

## **DEATH OF BOWLAND BETH: Police prove that rare bird of prey bled to death after illegal shooting**

***Bowland Beth*, a first year female Hen harrier has been shot and recovered from a Yorkshire grouse moor.**

**I visited The Forest of Bowland in Lancashire towards the end of May in 2012. Bowland had once been the stronghold of breeding Hen harriers in England. In the late 1980s and early 1990s there had been 20+ pairs. Then there'd been a decline which was reversed from 2003 to 2008 followed by a severe decline to none in 2012.**

**I was told that at the moment the outlook for Hen harriers in England was dire. Perhaps this was going to be the year when Bowland would lose its breeders, they were down to single pair and that was in the north of England. Maybe I would be lucky and see *Bowland Beth* – named after the character *Bet Lynch* in the TV soap opera *Coronation Street*. She was a female fledged at Bowland in 2011 and she had been fitted with a satellite transmitter. Satellite tracking has revolutionised our knowledge of the Hen harriers comings and goings. From them it may be possible to evolve a strategy to protect harriers. I'd already seen the video recording made at that nest and I knew she was the most precocious of the four chicks, the first to fledge.**

**I was shown a print out from the satellite tracking *Beth's* journeys. On 23<sup>rd</sup> July last year she left The Forest of Bowland and flew to the Yorkshire Dales spending the autumn and early part of the winter on a grouse moor Between Grassington and Pateley Bridge. Did she have some ancestral map in her brain that enabled her pin point the best foraging areas but also the best places to roost? She returned to Bowland on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2012. In mid-March she again headed back to the grouse moors in Yorkshire before returning to Bowland. In April she returned to the grouse moors in Yorkshire and to my amazement, within the next ten days, she travelled 450 kilometres to a point just north of Inverness. What racial memory pulled her in that direction, were her ancestral ties linked to the Orkneys? Anyway two days later she was back in Bowland. I marvelled at the mobility of this fine bird. I was told that RSPB staff had seen her 'skydancing' and ripping up bits of heather so it looked like she is about to breed if she can find a mate.**

**She had no luck finding a mate, so on 1<sup>st</sup> May she left Bowland heading for Drumnadrochit, passed through Forsinard in the flow country – that would**

have been a good place to stay - and reached Thurso on 8<sup>th</sup> May. An epic journey of 510 kms.

Over the next twelve days she wended her way back south again and was in the Grampian mountains by 20<sup>th</sup> May. What an adventurous, feisty lady she was and no sign of a mate yet.

I had endless discussions with conservationists and a grouse moor owner about what was being done to save the Hen harrier from extinction in England. As long ago as 2006 The Environment Council set up a *Hen Harrier Stakeholders Committee* to try and resolve the conflict between the conservationists and the owners of the grouse moors. At the moment there isn't any conflict because there aren't any Hen harriers on grouse moors in England

If Hen harriers were ever allowed to breed undisturbed and numbers increased sufficiently a scheme has been discussed in which a quota of surplus Hen harrier chicks would be translocated from grouse moors, reared artificially and then re-located back to their original sites in the autumn. This has the potential to allow for Hen harriers and driven grouse shooting to exist side-by-side. At the moment the status of the Hen harrier as a breeding bird in England hangs by a thread and is threatened by extinction. The government have now made a commitment that there will be no extinction of English wildlife by 2020. If they act immediately the Hen harrier can be saved as a breeding bird in England.

Unbeknown to me as I left to catch my train home, *Bowland Beth* was homing in on the Forest of Bowland. When I'd last heard of her she was in the Grampian Mountains. Now she was back in Bowland and quite close to the nest site where she fledged in 2011. I missed her by about 5 hours.

She stayed at Bowland for a couple of days and then on 25<sup>th</sup> May headed north-east using the prevailing wind to settle on the grouse moors around Pateley Bridge. This is where she had spent her last autumn and winter. It seemed as though she had found a good billet for the summer. Her immediate future was secure.

When I got back there was a message telling me that on June 3<sup>rd</sup> *Beth* was still near Pateley Bridge and letting me know that she was fine.

Another fix on 11<sup>th</sup> June showed that *Beth* had contracted her foraging range to the grouse moors around Nidderdale and Colsterdale. This was probably due to several days of prolonged rain. It was one of the wettest

**Junes in living memory. Heavy cloud cover meant that for several days there was no accurate fix on her. On about 14<sup>th</sup> June I was becoming concerned for her. Maybe the transmitter had failed. The manufacturers were contacted and asked whether the last fixes were reliable. I now felt sure that something had happened to *Beth* sometime between 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> June. *Beth's* approximate position on a map was known. The landowner was contacted. He couldn't have been more co-operative and arranged for the head keeper to help in the search. Using a hand-held scanner *Beth* was located at 11 am on 5<sup>th</sup> July. She was lying face down in a patch of heather and blueberry. The satellite tag was plainly visible. A post-mortem showed that she had been shot. A pellet had broken her leg and nicked the femoral artery. Tests showed really good traces of lead embedded in the bone. *Beth* probably would have been able to fly a few miles before she bled out and collapsed onto the grouse moor where she was found.**

***Bowland Beth* was a beautiful bird, an amazing bird. Her story is remarkable. We should be celebrating her life now and her becoming a parent and tracking her sons and daughters.**

**We will probably never know what happened. Perhaps this fearless, naive bird went a wing beat too far and had to run the gauntlet to regain the grouse moor which she knew as home. We grieve that, illegally, she was cut down in the prime of life. I hope she has not died in vain.**

**David Cobham  
Author, Filmmaker**

