

# **SPECIES ACTION PLAN FOR NIGHTJAR**

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## **Current Status**

The European nightjar is a summer visitor to the UK, and is a characteristic nocturnal bird of heathland, wood pasture, woodland edges and clearings. It was once common, but has been declining in numbers and range throughout Europe for much of this century, mainly due to the loss of its habitat. It is well camouflaged and difficult to survey, the usual method being to count the number of singing males and use this to estimate the total number of birds. Between surveys in 1968-72 and 1992 there was a decline in UK range of 52%, and now the species breeds mainly in southern England, with scattered populations as far north as central Scotland. Numbers reached a low point of 2100 males in 1981, but have now stabilised and are increasing in some areas. In 1992 a national survey resulted in an estimated UK population of 3400 males.

The Nottinghamshire nightjar population, although much smaller than it was in the last century, remains relatively healthy largely due to the growth in commercial forestry. Young plantations provide suitable nesting and foraging areas for the species in the absence of more natural habitats. Today the nightjar retains a strong population in the County, with strongholds being the large estates of the Dukeries, Sherwood Forest and Budby. A county-wide survey by the Birklands Ringing Group in 1997 resulted in an estimate of 59 breeding pairs. This makes the Nottinghamshire population of national importance.

## **Threats**

The main factors currently affecting nightjars in Nottinghamshire are:

- Loss and fragmentation of suitable nesting and foraging habitats.
- Lack of heathland management, leading to invasion by trees or scrub.
- Unsympathetic commercial forestry- commercial forests provide good habitat for nightjars when managed appropriately, but changes in management may threaten local populations.
- Decrease in large airborne insect prey as a result of intensive agriculture.
- Creation of roads through nightjar habitat - their low flight during feeding makes them susceptible to impact with vehicles.

- Disturbance by people and dogs. This reduces the amount of time a bird can spend incubating or feeding, and may therefore affect the likelihood of its chicks surviving. It also makes eggs and chicks more vulnerable to predators.
- Excessive cold and wet periods in recent years have reduced breeding success.

### **Current Initiatives - Examples**

- A UK Species Action Plan for the Nightjar has been prepared.
- The nightjar is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and is a priority species under European law. It is illegal to kill or injure a nightjar, take its eggs or damage its nest.
- Many private landowners manage areas of actual or potential nightjar habitat, and have a vital part to play in the conservation of the species.
- The Birklands Ringing Group have been studying and monitoring the nightjar in Nottinghamshire annually since 1986.
- The Nottinghamshire Heathland Strategy and the Habitat Action Plan for Lowland Heathland establish a framework for heathland conservation in the County.
- New areas of suitable habitat will be created under several habitat action plans, including those for lowland heathland and oak-birch woodland.
- Sherwood Forest is one of four trial areas in the English Nature Habitat Restoration Project. EN and the Sherwood Forest Trust are working together to tackle the problems associated with habitat fragmentation in the area.
- The majority of the best heathland areas are within Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), notified by English Nature.

### **Targets**

To contribute towards the UK species action plan by:

- Maintaining the current distribution and abundance of the nightjar in Nottinghamshire.
- Increasing the number of breeding pairs to 72 by 2005 (a 20% increase). This may be done by increasing populations on existing sites and encouraging the colonisation of new sites through appropriate management.

### **Proposed Action**

#### Policy and Legislation

1) Ensure that nightjars and their habitats are protected and promoted through appropriate regional and local planning policy instruments.

Action: Government Office East Midlands, Local Authorities (LAs).

2) Promote awareness of the legal protection afforded to nightjars among land owners and planning officers.

Action: LAs, English Nature (EN), Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust (NWT).

3) Incorporate action for nightjars into Indicative Forestry Strategies and Forest Design Plans. In particular encourage the planting of areas of broadleaved trees within and around plantations.

Action: Forestry Commission (FC).

4) Ensure that the needs of nightjars are taken into account in local and national incentive schemes.

Action: EN, LAs, FC, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF).

5) Ensure that the implementation of the Nottinghamshire Heathland Strategy takes into account the needs of nightjars, particularly when identifying suitable sites for heathland re-creation and deciding on the appropriate management of key sites.

Action: Heathland Strategy Steering Group.

#### Site Safeguard and Management

6) Ensure that the needs of the nightjar are considered in the management of all SSSIs and other wildlife sites suitable for the species.

Action: EN, NWT, RSPB, LAs.

#### Species Management and Protection

7) Take account of the requirements of the nightjar when considering felling and restocking proposals.

Action: FC.

8) Incorporate specific targets and management for nightjar in the site management plan for Budby South Forest.

Action: Defence Estates Organisation (Lands) East.

9) Ensure that heathland restoration schemes incorporate measures to encourage colonisation by nightjars wherever appropriate.

Action: Nottinghamshire County Council (NCC), Nottinghamshire Heathland Forum (NHF), Sherwood Forest Trust (SFT).

10) Ensure that the restoration of colliery sites under the British Coal deal incorporates measures to encourage colonisation by nightjars wherever appropriate.

Action: NCC, FC.

#### Advisory

11) Ensure that advice on the needs of nightjars is available to land-owners and managers, and encourage appropriate management.

Action: LAs, EN, NWT, SFT, RSPB, Agriculture and Development Advisory Service (ADAS), Birklands Ringing Group, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG).

12) Disseminate advisory material on the management of heathland for nightjars to land owners and managers. Consider the need for new material.

Action: EN, FC, FWAG, ADAS, SFT, NWT, RSPB, Farming and Rural Conservation Agency (FRCA).

### Future Research and Monitoring

13) Continue to monitor the County's nightjar population on an annual basis, ensuring that methods are consistent with the national monitoring programme.

Action: RSPB, Birklands Ringing Group, Notts Birdwatchers, Nottinghamshire Biological and Geological Records Centre (NBGRC).

14) Identify new or existing areas of habitat with the potential to support nightjar, and promote the needs of the species to their owners and managers.

Action: RSPB, FWAG, NWT, National Farmers Union (NFU), Country Landowners Association (CLA).

15) Establish a monitoring procedure to compare achievements to habitat and species targets and revise the Action Plan as necessary.

Action: BAG.

### Communications and Publicity

16) Use the nightjar as a flagship species to publicise heathland conservation.

Action: BAG.

17) Efforts should be made on sites with public access to raise awareness of ground nesting birds and the need to protect them from disturbance. Visitors should be diverted away from sensitive areas during the breeding season where possible.

Action: EN, LAs, National Trust.

18) Produce a revised code of birdwatching practice aimed at reducing disturbance to ground nesting birds.

Action: RSPB, NWT, Nottinghamshire Birdwatchers, Lound Bird Club.

### **What You Can Do**

- Keep your dog on a lead when walking on heaths during the bird breeding season (approximately 1st March to 31st July). Always stay on marked paths.
- Join your local bird watching club or the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.