

SAVING THE BLACK-NECKED PHEASANT

Excited to discover a tiny remnant of pure black-necks in the far north of Greece, the WPA speak to Emily Damment about how their new conservation project is breaking down barriers

Conservation work is a funny thing. Many of us will be aware that there are groups of dedicated folk working tirelessly behind the scenes to protect, preserve and revive all manner of flora and fauna. But when was the last time we looked up and said, "Hey, you over there with the dishevelled hair and mud up to your armpits, well done for giving up your own time and cleanliness to make life a bit happier for those wading birds"?

One such lot of selfless people belongs to a conservation group called the World Pheasant Association (WPA), whose goal is to conserve galliformes and the habitats they depend on. For those not familiar with the word, galliformes are heavy-bodied ground-feeding birds – those feathered friends that most of us would refer to as game birds. The latest lucky bird to be on the receiving end of the WPA's attentions is the black-

necked pheasant, a close relative to the birds we see today in the UK.

The great-great-grandfather to the pheasants we now shoot for game, they were introduced a long time ago – some say by the Romans, some think the Normans – and were the dominant form in Britain until the 1860-80s. Around this time, breeders and releasers began to work with other species, such as the ring-necked pheasant, which lays more eggs and rears its chicks better than its black-necked cousin.

What is thought to be the last remaining indigenous population of black-necks in Europe resides in the delta of the Greek river Nestos. These little gallies are very important; most of the pheasants we see are bred from hybrid stock and released for shooting, or are descendants of released birds. Their Greek cousins, on the other

hand, are wild and genetically pure, but their numbers have declined sharply over the last 50 years due to habitat loss as agriculture nibbled away at the edges of their forest home.

Despite the fact that any hunting of the species has been prohibited for decades, the black-necked pheasant population is down to around 200 birds; in other words, without the help of the WPA and their partners, black-necks are likely to die out completely. It's easy to write but difficult to comprehend; these birds, just like white rhinos and Bornean orangutans, are on the brink of extinction. Now, there's a scary word that'll make you sit up and polish your reading glasses.

A beautiful friendship

Saving the black-necked pheasant is far from a one-man job. It all began with an organisation called KOMATH, or the Hunting Federation of Macedonia and Thrace, which has been working for the protection of the black-necked pheasants for 15 years.

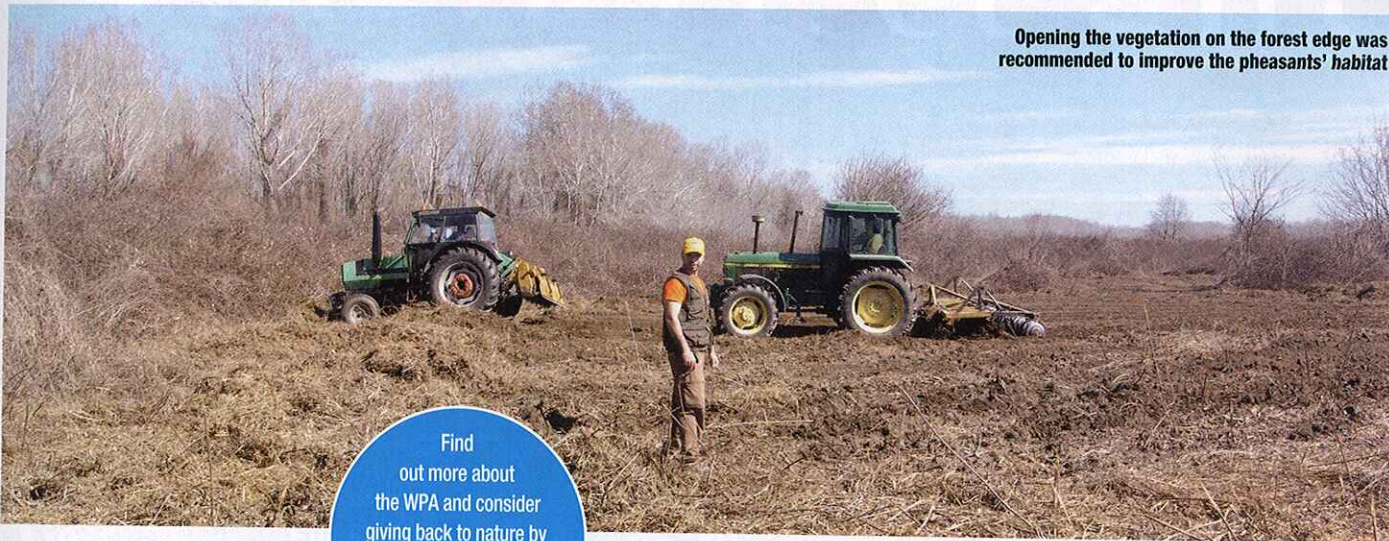
In collaboration with the Forestry Service of Kavala and the Hunting Association of Chrysopouli, KOMATH (made up of hunters who fund the organisation themselves) has been monitoring the population, trying to improve the habitat, and raising awareness of the black-neck's plight with books and scientific articles. This alone is a shining example of how hunters give back to nature and the environment; it's almost like a

'Black-necks are close relatives to the birds we see today – the great-great-grandfathers to the pheasants we shoot for game'

It is estimated that only 100-250 pure black-necked pheasants survive in the wild



PICTURES: CERVIUS CREATIVE



Opening the vegetation on the forest edge was recommended to improve the pheasants' habitat

Find out more about the WPA and consider giving back to nature by donating to the cause at www.pheasant.org.uk/ payments

thank you to Mother Nature for so generously allowing them to enjoy their sporting endeavours in her backyard.

Meanwhile, back in England, the chairman of the WPA, Richard Carden, had heard about the black-necked pheasants in Greece when one of the organisation's French members gave a talk at the WPA annual meeting. Being familiar with the area in question from past history- and birding-related holidays, Richard arranged a meeting with KOMATH, who convinced Richard that the work they were doing was important.

He then approached Roger Draycott of the GWCT who agreed to help evaluate the number of birds in the delta as well as come up with possible ideas for habitat improvement. A collaboration was born as the three organisations came together to draw up specific management plans for the protection and publicity of the lucky old black-necks. A six-year operation was agreed, which is being funded by the WPA and KOMATH, and put into effect with support from the WPA in Britain and France, and the GWCT in Britain.

Those little pheasants have no idea that a joint interest in their future wellbeing has brought together four organisations in three countries.

The bigger picture

It would be easy to get carried away with this inspiring story, and be under the impression that one day soon black-necked pheasants will be roaming the countryside in uncountable numbers, but in reality the aims of the project are currently far more humble.

"The size of the population at the moment is perilously small, at around 200 birds," said Richard. "If we achieve nothing more than to shore-up this position, it will be worthwhile."

"It's too early to say but we're hoping that with the habitat improvement work and careful protection around the edges of this area, which is carried out by skilled KOMATH employees, the number can be slowly increased so that we do actually achieve an increase in population."

There is also a bigger picture to take into account. Contrary to the common perception of Europe as a hunters' paradise, attitudes of the Greek public and government towards hunting are frosty at best.

"It's quite a new idea to the Greeks that shooting and conservation can go hand-in-hand, but we are changing that through this project," says Richard. "It's important to change those attitudes because we need the cooperation of one or two government agencies to get the work done. The forestry service, for example, who manage the woodland in the area we are concentrating on have been uncooperative with our hunter partners until now, but that is changing as they begin to see that here is a hunters' organisation that is working to protect a bird that they can't actually shoot."

"We're getting more cooperation from the agencies that have to give permission for groundwork to be done, and the fact that we are bringing in recognition from outside the country is already making people more aware of the issue. People take it more seriously and are becoming more receptive to the idea that hunters are also capable of doing good work for conservation."

So, simply because a small group of people cared enough about the black-necks' plight to take action, a ripple effect has now been set in motion which has the potential to change an organisation's attitude towards hunting – what better way to illustrate the power of conservation?

The fact that the project has been funded mainly by donations from shooters is a positive that we can be truly proud of. Words can only go so far, but positive actions have the power to truly implement change for the better. ■



Richard Carden, Roger Draycott and the KOMATH chairman are working together