

Saving Greece's ancient gamebird

The Nestos Delta is the last refuge of the black-necked pheasant. The GWCT and WPA have joined the battle to save this subspecies

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Few would imagine you might stumble across an indigenous wild pheasant while on a Greek holiday, but if you were to visit the Nestos Delta

National Park in the north-east of the country you could spot one of the last native black-necked pheasants in existence. During the 19th century, there were several populations across the country but loss of habitat, due largely to the intensification of farming, means black-necked pheasants are now classified as 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List and 'Critically Endangered' on a national level. Twenty years ago it was estimated that there were just 120 of Europe's native pheasants left.

The black-necked pheasant was taken off the Greek quarry list in the 1920s, so it is surprising to some that it was the Hunting Federation of Macedonia & Thrace, known as KOMATH, that came to the birds' rescue. KOMATH employs a network of wardens throughout the region who enforce strict laws around shooting and combat poaching as well as monitoring the black-necked pheasant population. Since 2003, they have been working to conserve the birds through habitat management, highlighting their plight both locally and nationally.

SIX-YEAR PLAN

Though much progress was made, KOMATH wanted to give impetus to the initiative by building partnerships with conservation organisations outside Greece. In 2016, the UK-based World Pheasant Association (WPA) offered support and together with the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) a six-year project was launched. "Bringing respected overseas conservation organisations to the table highlighted the importance of saving the pheasants. Having GWCT director of advisory Roger Draycott at a meeting with the National Forestry Service endorsing our management plan reinforced its credibility," says KOMATH director Kyriakos Skordas. Co-funded by WPA and KOMATH and with Roger Draycott as consultant, the project aimed to increase and stabilise the population in the Nestos Delta, through increased public awareness, better understanding of predation and habitat management.

Local agriculture is extensive and small scale, with a mosaic of crops that suits the black-necked pheasants, so the main focus is on woodland. "When I visited →

An oil painting of a pair of black-necked pheasants by Jonathan Pointer, the bird is now on the IUCN's Red List and described as 'Vulnerable'

the Nestos Delta I was struck by the similarities with UK habitat,” recalls Draycott. “I encouraged the KOMATH team to continue their work of managing areas of scrubby growth for the broods to forage for insects, making gaps in forest canopy and enhancements to the woodland edge.” His recommendations were largely those suggested to land managers at home wanting to increase a wild pheasant population.

“We had good experience of practical conservation,” says Skordas, “but it was nice to have our approach validated and improved upon by Roger’s broader knowledge and more systematic approach.”

Like all ground-nesting birds, black-necked-pheasants are vulnerable to predation. In Nestos Delta, these include feral and wildcat (*Felis silvestris*), beech

“ Shoots can promote diversity structure, which is likely to help ”

marten, golden jackal, badger, wild boar, corvids and gulls. However, it has been easier to persuade the National Park authorities to approve the habitat management measures than to convince them that predator control may be necessary. Control of most predators is prohibited in Greece and wild boar are protected within the park. So KOMATH felt it was vital to understand what impact predation was having on the pheasants. Camera traps, supplied by the WPA and set up to film fake nests, gathered data that suggests the principle predators of eggs and chicks are wild boar, jackal and, most worryingly, wildcat.

KOMATH’s lead scientist on the project, Petros Platis, has been monitoring the



nests. “Feral and wildcats are the pheasants’ worst enemy because they hunt day and night and in trees as well as on the ground, so there is no respite,” he says. “We created dummy nests with pigeon eggs and only 1% lasted the full 25-day incubation period. They are also taking a toll on the young pheasants. One hen bird successfully fledged 10 poults but by autumn all but two had been predated. In the longer term, I fear cats threaten the black-necked pheasants with extinction.”

Top: a fake pheasant nest is filled with pigeon eggs to research predation. Above: clearing rides for pheasants in scrubland. Above, right: about 250 black-necked pheasants remain in Nestos

Skordas added: “The involvement of the WPA and GWCT encouraged us to speak more openly about predation management, but it is a very difficult issue in Greece. Good wildlife management involves making some hard decisions. If you want to save a critically endangered bird like the black-necked pheasant, you have to consider controlling a relatively common species like jackal, wild boar or even cat. Sadly, we have a long way to go to get a dispensation for any protected predators, but thanks to the evidence we have collected we hope to get permission to control wild boar and crows.”

The progress on predation management is a tribute to the good relationship the project leaders have with the park’s forestry service. Through members of the local hunting clubs, they have also built a network of contacts among the farming community. As well as being essential to habitat management, this has helped a campaign to stop sheepdogs being allowed



The WPA’s fake cameras have shown that wildcats pose one of the greatest threats to the pheasants



to roam free during the breeding season, putting young pheasants at risk. Community involvement extends to game wardens and foresters from other regions helping with management measures and every spring students from the forestry school are invited to help with pheasant counts.

Annual counts are done in the early morning in April and rely on the team led by Platis being able to identify the call of the cock bird. There is an unbroken dataset going back to 2003 with counts undertaken even in lockdown. Last year's record of 87 male territories is up 40% since monitoring began in 2003. In the past three years, the number of male territories recorded has been climbing and Platis is confident that, barring disaster, they have stabilised the population at 250 individuals. "Attempts to save critically endangered species can sometimes end in failure but this story is an encouraging example of success and KOMATH deserves the credit," says Draycott. "I believe it's one of the best science-led hunting organisations in Europe."

The six-year collaborative project officially ends this year and KOMATH is looking for support to extend it. By continuing to engage with the local community and relevant government agencies and by raising awareness of the project more widely, Skordas hopes the pheasants will become one of the birds for which the National Park is designated an EU Natura 2000 site. "When they did the survey for Natura 2000 they made a mistake in not listing the black-necked pheasant as it would have unlocked big EU conservation funding," he says. Another possible source of financial support is the Greek Department for the

Environment. "The project currently relies on the voluntary sector. We would like to see the Government contribute to financing the management and provide better protection of the habitat. I hope our connections with WPA and GWCT will help this special and rare native bird gain the recognition it deserves."

TRANSLOCATION

The next steps will include trying to build resilience into the population by attempting to establish colonies elsewhere. This is important as suitable habitat in the Nestos Delta is limited and the pheasants' territory could experience catastrophic flooding were nearby mountain dams forced to open. One of the places for potential translocation is an area further east near the Bulgarian border, where old hunters remember seeing wild pheasants and camera traps have recently captured the birds on film. "Genetic analysis will prove if it is same subspecies," says Platis, who hopes to raise funds to DNA test feathers.

If the Nestos Delta population can be kept at around 250, it is less at risk of collapse but this is an insufficient number to allow translocations. Evidence from the camera traps suggests the greatest limiting factor on population growth in Nestos is predation, so the biggest threat to the long-term survival of the subspecies may end up being the reluctance of policy makers to grant licences for the control of wildcats. Skordas and Platis hope that footage of predation events might spark a meeting with the environment minister.

Another priority is keeping the gene pool of the Nestos Delta pheasants intact

BLACKNECKS IN BRITAIN

Records of pheasants in Greece go back to antiquity, featuring in the work of Aristophanes and Aristotle. Given Macedonia was a stronghold for the black-necked, it's easy to imagine Alexander the Great dining on them.

The Roman Cookery of Apicius, written in the late fourth century AD, contains a recipe for seasoned pheasant dumplings, clearly a delicacy at the time, and it's likely the Romans brought the pheasant to British shores. Until the second half of the 19th century, black-necked pheasants would have been the only subspecies going into the bag in Britain.

When pheasant releasing took off from 1860 onwards, gamekeepers began to favour other subspecies, such as the Chinese ring-necked, which proved more productive; it is by far the most common gamebird in the UK today. However, the cultural memory of the black-necked remains. President Emeritus and founder of the

WPA Keith Howman writes,

"Those who like me began their shooting careers 75 years ago will doubtless recall the game pheasant frequently being referred to as 'the old English blackneck'. In fact, it was no more English than I am and I'm a good Scot. Sadly, when other subspecies began to be introduced they crossbred easily so that today it is very doubtful if any pure black-necked pheasants remain in the UK."

as these truly wild birds have an extraordinary built-in survival instinct. Pheasant releasing is prohibited within 200km of the National Park, but dilution of the genetics could come from hybrid birds already living on farms in the region. Over the next few months, the team is planning visits to local farmers to see if they have hybrid pheasants among their poultry as they may not realise the risk this poses to the wild population.

"Besides KOMATH the other heroes of the story are the birds themselves," insists Draycott. "Having studied pheasants at home for many years it was lovely to see an original subspecies in its native land. Their survival instinct is incredible; anyone who is under the impression that pheasants are stupid birds should see a black-necked in its natural habitat." ■

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