

# South Peak Raptor Study Group Annual Report 2013

The South Peak Raptor Study Group (SPRSG) was formed in 1998 to monitor breeding success of scarce raptors in the South Peak. Broadly speaking, their study area extends northwards into the Upper Derwent Valley, and southwards into the whole of the White Peak including the Staffordshire Moors, together with south Derbyshire, and central Derbyshire as far as the Nottinghamshire borders. Since 2011 they have combined their Annual Report with that of the Peak District Raptor Monitoring Group (PDRMG) whose study area includes the Dark Peak (excluding the Upper Derwent Valley), the Goyt Valley and the Macclesfield Forest. Both groups work within the Northern England Raptor Forum (NERF). In the following summary of their report, the table shows data for the SPRSG study area, to enable comparison with previous years, but PDRMG data is included in the species accounts where appropriate. PDRMG have a website with interesting information, including links to other organisations, at [pdrmg.wordpress.com](http://pdrmg.wordpress.com).

The Report was introduced by Trevor Grimshaw (who took over from Mick Taylor as co-ordinator of SPRSG in 2012) and Steve Davies (PDRMG), and they began by pointing out that the 2013 breeding season started with unusually harsh conditions (snow, winds and freezing temperatures) in late March and early April, and that this appeared to have had an impact on some raptor species.

However, persecution is another major factor in parts of the recording area, and the North Peak is becoming known nationally for the exceptionally high level of raptor persecution (although it is also widespread throughout the UK uplands). It is totally unacceptable that this happens on National Trust land, and the situation is made worse because such prime habitat continually attracts new birds into the area, only for them to disappear without any natural explanation. The situation will only improve if law makers and enforcers make serious attempts to tackle the problem.

However, the National Trust launched a “High Peak Vision and Plan” in 2013, and this requires the landowner to ensure that tenants manage a more natural landscape, not one dominated by the requirements of grouse shooting. This could be considered to be a ground-breaking initiative, and it is greatly hoped that this will produce real change.

The table below summarises the data for breeding success over the past five years; in general, the number of fledged young can be assumed to be the minimum.

	Number of Sites					Number Successful					Number of Fledged Young				
	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13
Goshawk	13	21	24	11	11	7	12	8+	4	9	13+	25	18+	9	18
Merlin	9	9	9	9	10	6	5	2	4	2	24	21	4	9+	6
Hobby	34	41	51	54	28+*	28	28	33+	37+	26+*	64	64	70+	73+	57+*
Peregrine*	29	32	32	26	25	17+	18	20+	6	15	35+	40+	55+	11	36+
Barn Owl	18	20	10	9	4	18	20	9+	9	2+	55+	49+	28+	24	6+
LE Owl	2	3+	4+	0	1	1	2+	3+	0	1	1	4+	6+	0	2
SE Owl	8	4	5	5	5	3	1+	?	1+?	?	6	1+	?	1+?	?

\* includes North Staffordshire sites.

\*\* this is an underestimate: see species account below

**Goshawks** were formerly a regular breeding species in both study areas but this is no longer the case. As in all recent years, there was a noticeable lack of breeding success for the species in the Upper Derwent Valley, where all traditional territories were checked but none were successful. Elsewhere in the SPRSG area, eleven sites were occupied, nine were successful, and fledged at least eighteen young. After the end of the breeding season, a pair was rumoured to have bred in South Yorkshire but this could not be confirmed.

Nationally, **Peregrines** have increased in some areas, and decreased in others. Increases are thought to be associated with reduced illegal killing and abundant prey, whilst decreases are associated with poor food availability, degradation of habitat and continued illegal killing. In the SPRSG area, 30 sites were checked and, of these, five were unoccupied, with three of these being the three traditional sites in Upper Derwentdale. Of the 25 occupied sites, 15 were successful, with most of the failures being due to poor weather conditions. In addition to these sites, pairs were successful at Derby cathedral and St. George's church in Sheffield, fledging four and three young respectively, whilst a pair fledged four young at the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust site at East Mill in Belper. The species is grossly under-represented in the PDRMG study area, and a number of historically successful sites remain unoccupied. In 2013, six sites were occupied, four were successful, and fledged seven young.

**Merlins** had a very poor breeding season in the SPRSG area in 2013, with many sites unoccupied, or occupied only briefly, and only two sites successful. No pairs were located in the north Staffordshire moors for the first time in many years. The number of unoccupied sites is a cause for concern, and is thought possibly due to intensive habitat management. The PDRMG area fared better with thirteen occupied sites out of 22 checked, and these produced at least 40 fledged young. However, here also there are concerns about the numbers of failures. Thanks were expressed to Jamie Horner who is an independent field worker working with the Peak District Initiative on Birds of Prey, and greatly assisted with improved coverage and access arrangements. The initiative, which was set up by the Peak District NPA, went live in 2012; more about the initiative can be found if you enter *Peak District initiative on birds of prey* into your favourite web search engine

**Hobbies** continued to flourish in both study areas, and the totals in the above tables are very much an underestimate due to an unavoidable reduction of monitoring in 2013. Anthony Messenger is running a long-term intensive study on a core area of 100 square km, and his estimate based on this study is for an overall breeding population for the county of *c.* 115 pairs. For more about Anthony's project, see the "Birds of Derbyshire 2012" (which is the annual report of the Derbyshire Ornithological Society for 2012). PDRMG reported at least nine young fledged from eight nests.

Three common raptor species are not closely monitored by SPRSG. Sightings of **Sparrowhawks** are regular, and the species continues to thrive in urban areas. By chance, a dead bird was found in an unused trap in the vicinity of a pheasant shoot in Derbyshire and, as a result of this, the landowner agreed that doors should be removed from unused traps. Nationally, the **Kestrel** is in long-term decline and is now Amber listed. This is reflected locally, and SPRSG accepts that further study is warranted. **Buzzards** are now so widespread that it is no longer possible for SPRSG to monitor all known nests. However, it is known that unexplained failures continue to occur in the Upper Derwent Valley

Five non-breeding raptor species were also mentioned in the SPRSG report. There were increased sightings of **Red Kites** throughout both study areas with six individuals seen in various locations in the SPRSG recording area. There continued to be records of **Marsh Harrier** from both study areas during the summer months, suggesting that the uplands are used as migration routes. Although there is an abundance of suitable breeding habitat for **Hen Harrier**, it had not bred successfully since 2006 [but did so in 2014, outside the scope of this 2013 report]. In 2013, there were a number of sightings of single birds which were monitored closely but there was no sign of breeding activity. Ringtail harriers were reported from both areas in the autumn. The **Honey Buzzard** is thought to be expanding into upland forest in western and northern Britain. A female in possible breeding habitat was recorded in North Derbyshire in August, but there was no suggestion of breeding. **Ospreys** are occasionally seen on passage through the area, with three seen in early spring in the SPRSG area, and the species was also recorded hunting to the west of the PDRMG area during both spring and autumn.

Nationally, the **Barn Owl** is threatened by mortality associated with road traffic, as well as loss of habitat, and hence loss of food supply and potential nest sites. In the SPRSG area, the poor breeding season was due to poor vole population. There were a number of sightings in the PDRMG area, but there has been no breeding there since the 1980s.

Despite much effort, SPRSG were able to locate only one active nest of **Long-Eared Owls**, and this fledged two young. PDRMG checked six known nest sites but none appeared to be occupied. However, later in the season, fledged young were found at two of these sites.

SPRSG located three pairs of **Short-eared Owl** in the Staffordshire moors, and two pairs in Upper Derwentdale, but the outcomes from these were unknown. The report expressed concern that the species is absent or scarce from several areas where it has traditionally bred. In the PDRMG area, there were hardly any sightings at all, and lack of voles was thought to be the reason.

Two common owl species are not systematically monitored by SPRSG or PDRMG, and neither group made a specific study of **Little Owl** in 2013, but the species remains relatively common, particularly at lower elevations. The **Tawny Owl** was thought to have had a poor breeding season in 2013, possibly due to low vole numbers.

**Ravens** continue to expand in the SPRSG area, including into the north-east lowland areas. In 2013 there were successful pairs in most White Peak quarry sites, and in nine tree nests in south Derbyshire, all nests fledging between two and five young. A pair was also successful at Alport Castles, whilst two pairs were successful in the Dovedale area. PDRMG reported five successful nests from eleven sites checked, and again reiterated that persecution seems to be the main limiting factor. They noted that good public access was associated with successful outcomes.

**Some Acknowledgments:** The membership of SPRSG in 2012 was: Trevor Grimshaw (Co-ordinator), John Atkin, Roy Frost, Mick Lacey, Geoff Mawson, Anthony Messenger, Stephen Moores, Steve Samworth, Ken Smith, Jack Street, Mick Taylor and Paul Tooley. The membership of PDRMG was Steve Davies (Co-ordinator), Carl Ashford, Nick Corley, Andy Platts, Mike Price, Paul Stafford and Mark Watson. The authors of the report expressed their thanks to the organisations and landowners who allowed access to their property, and also thanked Rhodri Thomas at Peak District National Park Authority.

[Finally, an apology from the writer-upper: I received this report in good time in 2014, and the lateness of this summary is entirely down to me. Sorry.]

Wendy Thomson

