Dartmoor Delivery Plan for Ring Ouzel

Description and Importance of the Species
Ring ouzels (*Turdus torquatus*) are similar to the more familiar blackbird, but have a distinctive white 'bib' and silvery fringes to their feathers. As with many bird species, the markings are more obvious in the males than females. They are summer visitors to the UK, spending the winter in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco and returning to the UK from March to October.

They only breed in upland landscapes, generally occupying steep slopes, often with crags or tors, and cover of shrubs like heather or bilberry. However, they also need grazed, species-rich grassland within 500m of their nest sites to find invertebrate food for their young.

Ring ouzels are on the Birds of Conservation Red List, following a national decline of over 50% in 25 years and are a national Biodiversity Strategy priority species. Whilst the main breeding populations occur in Scotland, north Wales and northern England they maintain a small population on Dartmoor, which is now the only population in southern England. Historically they have bred on nearby Exmoor.

Ring ouzel male, copyright Andy Hay, rspb-images.com

Current Status on Dartmoor

Dartmoor's population of ring ouzels is highly vulnerable and at risk of local extinction. A survey in 2006 found numbers had approximately halved since the late 1970s to 10-15 pairs, and detailed survey work since 2010 has found a very small population of around 11 pairs; with a further drop to just seven confirmed pairs in 2013. Even if the occasional pair has been missed in these surveys, the trend is still of concern. The birds can only occupy particular sites where the topography and vegetation are suitable, but they are not highly site faithful and there is evidence of abandonment of breeding sites from as recently as 2012.

Current factors affecting the Species on Dartmoor

1. Habitat quality is paramount to the survival of Dartmoor's ring ouzels, not only in providing the right conditions for breeding, but in protecting the birds from predators and disturbance and building resilience in a changing climate. Current detailed studies on Dartmoor have shown that predation is the most significant factor influencing breeding success, although it is variable between years. Whilst some predation is always to be expected, factors such as suboptimal habitat quality and disturbance (from activities such as dog walking, mountain biking and geocaching) can increase the risk of predation.

2. The amount of vegetation cover at and around nest sites is vital in concealing the birds and their movements. The challenge comes in providing sufficient cover for nesting, while maintaining grazed species-rich grassland for the birds to forage for earthworms and other invertebrates. After mid summer, the ring ouzel's diet includes an increasing amount of berries from plants such as bilberry, where this is available. High browsing levels on some parts of the north moor are still restricting vegetation at nest sites and suppressing bilberry growth, reducing the abundance of berries.

3. There are potentially other factors impacting on Dartmoor's ring ouzels; climate modelling predicts that the breeding distribution of ring ouzels will shift northwards over the course of the century; and as a migrant, there are other challenges on migration and over winter. Research is underway in Scotland to identify the relative significance of threats throughout its lifecycle.

4. In the meantime, by providing sufficient suitable habitat and maximising the breeding success of Dartmoor's ring ouzels, we can give the species the best chance of remaining one of the National Park's most iconic species.

Current Initiatives on Dartmoor

1. An intensive monitoring programme has been undertaken between 2010 and 2013, implemented by the RSPB with funding from Natural England, SITA Trust, DNPA, Devon Birds and the MOD and supported by volunteers from the Dartmoor Study Group and Devon Birds. This intensive programme of work aims to locate nesting pairs and assess breeding success; document details of habitat use, record observations of disturbance and predation, and recommend conservation actions.

2. Known breeding areas are mapped and are excluded from access by recreational events during the nesting season, including the Ten Tors event. The maps are updated periodically when new information becomes available.

Targets

1. Increase breeding success to a level where 60% of observed nests are successful by 2020, and 65% by 2025.

2. To achieve a breeding population to approximately 10 pairs by 2020 and increase to 12 pairs by 2025.

Delivery and Monitoring

Habitat management and grazing levels - liaison and site meetings with Natural England, Commoners and the MOD to agree actions to enhance habitat condition at known (and historic) nesting sites. Habitat management should be in place at all nesting locations by 2016, to ensure sufficient cover at nest sites and maintenance of high quality forage grasslands close by.

Ensure that events notified to DNPA during the breeding season, such as Ten Tors, are designed to minimise disturbance to nesting ring ouzels, in particular by avoiding tors used regularly for nesting – annual liaison between event organisers and DNPA.

Ensure information for moorland users is up to date, site specific where necessary, and reflecting the sensitivities of the species to help reduce disturbance from recreational activities – updates as necessary to DNPA website and other relevant information.

Monitor the population annually at sites where conservation action is in place, and monitor the whole population in detail approximately every three years, to test the effectiveness of conservation measures for the species – funding is needed to support this action.

Lower intensity annual monitoring should be conducted as far as possible to assess site occupation, potentially involving input from Devon Birds, the Dartmoor Study Group and RSPB.

	Lead	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Habitat management for nest cover and forage grasslands	**NE/RSPB/DNPA**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**
Annual monitoring of the population	**RSPB with partners**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**
Detailed monitoring of the population, including breeding success	**RSPB with partners**				**x**	
Reducing disturbance through managing recreational activities, military activity and events	**DNPA/MOD**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**	**x**