

Grey Partridge Newsletter



AUGUST 2025 | ISSUE 43 | THE GWCT AUTUMN UPDATE

INTRODUCTION – Julie Ewald *Principal Scientist Farmland Ecology & GIS*

Welcome to the 43rd version of the PCS newsletter. As I write this, the sun is blazing down on GWCT HQ in Hampshire. All indications are for an early harvest, due to the hot, dry conditions during the last part of the growing season – with mixed expectations for the yield. The weather this season has also led to high hopes for grey partridges. The GWCT are working to reinvigorate the Partridge Count Scheme in the North of England. One aspect of grey partridges in northern England and areas of Scotland is counting grey partridges on the moorland fringe. Phil Warren from the GWCT's Upland Research Team provides information below on the proposed process and we are adjusting counting instructions on the PCS count forms to help counters in the moorland fringe.

The middle pages of this newsletter give the results of the PCS counts in spring 2025 and information on grey partridge recovery from Alex Keeble. The last page of the newsletter reports on the Lincolnshire grey partridge trophy presentation and a grey partridge walk hosted by a PCS member in the Cotswolds. And finally, I am sorry to report that Neville Kingdon, who you will know in his role as the PCS Coordinator, has decided to leave the GWCT after over 25 years of service. He will step down on 12 September. I am sure that you will join me in wishing him all the best for his next adventure – he will be much missed.

Partridges on the Fringe

GREY PARTRIDGES ARE DIFFICULT TO COUNT IN THE MOORLAND fringe. However, they have favoured haunts on the moorland fringe and are regularly seen on daily routine activities by gamekeepers and farmers. Recording the locations of known pairs and singles seen during routine activities in spring (late March to early May) and again post-breeding in later summer (September/October) can, if repeated annually, provide important information on overall numbers, distribution, breeding success, and over-winter survival. We propose this method:

1. **COUNT AREA:** Record grey partridges on all your land covered by the moorland fringe, and record the area covered by your count – note you should count the same area each year to get a measure of change in numbers and productivity through time.
2. **TIMING:** Record both spring pairs and single birds present between mid-March and early May after coveys have split and birds have paired up, but before grass cover gets too high. Record birds post-breeding (September/October), identifying males, females, and young in each covey. It helps to estimate age of chicks to avoid double counting a covey.
3. **RECORDING THE COUNT:** Please record your observations of grey partridges and any redlegs on a map indicating the area covered. The map will provide a record of the distribution of partridges on an area that you can compare over multiple years. Mapping birds where you see them also means that you are less likely to double count birds that are physically close to one another. Then fill in the PCS count form and send it off to us.

Game & Wildlife CONSERVATION TRUST
Partridge Count Scheme

gwct.org.uk/pcs

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EVENTS 2025

PARTRIDGE FARM WALK
ALLENDALE ESTATES, BYWELL
THURSDAY 4 SEPTEMBER
5.30PM
Contact Rebecca Barber for further information: rbarber@gwct.org.uk

EAST ANGLIAN GREY PARTRIDGE WALK
CHURCH FARM, ST NEOTS, CAMBRIDGESHIRE
WEDNESDAY 10 SEPTEMBER
Contact Lizzie Herring for further information: lherring@gwct.org.uk

FOR MORE DETAILS
Contact our Advisory Service on 01425 651013 or go to gwct.org.uk/events

LATEST PCS RESULTS

It seems to have become a traditional part of the articles we write considering the results of our PCS counts to start with a brief summary of the weather – mainly due to the variability we are seeing in conditions and the effect it is having on our ability to conserve grey partridges. This article is no exception- the UK has been on a weather roller coaster over the past year. After a milder than average winter, with December being the fifth warmest on record for the UK, the start of 2025 brought cold Arctic conditions, wintry showers, Storm Éowyn's destructive and heavy rain, and winds across southern England and Wales. This was followed by February, which was a drier than average month, especially across northern England, despite a gloomy start and mid-month unsettled conditions. Following this, spring 2025 broke climate records as being the warmest and sunniest on UK record. Indeed, in some areas of the country, there was no significant rainfall this spring. While this may be nice for the average beachgoer, the extended dry period raises the question of whether there were enough chick food insects available when grey partridge chicks hatched in June. Although sunnier conditions are welcome, insects do need moist (but not wet) conditions to thrive. The possible negative effects of the dry conditions are further exacerbated by some farms kicking off their harvest at the end of June!

PARTICIPATION

The results from this year's spring grey partridge counts are summarised in Table 1. We would like to thank everyone for their time and effort in undertaking a count and submitting their findings to the Partridge Count Scheme (PCS). In total, 418 spring counts were received from across the UK. This is an 8% decline on the number returned last spring. The largest proportional declines in the number returned were in northern England (-17%) and Scotland (-19%).

WINTER SURVIVAL OF 2024/25

Over-winter survival (OWS) is calculated for sites that have undertaken both a 2024 autumn and a 2025 spring count (Table 2) and measures both survival and movement of birds on and off a count area. Overall OWS was 53% in 2024/2025 compared with 59% in 2023/2024. PCS members in the Midlands region in 2024/2025 recorded an increased level of OWS, compared to the previous winter, while PCS members in the areas of the country that returned a noticeable reduced number of spring counts also reported substantial declines in OWS.

SPRING PAIRS

This spring, PCS members recorded a total of 4,620 pairs of grey partridges, down 1,040 pairs (-18%) on spring 2024. Eastern England, with just over one third of all participating sites, recorded 42% of the total number reported, while the PCS members from Northern England and Scotland reported 22% and 17% of the total, respectively.

SPRING DENSITY

Nationally, spring pair density decreased by 10% to 4.6 birds/100 hectares. Regionally, breeding densities in the Southern region increased by 38% to 2.9 pairs/100 hectares. The Midlands remained roughly stable at 3.2 pairs/100 hectares, up from 3.1 in 2024. Similarly, the average spring pair density in the Eastern region dropped slightly (-2%) to 5.5 pairs/100 hectares. PCS members in Scotland recorded the largest decline in density (-41 %) to 2.9 pairs/100 hectares.

LONG-TERM STATUS

The long-term index (Figure 1) shows changes in grey partridge density since 1960 for "long-term sites" participating in the PCS prior to 1999, and "new sites" who joined since 1999. In spring 2025, long-term sites recorded an average 22% decrease on spring 2024 density. This is less than the 34% decline seen from 2022 to 2023, but it is disappointing compared to the slight increase seen between 2023 to 2024. This gives an average index in national spring pair density of 2.8 pairs/100ha (250 acres) for the long-term sites. Meanwhile, the new sites recorded a smaller decrease (-8%) in the average index of spring pair density, with an average index of 3.6 pairs/100ha (250 acres) – notably nearly 30% higher than that on long-term sites.

Table 1

Regional total counts and average spring pair densities of grey partridges in Great Britain for 2024 and 2025.

Region	Number of counts		Spring pairs per 100ha		Percentage change
	2024	2025	2024	2025	Change %
Southern	56	53	2.1	2.9	38%
Eastern	146	149	5.6	5.5	-2%
Midlands	65	61	3.1	3.2	3%
Wales	2	1	0	0	-%
Northern	112	93	7.4	6.4	-14%
Scotland	75	61	4.9	2.9	-41%
N. Ireland	0	0	-	-	-
Overall	**456**	**418**	**5.1**	**4.6**	**-10%**

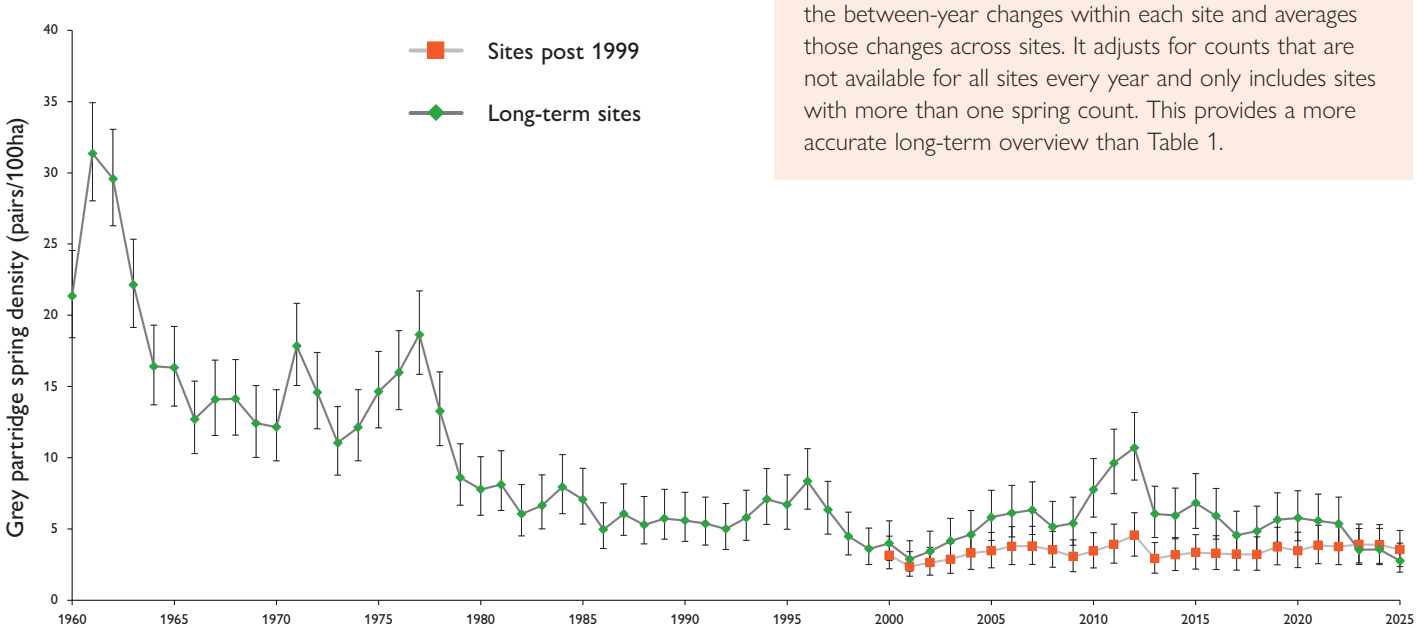
Table 2

Over-winter survival (OWS) rates.

Region	Mean over-winter survival (%)	
	2023/24	2024/25
Southern	44	45
Eastern	57	57
Midlands	49	64
Wales	0	0
Northern	77	48
Scotland	47	42
N. Ireland	-	-
Overall	**59**	**53**

Figure 1

Trends in the indices of grey partridge density, controlling for variation in different count areas.



Comparing Table 1 & Figure 1

The results of Table 1 and Figure 1 differ due to the more complex analysis in producing Figure 1, which looks at the between-year changes within each site and averages those changes across sites. It adjusts for counts that are not available for all sites every year and only includes sites with more than one spring count. This provides a more accurate long-term overview than Table 1.

With the UK overall experiencing its second warmest-ever June (only behind 2023), and England seeing its warmest June since records began in 1884, partridge chicks fledged into warm but noticeably dry fields. How this has affected early brood survival, we can only find out with your help. We are looking forward to receiving your counts from this autumn to help us understand the effect that the variable weather conditions are having on grey partridge chick production.

Re-establishing greys

Many farms and shoots attempt to boost numbers or re-establish grey partridges through releasing. However, such efforts are prolonged, expensive, labour-intensive, and often unsuccessful.

The GWCT's extensive research suggests that if wild grey partridges are still present at over two pairs/km^2 across at least 4km^2 (400ha), releasing is not necessary. If wild birds are present then it is possible to increase the numbers via habitat management, supplementary feeding, and reducing predation pressure. If numbers fail to increase it is likely one of these key elements is deficient, or adverse weather has impacted nesting success. During our Royston project, pairs rose from 2.9 to 18 pairs/km^2 in five years.

The three key measures needed are:

1. **HABITAT** – Provide the correct type and amount of habitat needed throughout the year – over-winter and spring cover, nesting, foraging cover, and brood-rearing. A mixed mosaic, with each element in close proximity, allows nesting hens easy access to food and brood-rearing cover at hand for chicks.

2. **PREDATION CONTROL** – Manage the key predators of grey partridges (foxes, stoats, weasels, rats, crows, and magpies) with a focused predation management plan during February to June.

3. **SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING** – Use hopper feeders and maintain a feed supply until late May. This maintains the body condition of hens during breeding and limits their time away from the nest to find food. Move feeders regularly to deter rats and control any infestations early.

If wild partridge densities are below two pairs per km^2 over at least 4km^2, it may be worth considering re-establishment, but releasing into unfavourable conditions will likely fail. Before any releasing, get advice to ascertain the reason for the low numbers and whether the key measures are met.

The domesticated nature of artificially reared birds and genetically poor breeding stock means releasing reared poults will most likely fail. Although translocated wild birds perform best, they must be sourced from a viable natural population and caught up during the open season (1 September to 1 February in Great Britain).

NOTE: Translocating wild grey partridges requires a licence from Natural England.

If translocated birds cannot be sourced, then parent-reared birds or bantam-reared young (between the ages of 5–8 weeks) fostered to wild barren grey partridge pairs would be the next option. Do not attempt fostering with already successful pairs or with birds outside the 5–8 week age window, as they risk rejection or abandonment.

Successful re-establishment can often take at least five years to achieve a population and maintain or increase numbers thereafter. Understanding the core area of the new population is key and will enable you to focus your attention on the three key measures in this area.

For further details go to gwct.org.uk/re-establish

Grey Partridge Highlights: Trophy Presentation and Cotswolds Evening Walk



GWCT members admiring the floristically enhanced hedgerow margins on George Ponsonby's farm.

George Ponsonby kindly hosted a farm walk for the Wiltshire GWCT Committee on the evening of 26 June, highlighting the habitat management and predation control undertaken on his farm.

George and his head gamekeeper Niall Wright produced an average density of just over 22 pairs per 100ha on his farm in the Cotswolds over the last two years from a baseline of two pairs on the farm just over ten years ago. Not only have they managed to restore the fortunes of grey partridges, but they are supporting a host of farmland birds, bees, butterflies, and predatory insects that help protect the crops on this "Jewel in the Cotswolds".

The farm relies on managed permanent flowering strips alongside hedges for both nesting cover and chick-food habitat. New beetle banks have been installed to provide additional nesting habitat, over-winter feeding, and legal predation control then complete the grey partridge recovery package.

The awarding of the Jas. Martin Lincolnshire Grey Partridge Trophy has been a highlight of the Lincolnshire Show for the last 20 years. It is awarded annually to the farm, shoot or estate that has achieved the biggest uplift in numbers over the past year according to submitted spring and autumn counts. The Partridge Count Scheme has added to the GWCT's knowledge of this iconic farmland bird, and the Trust is very grateful for Jas. Martin & Co's continued support.

This year, the judges were delighted to award the Trophy to Claxby Grange Farm, near Market Rasen. The recipients, owner Andrew Lyle and gamekeeper Pete Appleyard, had been runners up in 2008 and 2018 and the judges felt that there was almost nothing more they could be doing at Claxby Grange to support the grey partridge. They are very worthy winners.



L-R: Harry Lyle, Andrew Lyle, High Sheriff of Lincolnshire David Chambers (who presented the award), and Pete Applewood.



JOIN THE PARTRIDGE COUNT SCHEME

If you're a farmer, landowner, game manager or land manager, or know someone who is and wants to help their wild grey partridges, please join the scheme. For more details and to sign up visit: gwct.org.uk/pcs.

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