

The Hen Harrier Programme in north Kerry and west Limerick

David Trant, Teagasc, Listowel

The next CAP will almost certainly include more environment-related support payments. The Hen Harrier programme, which pays farmers partly on the basis of its impact on actual bird numbers, may be a taste of things to come.

The Lyracrompane area lies between Listowel and Castleisland and sits between the Stacks and Glanrudery Mountains. This is an area with over 2,000mm of rainfall and, unsurprisingly, wet soils.

A lot of the land has been planted with trees. Farmers in "Lyre" are resilient and despite the challenging circumstances generally tend to think that "the glass is half full rather than half empty".

The Carmody and Collins farm families have farmed in the area for generations. Mattie and Jason Carmody have a suckler cow herd and dairy farmer Gerard Collins is a Lee Strand Co-op supplier. Both families have some of their land designated as Hen Harrier Special Protected Area (SPA). They are happy to be part of the programme as it compliments their farming systems.

"We farm commercially but there's no question that some areas of the farm which would need major attention to perform well commercially are best suited to environmental uses. These areas are more sustainable financially and from an environmental position in the Hen Harrier Scheme than they would be in farming," says Mattie Carmody.

Birds of prey

Hen harriers are medium-sized birds of prey that are widely distributed throughout Ireland, though in very small numbers. Numbers in the past have been in decline and there is estimated to be only 100 to 150

breeding pairs. The new hen harrier programme is aimed at turning this around.

Adult male hen harriers are pale grey with black wing tips. Females are larger, brown in colour and have a white rump and bars on their tails. During their first year, birds of both sexes look similar to adult females, and the term "ringtail" is often used to refer to birds that could be either juveniles or adult females.

Hen Harriers are rare in Ireland throughout the year, although they are more widely present during autumn and winter. During this time, some birds may leave Ireland to winter abroad but greater numbers will arrive here from overseas.

Typically, hen harriers establish their nests in spring. Males provide nearly all of the food required by both adults as well as the chicks for the first five weeks. In Ireland, the hen harrier's diet is comprised mostly of small birds and mammals. Males returning from a successful hunting trip deliver food to their mates in a spectacular aerial manoeuvre called a "food pass".

As he approaches the nest area, the male calls to the female, who rises to meet him. The male then either drops the food for the female to catch, or delivers it to her directly in mid-air, his mate swinging upside down beneath him to take the prey from his feet into the grasp of her own talons.

The hen harrier project programme for farmers

This five-year programme is targeted specifically at farmers with land designated for the protection of breeding hen harrier pairs in Slieve Beagh, Slieve Bloom Mountains, Slieve Felim to Silvermines Mountains, Slieve Aughty Mountains, Stacks to Mullaghareirk Mountains, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle and Mullaghanish to Musheramore Mountains



Special Protection Areas (SPAs), totaling about 167,117ha.

The programme gives farmers the opportunity to earn extra income by providing environmental goods and services and thereby protect the hen harrier. The programme encourages farmers to protect and enhance high nature value (HNV) farmland and deliver enhanced ecosystem services.

The payments to farmers include a results-based habitat payment which involves an annual "scoring" of the hen harrier fields. A supporting actions payment where farmers are financially reimbursed to varying degrees for capital infrastructure that benefits upland management, and lastly there is a hen harrier payment

David Trant, left, Teagasc, Business and Technology advisor, with Eoin McCarthy, agriculture specialist and project officer for Stacks to Mullaghareirk Mountains, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle (Cork, Kerry, Limerick) and Mullaghanish to Musheramore. \ Valerie O'Sullivan

based on the success of the local hen harrier population, ie are there more nests and more chicks and so forth.

In general, average farmer payments are around €3,000 per annum but the range is very broad. There is no compulsion to join the programme and a farmer is not obliged to remain in the project either – they are effectively paid for what they provide annually.

The future

All farmers who applied on time for the programme have been offered contracts and this summer will see an additional 800 participants, bringing the total number of farmers in the project to 1,600.

The Department of Agriculture Food & Marine has a keen interest in EIPs – (European Innovation Partnerships). The hen harrier programme is a very prominent interactive innovation model and is one of the 23 Irish EIP-Agri operational groups. Other EIPs include the Pearl mussel project, Enable conservation tillage, MOPs, BRIDE, and so on. Future environmental schemes will be based on these type of models.

The marketing of Irish produce will also be looking to production systems and farmers who have major environmental credentials and this may be of major value to farmers based in these HNV lands. This programme endeavours to support farmers and farming communities and will hopefully sustain cultural landscapes and vibrant rural communities.

Reminder

Teagasc would remind any farmer that applied for the programme to check with their local project officer or the Hen Harrier team in Oranmore, Galway, if they have applied for the project and not yet received correspondence.