Lucky lottery win for rare black grouse

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However to improve their future prospects during severe weather conditions, this iconic species has been thrown a life-line by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), which has awarded the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust a £32,100 grant to help fund a two-year ‘Woodlands for Black Grouse’ project in northern England.

In winter, black grouse depend on heather to survive but when this is buried under snow, the buds and berries of trees and bushes provide a critical emergency food source. However, the severe winter of 2009/2010 highlighted the dependence of black grouse on woodland cover during these freezing conditions as the number of birds halved in areas where woodland was absent. In contrast, in areas with woodland cover the birds showed better rates of survival.

Fran Atterton, the Black Grouse Project Officer with the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, said: "Black grouse require only small pockets of scrub type woodland ideally planted in sheltered locations along the moorland fringe. Species favoured by black grouse include birch, hawthorn, eared willow, rowan and alder, which when planted at low density will create open scrub woodland providing food and shelter during periods of deep snow cover."

Populations of black grouse in England have undergone dramatic declines in both numbers and range over the past 100 years, and are now confined to the uplands of Northern England within the counties of Durham, Northumberland, Cumbria and North Yorkshire. Conservation efforts here have seen numbers increase from 773 males in 1997 to a peak of 1,200 males in 2007, but the population has since declined through weather induced poor breeding years in 2007 and 2008, and high over-winter losses in 2009/2010. In spring 2010, the English population had suffered a catastrophic decline to only 500 males.

Fran Atterton explains how this Heritage Lottery Funding will help in the battle to save the black grouse population in northern England: “The impact of the severe winter in 2009/2010 highlighted the urgent need to provide pockets of native woodland to provide an emergency food source during severe winter weather. Despite considerable woodland planting across the region over the past 15 years or so, woodland is still absent from many key areas. The project will therefore target these areas to encourage the creation of pockets of woodland through conservation advice and an educational programme which will involve local communities and volunteers as well as advising on grants for woodland planting schemes.”

Ivor Crowther, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in the North East, said: “This project has so many valuable outcomes, raising public awareness of this special breed and improving their current habitat to name just two. Getting local people involved with projects like these is key to HLF and ‘Woodlands for Black Grouse’ demonstrates this perfectly. Landowners, farmers, volunteers and students will all have the chance to take part and help vastly improve the surroundings for the black grouse and ensure their survival in the future.”

Notes to editors

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust is an independent wildlife conservation charity which carries out scientific research into Britain’s game and wildlife. We advise farmers and landowners on improving wildlife habitats and we lobby for agricultural and conservation policies based on science. We employ 14 post-doctoral scientists and 50 other research staff with expertise in areas such as birds, insects, mammals, farming, fish and statistics. We undertake our

own research as well as projects funded by contract and grant-aid from Government and private bodies. The Trust is also responsible for a number of Government Biodiversity Action Plan species and is lead partner for grey partridge and joint lead partner for brown hare and black grouse.

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 over £4.5 billion across the UK, including more than 1,800 projects totalling over £214 million in the North East.

Have your say: HLF's three-month consultation **Shaping the future – for heritage**, for everyone is now live on our website and all views will help shape HLF's strategy from 2013 to 2019. This is people's chance to tell us what they think we should continue to do and what we should do differently. To respond to the consultation and to video until 26 April 2011.

Further information

Morag Walker, Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust Head of Media on 01425 652 381 (direct 01425 651 000) or 07736 124 097. www.gwct.org.uk

For more information about black grouse conservation, woodland planting schemes, or future black grouse events contact:

Fran Atterton, Black Grouse Project Officer at Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust on 01833 622 208 or fatterton@gwct.org.uk.