

Great outdoors

Moor the merrier

Shooters and twitchers are equally thrilled by the return of bird life to a barren tract of the Peak District, reports Simon Birch

Geoff Eyre is a miracle worker. As the shooting tenant on the National Trust's Derwent and Howden moors in the Peak District, he has been helping to breathe life back into the once barren and bleak moorland. In the process he has been involved in one of the most successful and groundbreaking heather moorland restoration projects in Britain.

"When I first took over the tenancy in 1990, the whole moor was just one big, lifeless monoculture of grass," says Eyre, 59, as we walk across the rolling moorland. "You'd be lucky just to see a meadow pipit."

Not so now. The reeling song of skylarks and the burbling call of curlews drown out our voices, while underfoot lies a patchwork of fresh, young heather, cotton grass and myriad different mosses.

Back in the 1930s, Derwent and Howden were productive grouse moors. There were 14 day shoots a year, bagging more than 400 brace a day. But years of overgrazing and over-burning led to the virtual eradication of both heather and grouse from vast swathes of the moor.

Come the late 1980s, though, and government environment agencies were increasingly aware of their international biodiversity obligations. Britain is where 75 per cent of the world's remaining heather moorland is found.

Consequently, in 1990 a deal was struck between the then Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Farming, the National Trust, Geoff Eyre and the grazing tenant to restore heather to more than three square miles of the moor.

For years, the restoration of heather moorland had been the Holy Grail of upland land managers. Undaunted by the scale of the task, Eyre and his National Trust colleagues rolled up their sleeves and set about reviving the heather moor.

"To begin with it was all trial and error," admits Eyre. "We'd try different techniques to gather heather seed from nearby moors and attempt to sow it on ground which we'd prepared."

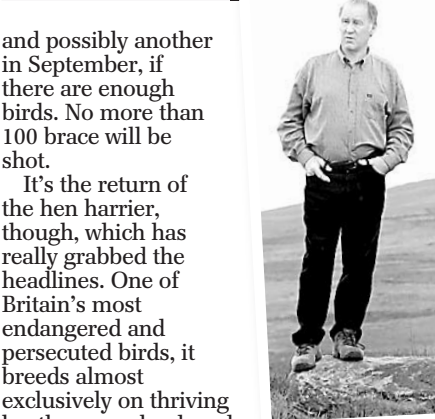
Despite early setbacks, Eyre persevered and eventually cracked the way to bring back heather and a range of other moorland plants.

The impact of Eyre's work was immediate.

"I couldn't believe the explosion of wildlife that began returning," says Eyre. First off the mark were skylarks, quickly followed by lapwings, curlews, golden plovers and mountain hares. Eventually, even grouse returned to the moors. This year, there will be one day of grouse shooting in August



CORBIS, GUZELIAN



Heather sent: shooting tenant Geoff Eyre (left) and Mike Innerdale are overjoyed at the return of the hen harrier (above) and the grouse (below left) to the thriving moorland

and possibly another in September, if there are enough birds. No more than 100 brace will be shot.

It's the return of the hen harrier, though, which has really grabbed the headlines. One of Britain's most endangered and persecuted birds, it breeds almost exclusively on thriving heather moorland, and its unexpected arrival this spring was in many ways a testament to the success of the restoration project.

But when a pair of harriers proceeded to nest on the moors the National Trust met a new set of challenges.

"Hen harriers have long been the subject of controversy and bitter fall-outs between wildlife and shooting interests," explains Mike Innerdale, the National Trust's property manager for the High Peak.

So why the feuding? Simple: young grouse can sometimes find themselves being served up as tasty treats for voracious young hen harriers.

Not good. Almost a decade ago, a study carried out on the Langholm estate in the Scottish borders looked at the impact of hen harriers on grouse numbers. The harrier population was allowed to go unchecked, and the numbers of grouse collapsed, effectively closing the moor as a viable shooting estate.

In an effort to avoid any potential new flash-point, Innerdale was determined to

brokered a peace deal that saw round-the-clock protection for the nesting harriers. The scheme was jointly funded by English Nature, the National Trust, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and, in an historic first, the British Association of Shooting Conservation.

Central to this outbreak of peace is the good news that the restored moorland now supports a huge number of birds and other wildlife on which the harriers can prey and feed their five chicks, thereby taking the pressure off the grouse.

The hen harriers have been seen bringing back prey of voles, meadow pipits and mountain hares to their nest, and very few grouse are believed to have been taken. The bad news is that the peace deal is coming under increasing strain. The male hen harrier recently disappeared, leaving the female to raise the chicks on her own. Could it have been shot or poisoned? Both sides are remaining diplomatically tight-lipped on the subject, but one senses that the current peace is as fragile as a harrier's egg.

Back on the moor, a skylark sings its triumphant song. For the time being, at least, it has something to celebrate.

C'EST LA FOLIE

A communications breakdown means crossed lines with the new breed of Brits abroad



Storms are a darn sight stiffer here in rural France than in Blighty. You really do get the full King Lear: the sky lit up with shafts of magnesium; the thunder exploding with the roar of a bunker-buster aimed straight at the front door. To date, I have lost three modems and four cordless phones. Claude, the electrician with the strong forehead, has expensively installed a *parafoudre* on La Folie's main fuse box, but since the phone line is still unprotected, this is a bit like building a moat around your château and then forgetting to raise the drawbridge.

Today, there are perhaps 30 people crammed into the France Télécom shop in St Juste, all clutching fried Liveboxes like mine. In the corner, I recognise Guillaume from the aeroclub: a delightful mint humbug of a man, with owl glasses and a permanent smile. I'm surprised to hear someone shouting at him. First surprised, then mortified. For the person is shouting in English.

"Nah, nah, don't give me that." A wiry little man, as wired as a Jack Russell, is yapping at Guillaume's ankles. "Get out of my face. No, no, no!" He actually stamps his foot, which is something I thought people only did in fairy stories. Unfortunately, a foot-stamping loses some authority when conducted in open sandals.

"I just say," Guillaume murmurs in broken English, still smiling, "that you must telephone for number before you come here."

"Well, I'm not dealing with you, am I? I'm dealing with 'im." The Jack Russell jabs his finger at the man behind the desk, who sighs and announces in French: "If anyone here speaks English, would they mind explaining to this gentleman that he must ring the technicians on

3900 to get a docket number before we can replace his Livebox?"

I feel myself shrinking. I am already six inches shorter than I was when I entered the shop, and getting smaller all the time.

"Non, non," snaps Jack Russell, stamping his sandal once more. "Nous parlez française. Et nous voudrais service."

My heart sinks, for I recognise this man. I have seen his type often enough in London: the person who will complain in a restaurant "on principle", even though it may spoil the evening of everyone he's with. And then, to my relief, a huge grizzly bear of a man calls out, in an accent that is two parts German to one part American: "You've got to phone, man. Otherwise they're not doing nothing. And it takes minimum five hours."

"It's all right," yaps JR, who has been handed a cordless phone by the man behind the desk. "I'm using their phone to make the call. It's at their expense." He looks exultant.

I have often heard local people observing that the type of Brits who are moving to France has begun to change; that a new breed of immigrant is emerging. "Have you noticed it?" they ask. I have. But I don't like to say so, because there's no way for me to say it without becoming the kind of snooty nimby who somehow thinks I'm less awful than the rest.

What I will say is this: when I see English people going into shops in France, and asserting their place in the queue with elbows and insults, and shouting at shop assistants, and talking amongst themselves about the French as if they cannot understand them, then I feel no sense of kinship with these abrasive ambassadors for England's much-vaunted values of tolerance and politeness.

No, I feel far more at one with those gentle local people who are not accustomed to shouting to make themselves heard, or to making a scene in order that others may have a due sense of their importance. And I wish that the likes of Jack Russell could see that everyone here – Guillaume, the man behind the desk, French people generally – is already on his side, at least until he begins to fight.

■ 'C'est La Folie' by Michael Wright is available for just £11.99, plus £1.25 p&p, from Telegraph Books (0870 155 7222).

■ la.folie@tiscali.fr

LOVEBIRDS

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■ You can follow the progress of the five harrier chicks in the Peak District in an online diary at www.nationaltrust.org.uk.

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