

RING OUZEL *Turdus torquatus* **Species Action Plan**

1. Introduction

The Ring Ouzel is a summer visitor to the UK spending the winter in north western Africa and southern Spain. It is a characteristic breeding species of the UK uplands above the 250m contour line. Restricted to Scotland, Wales, North and North western England, typical nesting territories are found on heather moor and sheep walk bisected by water courses. These areas contain steep sided gullies, scree slopes or crags often with scattered trees. Territories can therefore be arranged in a linear fashion along streams and burns which seems to be the case in NNP. Nest building usually occurs on the ground, in or under mature heather, although trees, bracken and derelict buildings are sometimes used. Adult birds will also fly considerable distances to forage in different habitat types, feeding on earthworms principally but also on other invertebrate food such as ants as well as butterfly, moth, beetle and fly larvae. Close cropped rough grazing on fertile loam soils, enriched grassland around pens or stock feeding sites and in-bye pasture are used especially when feeding nestlings. From mid summer, berries of bilberry, crowberry, hawthorn, bramble, elder, juniper and rowan are taken. It is reported that spiders, moths and grasshoppers are taken in their winter quarters but these would also be available in mid to late summer in the NNP.

2. Current Status

2.1 National

During the 20th century a long and steady decline in the population has been detected especially well documented in the last few decades. This decline is still not properly understood and requires further research. Occupied 10 km squares in Britain declined from 745 to 544 between the 1968-72 bird breeding atlas (Sharrock 1976) and the 1988-91 atlas (Gibbons et al 1993) representing a decline of 27%. This equated a contraction in range particularly in Wales and the south west of England. Population size is estimated at 5,500-11,000 pairs (Gibbons et al 1993) (confirmed in a 1999 RSPB unpublished survey) Local surveys however suggest population decline continues. Ring Ouzels are protected nationally by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and is red listed in the Red Data book. Internationally the Ring Ouzel is protected by the EC Birds Directive. It is also listed in Annex II of the Berne Convention and Annex II of the Bonn Convention.

2.2 Local

Given its habitat preferences it's not surprising that the bulk of the records of this species in the county occur in the NNP. The area north of Redesdale containing the Cheviot and Simonside Hills hold virtually all the breeding records as described in the local atlas (Day et al 1995). Recent observation has suggested a major decline in breeding pairs in Redesdale and Coquetdale in the last decade (Galloway 2000). Ring Ouzel is recognised as a Red Data Book species for Northumberland (Kerslake 1998) species as well as a North Pennines Target Species.

3. Factors Causing Loss or Decline

3.1 Soil Acidity

It is suggested that soil acidity has increased over the last 150 years due to pollution. Earthworms are less abundant in acidic or peat soils than in neutral or calcareous soils. This may require birds to fly further to forage reducing nestling food and productivity and placing greater energy demands on adults (Tyler and Green 1994).

3.2 Agricultural Practices

3.2.1 Overgrazing

Overgrazing of heather, bilberry and scrubby trees like juniper and rowan reduces opportunities for nesting and food in the form of berries that are especially important in summer. Changes in vegetation structure could affect soil hydrology and in turn the invertebrate community, through drying out of the soils. Observation of foraging Cheviot birds have confirmed the extensive use of moist rank areas of vegetation, particularly unimproved grassland mosaic mixed with mosses, nettles, rushes and bilberry etc (Galloway 2000 and 2002).

3.2.2. Undergrazing

Ring Ouzels rely in part on short, damp, unimproved turf for feeding, so removal of grazing stock could alter the ability to forage efficiently in matted, un-grazed swards. This is seen clearly when afforestation or tree planting fenced enclosures occur, as well as when removal or reduction of stock on grouse moors happens as part of management. This may have a local impact on breeding pairs. However it is clear that dense heather also provides nesting opportunities and shelter for fledglings (Galloway 2002).

3.2.3. Shepherding and husbandry of stock

Changes in traditional sheep management and intensification may have contributed to decline. Overgrazing and the reduction of traditional shepherding of hill sheep have been suggested. A study of the use of supplementary feed-blocks on heather could have contributed to a local decline. The use of anti-parasitic agents used in doses may remain in sheep manure, potentially reducing invertebrates in pasture. Changes of husbandry practices e.g., winter feeding locations and use of in-bye fields may have reduced Ring Ouzel feeding areas. This appears to be important in the Cheviot study (Galloway 2000).

3.3 Afforestation

In some parts of the UK, afforestation has coincided with local declines. Habitat loss for feeding and nesting and the greater potential for harbouring predators, are the main implications for decline.

3.4 Recreational disturbance

Evidence for this is somewhat contradictory and rather anecdotal. Impact may be localised in areas used for rock climbing as has been shown in the Peak District.

3.5 Competition with other thrushes

Mistle thrushes and blackbirds have been suggested as being a potential cause of the decline in Ring Ouzels through competition. There is no clear evidence of this.

3.6 Predation

Limited evidence has shown that between 20-62% of nest failures are believed to be attributable to crow, magpie, fox, stoat and weasel. Peregrine and merlin take the species on occasions but no quantitative studies have been made. Predation is potentially high in non-keepered areas where species poor and impoverished habitats occur.

3.7 Problems in wintering areas and on migration

Little is known about any changing factors whilst the species is out of its breeding areas. Changing farming and grazing practices in Spain and Africa are possible factors as are drought and hunting pressure.

3.8 Climate change

It has been suggested that climate change may increase the potential of many of the theories put forward above. The inability of the birds to utilise food supplies at different times of year would be a consequence e.g. earthworm availability in early summer after dry winters.

4. Current and Recent Action

4.1 National and local surveys carried out since the 1970s, have provided base line data. Knowledge is limited in relation to species requirements and factors affecting the decline. Relevant regional reports are summarised in the bibliography.

4.2 Reports on the observation of 2 pairs in the Cheviot Hills were commissioned by the NNPA (Galloway 2000 and 2002).

4.3 Limited research work has been done by RSPB and others into this area of work.

4.4 Upland agricultural policy fostered and promoted through Countryside Stewardship and other schemes may have a beneficial effect if the species is considered whilst drawing up schemes. An existing leaflet published by RSPB and MAFF gives habitat advice to land managers.

4.5 Some targeted action has been employed in the NNP. Fencing and scattered tree planting of steep slopes and sikes near known territories in the Harthope Valley has occurred, through the Tweed Rivers Heritage Project.

5. Broad Objectives and Targets

5.1 To halt and reverse the decline in numbers in the NNP.

5.2 To halt and reverse the contraction in range of the Ring Ouzel in the NNP.

5.3 To improve the knowledge of the ecological requirements of the Ring Ouzel and the factors causing its decline.

5.4 To promote sympathetic land management practices in NNP by providing information to landowners and the general public.

5.5 To set up a monitoring scheme to assess future trends.

6 Proposed Action with Lead Agencies

6.1 Policy and legislation

Action	Target	Partners	Achieving Objective
6.1.1 Protect and manage upland heath, upland grassland, rivers and burns and hay meadows through Habitat Action Plans.	Ongoing	EN, DEFRA.	5.1, 5.2, 5.4

6.1.2 Ensure Agri-environment schemes consider the importance of in-bye fields and marginal unimproved rough grazing for Ring Ouzel.	Ongoing	EN, DEFRA	5.1,5.2,5.4
6.1.3 Ensure grant aided woodland schemes are designed to benefit Ring Ouzels.	Ongoing	FA, FE	5.1, 5.2, 5.4
6.1.4 Take full account of the Ring Ouzels requirements in Forest Design Plan consultations	Ongoing	FE	5.1,5.2

6.2 Site Safeguard and Management

Action	Target	Partners	Achieving Objective
6.2.1 Promote good practice in moor burning by encouraging the retention of old heather on crags, in gullies and steep slopes for nesting and post fledging shelter. Encourage bilberry as an invertebrate food source.	Ongoing	Landowners, GCT, EN, RSPB, DEFRA	5.1,5.2, 5.4
6.2.2 Encourage landowners to limit the use of anti-parasite chemicals that persist in dung.	Ongoing	Landowners	5.1,5.2, 5.4
6.2.3 Encourage the blocking of drainage grips within current and historically known range of the species.	Ongoing Same as Blanket bog HAP	Landowners, FE, DEFRA	5.1,5.2, 5.4
6.2.4 Encourage the planting of berry bearing trees in suitable locations in upland burn side situations and those in marginal hill grassland habitats.	Ongoing, as new native woodland target.	FA, FE, MoD, Landowners, DEFRA	5.1,5.2
6.2.5 Ensure Agri-environment schemes consider the requirements of the Ring Ouzel with regard to the threat of <u>under grazing</u> of feeding areas.	Ongoing	DEFRA, EN,	5.1,5.2, 5.4

6.3 Species management and protection

None proposed

6.4 Advisory

Action	Target	Partners	Achieving Objective
6.4.1 Circulate leaflet on Ring Ouzel to landowners.	Distribute RSPB leaflet/literature or similar to landowners by 2005.	RSPB	5.3

6.5 Future research and monitoring

Action	Target	Partners	Achieving Objective
6.5.1 Participate in any national survey for the species as they arise.	Ongoing	BTO, RSPB, NTBC	5.3,5.5
6.5.2 Promote recording of the species using the RSPB standard methodology and enter results on data base. Pass to national data base.	Annual update	NNPA Voluntary Rangers, Rangers, Landowners and the public	5.3,5.5
6.5.3 Collate all existing records for the NNP and produce a current and historical distribution maps.	By end of 2004	Northumberland and Tyneside Bird Club, RSPB, BTO	5.3,5.5
6.5.4 Monitor 2 or more breeding territories to determine feeding habitat requirements.	2000, 2002	Landowners, RSPB, EN. N and TS BC Contractor	5.3,5.5
6.5.5 A base line survey of all suitable SSSI,s is required to monitor affects of open access through the CRoW Act	2004 and 2005	Landowners, RSPB, EN. N and TS BC Contractor	5.3, 5.5
6.5.6 A bi-annual survey of all suitable SSSIs is required to monitor affects of open access through the CRoW Act	2007, 09, 11	Landowners, RSPB, EN. N and TS BC Contractor	5.3,5.5

6.6 Communications and publicity

Action	Target	Partners	Achieving Objective
6.6.1 Include Ring Ouzel in any talk or walk on upland birds.	2 talks and 2 walks annually.	RSPB,NT,EN ,NWT,FWAG	5.4
6.6.2 Include article in NNPA newsletter and other periodicals	1 per year	Press, FWAG	5.4

7. References

Day, J.C., Hodgson, M.S. & Rossiter, B.N. (1995) *The Atlas Of Breeding Birds in Northumbria*. Northumberland and Tyneside Bird Club.

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