

Geltsdale blog

Hello!

My name is Andy and this April I started as a residential volunteer at RSPB Geltsdale. Initially, I was monitoring Curlews as part of the Curlew LIFE project, before moving on to working with Hen Harriers, and I have written separate blogs about these roles. This blog is a more general overview of life at Geltsdale and what else I got up to over my 3 and a half months on the reserve.

Geltsdale is a stunning upland reserve in the north west corner of the North Pennines AONB. The reserve largely consists of blanket bog, along with heath, grassland, meadows and woodland. These habitats support a wide range of fantastic wildlife and as soon as I arrived I was struck by how full of life the reserve felt. As I drove down the track past Stagsike Meadows towards the reserve offices for the first time, I was greeted by the electronic whistles of Lapwings and the much-loved call of the Curlew. Soon after, I was shown to the volunteer accommodation at Howgill Cottages by Phil, the reserve's Estate Worker.

On our way, we stopped at a nearby spot where Adders like to thermoregulate, and sure enough there was one basking in the afternoon sun. Howgill is an amazing place to live, surrounded by the beauty of the reserve. On my first evening there, I had a stroll up one of the trails that leads directly from the cottages into the fells, accompanied by the clucking of Red Grouse and the songs of Willow Warblers, Wrens, Skylarks and Meadow Pipits. Later that night, a strange grunting and squeaking alerted me to the presence of a roding Woodcock, and I watched it fly by for a while from my bedroom window.



Outside the volunteer accommodation

One evening, a few days after I arrived, the first Cuckoo's call announced the arrival of Spring. The next morning I was up before sunrise for a Ring Ouzel survey. As I set out in the dark, icy morning with my head torch, the Cuckoo began to call again and I heard for the first time the bubbling drone of the Black Grouse at one of the nearby leks. Sadly I heard no Ring Ouzels on the survey but I had some wonderful views as the sun rose over the reserve. This was just the first of a number of different surveys I had the opportunity to carry out during my stay. The team at Geltsdale were incredibly welcoming and right from the start they involved me in all sorts of work outside of my initial role of Curlew monitoring. Geltsdale is an ideal reserve to build up very varied experience of species monitoring and I learned so much with every passing week.

Accompanying Steve, the Site Manager, on one of his survey plots ensured I was learning from the best. We walked through the area, recording every bird heard and seen, and Steve taught me how to use the BTO species and activity codes for marking them on the map. Highlights included my first distant sighting of a male Black Grouse and a flock of Golden Plovers passing overhead on their way to breeding grounds further north. A week or so later I did my first solo survey on one of Farmland Warden Ian's plots. It was a great way to get my ear in to the birdsong, marking down all



*Red Grouse nest hidden
in heather*

the singing Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs, Wrens, Robins, Blue Tits and Great Tits among others. Jen, the Monitoring Warden, also gave me one of her upland plots, which I surveyed following the Brown & Shepherd methodology. This involved following transect lines through a 1km square area, recording all bird species except the very common Meadow Pipit. I mostly recorded Red Grouse and Skylarks, as well as a pair of breeding Curlews. Although it was tough going at times walking through thick heather, and following the transect lines meant tackling many inclines and declines, it was a great way to spend a day.

I also took part in Woodcock surveys on several occasions. As part of the BTO's national Woodcock Survey, the Geltsdale team and local volunteers were allocated set points to watch for 'roding' Woodcock for a specified time around dusk. Roding is a display put on by the males, who repeatedly fly above their territories while making a unique grunting sound followed by a squeak. During the survey, we recorded each of these flypasts as part of an effort to build a national picture of breeding pair distribution. My first Woodcock survey was quite an experience. My survey point was around a 45-minute walk from my accommodation at Howgill. On the way, Short-eared Owls were hunting in the last of the light and I spotted Stonechats and a singing Whinchat. The survey point was next to an abandoned building which, together with the sounds of Snipe drumming in the fading light, made for a very atmospheric scene. A while passed before I heard the distinctive sound and saw the silhouette of a Woodcock, which continued to fly by every so often for the rest of the survey period. Walking back in the dark, the unexpected barking of invisible Roe Deer made me jump a few times. Back at Howgill, I watched a video I'd taken in the dark to record the Snipe drumming, and was surprised to see my phone had picked up the ghostly shape of a Barn Owl leaving the abandoned building to go hunting. It had flown just metres in front of me but the darkness and its silent flight meant I had been completely unaware of its presence.



Male Stonechat



*View through the scope of lekking Black
Grouse*

Geltsdale is one of the few places in England where you can see breeding Black Grouse. Every morning around dawn, the males gather at traditional 'lekking' sites to compete for breeding rights. A Black Grouse lek must be one of the UK's great natural spectacles, as the males posture at one another, fanning their white tail feathers and making their bubbling call. To get an idea of total numbers, we carried out a Black Grouse count at the various lekking sites. This involved watching the leks through a scope from some distance so as not to disturb the birds, and counting the displaying males. The lek I was watching

had six males, but other sites were into double figures. Sadly, reduction of suitable habitat has meant that leks like these have been lost from most parts of the UK.

The final survey I was involved in at Geltsdale was one of the most exciting. We set out one evening to our assigned survey points and spent the next couple of hours listening for the mechanical churring of the Nightjar. As nocturnal birds, Nightjars are rarely seen, but the churring song of the males is unmistakable. Getting to my survey point involved a tricky walk over an area of brash and boggy pools on the edge of a conifer plantation. It was a warm, still evening and for the first half of the survey the flies around my head were so loud that I doubted I would hear anything else. Luckily they moved off as it started to get dark, only to be replaced by hundreds of midges - I was very glad of my head-net! It was quite some time before the first Nightjar started churring, but eventually the strange sound began somewhere in the darkness, soon followed by another, making all the waiting and midges worthwhile.



Nightjar survey location

One thing I particularly enjoyed during my time at Geltsdale was the opportunity to learn about upland habitat management and restoration. If you stop by the Visitor Centre at Stagsike Cottages, you will notice the leafy Bruthwaite plantation running along the lower slopes of the nearby fells. This scrub woodland was planted from 2004 onwards, and consists of native trees such as Hawthorn, Rowan, Birch, Alder and Willow. Taking a walk through the area really allows you to appreciate its benefits to wildlife, as it is buzzing with birdsong and insects. It also provides good habitat for Black Grouse, who like to shelter among the shrubs and feed on Hawthorn and Rowan berries.

Areas of open woodland would once have covered much of the lower slopes of UK uplands, giving way to scrub and blanket bog higher up. Most of this woodland habitat has now been lost, often as a result of management for grazing. I was surprised to learn that parts of Geltsdale used to make up one of the largest sheep farms in Cumbria. Sheep are highly selective grazers and will nibble choice plants right down to the ground, leaving unpalatable coarse grass to dominate. Sheep numbers have been greatly reduced at Geltsdale in recent decades and the difference this has



Cattle grazing at Geltsdale

made to the diversity of flora is clear to see, with bilberries carpeting the higher slopes and an abundance of wildflowers in the meadows below. Geltsdale is still a working farm but, working together with tenant farmers Ian and Rebecca, the grazing mix has been shifted towards small herds of cattle. Ian and Rebecca are fantastic advocates for wildlife friendly farming. In fact, they were recently [awarded a Farmland Curlew Award](#) for their work in creating suitable habitat for the waders. Cattle graze in a different manner to sheep, non-selectively tearing up the vegetation with their powerful tongues and disturbing the ground with their hoof

prints. This disturbed ground is ideal for seeds to germinate in, often having been transported on the cow's coats or in their dung. You may see cattle roaming among the Bruthwaite woodland, spreading seeds and keeping bracken under control as they shelter under the trees.

A recent example of highly successful habitat restoration at Geltsdale is the 'rewiggling' of Howgill Beck. This was carried out in August and September 2022 and has restored a section of the beck, which was straightened in the 18th Century to create suitable farmland, to its natural state of flowing wetland. The success of the project has been remarkable, even less than one year on. The flowing wetland can hold far more water than the previous straight channel, creating the perfect habitat for waders and the invertebrates they feed on. We had Common Sandpipers and Oystercatchers nesting in the area this year, as well the usual Lapwings, Curlews, Snipe and Redshanks. On several mornings, as I drove past the 'rewiggled' section on the way to the office, I spotted Lapwing, Redshank and Oystercatcher chicks running about just metres from the track, a reminder of how important it is to keep dogs on leads in the breeding season. During an extraordinarily dry June, the wetland area provided a lifeline for these waders, retaining water while rivers and streams elsewhere were all but drying up. Already, it is a rich habitat which looks like it has always been there. Jen championed the project and if you bump into her at the Visitor Centre she will be more than happy to tell you all about it and get out the laminated before and after pictures.



Howgill Beck dry after weeks of no rain. Meanwhile downstream, the 'rewiggled' section retained plenty of water

Up in the fells, there is work going on to restore the areas of blanket bog that cover most of the reserve. Historically, large areas of the UK's blanket bog have been drained by way of cutting drainage channels and burning, often as part of intensive management for grouse shooting. You



Sections of exposed peat

can still see grouse butts dotted across the landscape from when driven grouse shooting was practiced on Geltsdale. Dried out blanket bog results in a landscape dominated by common heather, which has the effect of drying out the ground even more as it sucks up water from the peat below. Peat, consisting mostly of decayed sphagnum moss, is a fantastic carbon store, but when it is dry and exposed it returns this carbon to the atmosphere. Peat can erode by several centimetres per year but will only regenerate at 1mm per year in favourable conditions. Restoration, often done by blocking drainage channels, is therefore a slow process and requires

decades of monitoring. It is important work, as peatlands store several times more carbon than forests in the UK. I loved spending time among Geltsdale's blanket bogs, surrounded by Cloudberry, Crowberry, Bog Asphodel and all sort of mosses, with breeding Golden Plovers whistling in the background.

My time at Geltsdale was as enjoyable as it was varied and fascinating. I felt incredibly lucky to be able to spend my days out in the fells and valleys, with only Short-eared Owls and Stonechats for company, or wandering through the lowland meadows rich in Yellow Rattle, Common Spotted-orchids and Meadowsweet, accompanied by the call of the Curlew. I am so grateful to the staff at Geltsdale for welcoming me as part of the team and really think it must be one of the best RSPB reserves to spend a season at as a residential volunteer.



Sunset over RSPB Geltsdale