

Skydancers given wings

06/04/2011

The Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) a grant of over £300,000 to help secure the future of the hen harrier as a breeding bird in England.

This grant will help fund Skydancers, an exciting and ambitious four-year project aimed at protecting and conserving nesting hen harriers in the English uplands. Skydancers differs from other bird of prey protection projects as it will not only deliver direct conservation work but also an innovative programme of community activities on an unprecedented scale.

An important part of Northern England's upland heritage, hen harriers are graceful birds of prey, best known for their aerobatic spring courtship displays, known as skydancing, and spectacular mid-air food passes.

Sadly, this spectacle is all too rare a sight in the English uplands owing to the ongoing illegal killing and disturbance of hen harriers.

Ivor Crowther, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in the North East, said: "We are delighted to be able to support this project which will see these fascinating and rare birds put back on the map. Our natural heritage is something we should be very proud of and do our best to look after for the future and this project does exactly that."

A recent report the - **Hen Harrier Framework** - suggests that there is enough habitat for over 300 pairs in England, yet last year there were only seven successful nesting attempts. The majority of these were on the United Utilities estate in the Forest of Bowland, in Lancashire, which remains this bird's only English stronghold.

Beginning in the autumn, Skydancers will work with volunteers across existing breeding sites in Bowland, Cumbria and Northumberland to protect and monitor any nests. A Skydancer Engagement Officer will work with RSPB staff and partners to develop and deliver a comprehensive programme of events and activities in these areas, aimed at enthusing and educating school children and local people about these remarkable upland birds.

The project will also enable the RSPB to listen to the views of local stakeholders such as land managers and work with them to enable a greater understanding of issues surrounding hen harriers, with a view to developing better ways to conserve them in the future.

Amanda Miller, the RSPB's Conservation Manager for Northern England, says: "It is fantastic that the Heritage Lottery Fund has stepped up for nature and given us the opportunity to build a greater awareness of this magnificent bird of prey and our wonderful British uplands.

"We are really looking forward to forging strong new partnerships with local stakeholders to help conserve Northern England's hen harrier population, as well as strengthen our relationships with

our existing partners such as United Utilities and the Forestry Commission.”

Notes to editors

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported more than 30,000 projects allocating £4.5billion across the UK.

Further information

Chris Collett, RSPB Regional Communications Manager on 0191 233 4317 or 07885 834 889.