catch mainly on the wing. Although they feed over heathland and along forest rides and edges, nightjars are most successful when there is a range of food rich habitats at hand. These include wetlands, such as reedbeds, fens, and grazing marsh, native woodlands, mature hedges, and old pasture.

On lowland heathland, nests are usually located in small naturally occurring gaps in deep heather in dry heath, with a scatter of plant debris, but not live grasses. This offers shelter and camouflage, and seclusion from potential predators. Scattered trees are used to sing from, and to roost in.

In conifer forest clearings, clear-fells and restocks, especially those on former heathland, the vegetation structure is very like that of heathland, and is augmented with lying brash, which provides added concealment. Restocked clearings are abandoned when the ground vegetation becomes unsuitable or as the tree canopy closes over, at around seven to eight years after planting. These plantations may continue to be used if there are gaps in the crops or on the poorest soil where ground vegetation is limited, for up to 15 years.

In coppice woods, nightjars nest in large recently cut coups (clearings), and continue to occupy them until the canopy covers much of the ground, in for example four to five years, depending on the rate of re-growth of the coppice.

There is increasing evidence to suggest that nightjars are vulnerable to disturbance, for example by dogs, which flush the adult from the nest allowing predators in to take the eggs or chicks. Significantly fewer chicks are raised to adulthood on sites with high levels of disturbance than on undisturbed sites.

Key points

Heathland: Maintain a proportion of mature dry heath with plenty of small-scale gaps; retain a proportion of standard trees as song posts.

Forestry: A continuity of recently cut clear-fells is important.

Coppice Woods: Ensure there is a continuity of recently cut coups and remove most of the lop-and-top.

REFERENCES AND CONTACTS

Further information on managing land for nightjars and other wildlife is available from: The RSPB Land Management Advisor, UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy, Beds.