



SOUTH WEST PEAK
LANDSCAPE AT A CROSSROADS



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**SOUTH WEST PEAK
LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP**

FINAL PROJECT REPORT

Name of Project	Working for Waders
Delivery Partner	RSPB
Name of Person Completing Report	Natalie Le Brun
Start Date of Project	2017
End Date of Project	December 2021
Date of Report	December 2021



Curlew © RSPB images

Aims and Objectives of the Project

This project aimed to bring together a programme of work to support the recovery of breeding wader populations in the South West Peak. Populations of lapwing, curlew and snipe have declined alarmingly over the last 30 years, and despite several years of effort we needed to do more to reverse these declines. This project used a refreshed approach, integrating applied PhD research, evidence-based interventions, biodiversity monitoring, social science, ecosystem services and innovation. This approach informed how we can work at a landscape-scale to secure and enable the recovery of populations of curlew, lapwing and snipe in the South West Peak.

Important populations of breeding waders persist in the South West Peak, though populations of lapwing, curlew and snipe have all declined by more than 75% since 1985. Several sites are designated as SSSIs and SPAs on the basis of wader populations. Lapwing and curlew are UK priority species, snipe is a notifiable species for the Leek Moors SSSI, whilst it has recently been estimated that the UK holds an estimated 25% of the global population of curlew.

The Working for Waders approach aimed to link the evidence/research programme (PhD) with action at the individual farm level, applied at a landscape scale; leading to a programme of habitat interventions, monitoring of breeding birds and collection of data at the farm level. Project sites would be in identified priority areas for breeding waders, where there were strong wader population requiring interventions, and/or significant opportunities to improve habitats and attract larger breeding wader populations.

A key element of the approach was to carry out targeted wader plans for farmers within these priority areas. These were also used to identify the need for further habitat interventions on individual farms. On-going support to individual farmers will continue through local volunteer Wader Wardens, with the Future Farmscapes project Farm Link Workers providing a co-ordinating role. A social science element to the PhD research helped us to understand the perceptions of the farming community to breeding wader conservation.

Project Delivery

The project was delivered over a 5-year period led by RSPB staff, working closely with external partner organisations, notably Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, and a PhD student based at the University of Sheffield. The project used a combination of applied research at a strategic landscape scale; production of user-friendly Wader Plans; support from two Farm Link Workers; training and support via volunteer Wader Wardens; and direct habitat management, to deliver its objectives.

Staff resource

A project officer was not employed to deliver this project, instead delivery was shared between RSPB staff:

- Senior Conservation Officer – coordinating/delivering the project
- Area Manager – strategic support/line management and project exec
- Senior Administrator – admin support/volunteer management support
- Fundraiser – support identifying/securing funds
- Principle Conservation Scientist – PhD supervision

Budget resource

The initial planned project budget for Working for Waders was £175,307 which was subdivided as follows, showing planned and actual costs incurred against each NLHF budget heading:

NLHF budget heading	Example items	Intended cost	Actual cost
Repair and conservation work	Habitat interventions	£15,000	£11,566

Equipment and materials	Survey & monitoring equipment	£13,158	£7,127
Training for volunteers		£300	£38
Travel for staff		£8,264	£4,275
Travel and expenses for volunteers		£10,000	£9,508
Other costs (activity)	PhD Research (stipend, fees and associated costs) and farm plans	£108,600	£115,562
Recruitment		£65	£0
Evaluation	Questionnaires of farmers	£280	£562
Full cost recovery		£19,640	£14,973
TOTAL		£175,307	£163,610

In addition, the project received non-cash contributions of £90,109 comprising RSPB and SWT staff time, University of Sheffield supervisory staff time, training for the PhD student and recruitment costs; considerable time input was received from public sector staff at Natural England and Peak District National Park Authority; plus volunteer time valued at £27,068.

The project was funded by the grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, plus match funding from the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund, a Boost for Biodiversity grant from Severn Trent Water and cash contributions from RSPB and SWT.

Partnership working – team involvement, steering group etc

Working in partnership was key to the successful delivery of this project, a steering group was set up and met quarterly to guide the project delivery. Partner roles were as follows:

- University of Sheffield hosted the PhD student and her supervisor.
- Staffordshire Wildlife Trust led on delivery of wader plans, support with data management, lead for SWP Farmers Facilitation Fund (facilitation/delivery of countryside stewardship priorities alongside local farmers).
- Natural England provided support for production of wader plans and habitat interventions.
- PDNPA: The SWPLP Farm Link Workers provided contacts with landowners and contractors, SWPLP programme manager and programme administrator provided guidance and support; ecological support was given by the PDNPA ecologist.

Volunteers

- Wader wardens: 23 wader wardens (at peak) monitoring sites across the target area. Each wader warden was assigned to a specific farm.

Consultants and contractors

Local contractors were employed to deliver habitat interventions, mostly in the form of creating new scrapes to improve habitats for wader feeding, these were:

- Tim Robinson – habitat management supervisor
- Anthony Flowers – habitat restoration works
- David Shaw – habitat restoration works
- George Critchlow – habitat restoration works

Community involvement

Community involvement in the project centred on recruiting, training and supporting volunteers, (many from the programme area) to become wader wardens. They were paired up with a nearby farm, introduced by one of the Farm Link Workers and they then maintained contact with the farm owner to provide support for them via surveying waders on their land. 50 landowners were engaged as staff met them and surveyed their landholdings to produce wader plans, many of the resultant plans were hand delivered by one of the farm Link Workers and discussed with the landowner.

What Has (and has not) Been Achieved

Outputs

	Intended Output	Delivered Output
1	50 wader plans	50 wader plans
2	Applied PhD thesis produced and shared	Research completed/thesis submitted and approved
3	20 Wader wardens recruited and trained	23 volunteers recruited and trained
4	Improved wader habitat across the three priority areas	Habitat intervention works completed on 11 sites and 50 wader plans with recommendations across the project area – see appended map
5	50 landowners engaged with to enhance understanding and attitude	Farmer questionnaire about wader plans produced and disseminated, summary report produced – see appendix 1
6	Feasibility study for end use of soft rush	Feasibility study not commissioned as unable to attract funding for this, rush management guidance note for practitioners produced instead

Key Outputs

The wader plans and wader wardens have been essential to the delivery of this project. Having successfully recruited 23 volunteer wader wardens (3 more than the target) we have not only been able to collect valuable data relating to the distribution of waders in the South West Peak, but also engaged the local community and empowered them to act for nature. This will form a key part of our legacy planning, as we continue to develop our network of wader warden volunteers and gain valuable insight into the distribution, and hopefully productivity, of curlew, lapwing, and snipe. The wader plans, alongside the volunteers, have also given us the opportunity to engage local farmers/landowners, thus highlighting the issues around wader conservation in upland habitats. This too will form part of the legacy of this project, as we review opportunities to deliver more habitat intervention works on farms with plans.

Two papers were peer-reviewed and published as a result of the PhD research, these can be found here:

[Upland rush management advocated by agri-environment schemes increases predation of artificial wader nests - Kelly - 2021 - Animal Conservation - Wiley Online Library](#)

The full PhD thesis can be found here:

[Wading birds in the UK uplands: threats and conservation interventions - White Rose eTheses Online](https://www.white-rose.ac.uk/e-theses/)

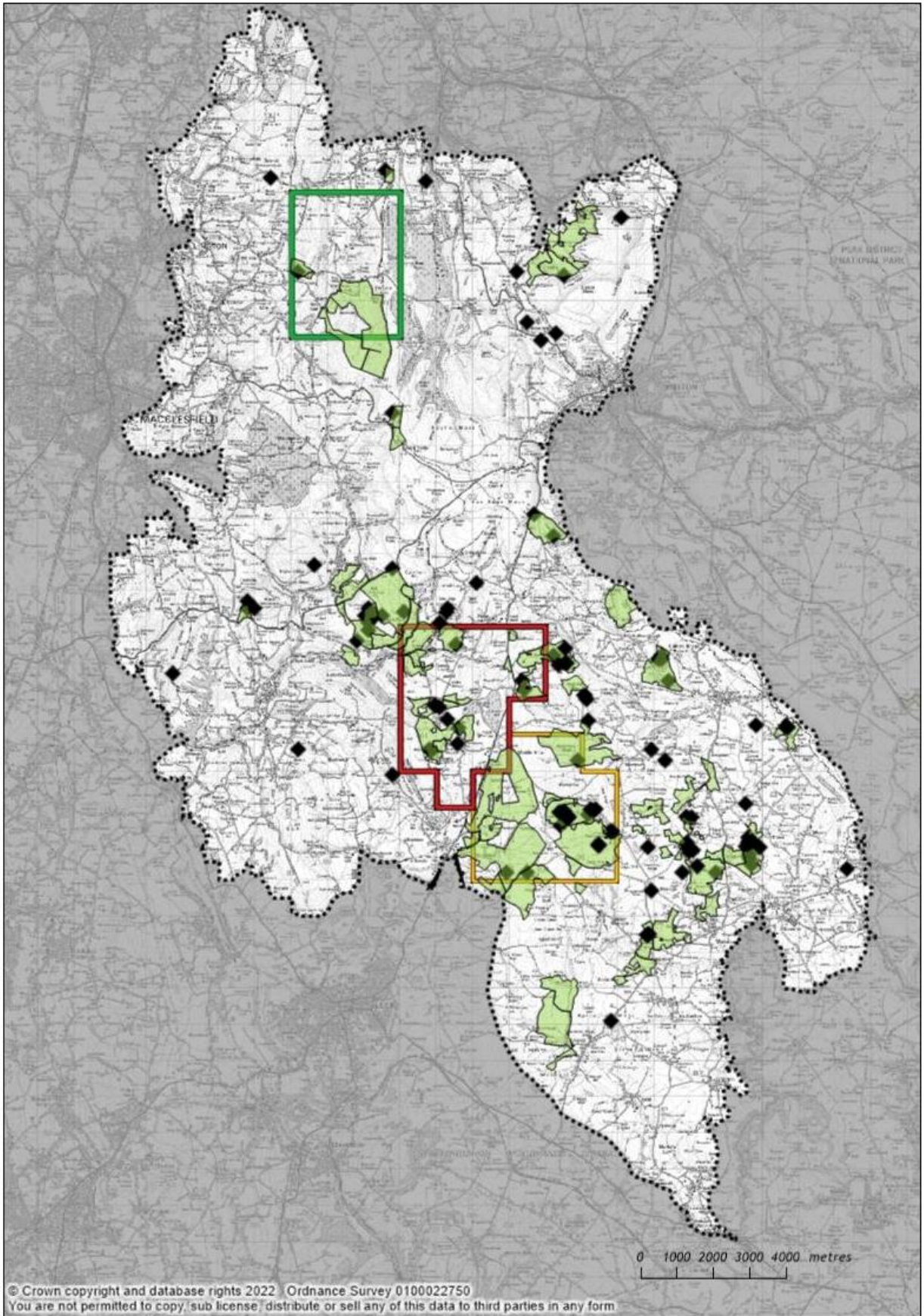
Outcomes

	Intended Outcome	Delivered Outcome
1	Improved understanding and relationship between different communities	Wader wardens and farmers have both been engaged & empowered
2	Habitats are more diverse and more resilient	Habitat interventions have been delivered and the PhD research provides further information on the impacts of land management on invertebrate availability and nesting/foraging habitat
3	Populations of key species are supported and more resilient	Ongoing monitoring is required and data analysis needs to be completed to identify future opportunities
4	The landscape is managed for multiple benefits	More farmland is managed for breeding waders, farmers more aware of methods to improve the landscape, and variety of ecosystem services (e.g., water, carbon, cultural heritage) delivered through restoration works
5	People have a stronger sense of place, they are engaging with landscape, have better experiences, and have gained respect and understanding	Local community representatives have been recruited as wader wardens, and collaboration with local groups such as Buxton Biodiversity
6	People have gained skills and knowledge about the landscape	23 wader warden volunteers recruited, and training delivered
7	People value the environment and understand the benefits it provides	Farmers and wader warden volunteers engaged and empowered to act for nature
8	The existing mosaic of natural heritage is maintained and enhanced.	Wader plans have been produced which advise on management for waders, whilst considering and complementing advice given by the LPS for other target grassland species such as fungi.

Key Outcomes

Engaging and empowering the local community, both through volunteer opportunities (wader wardens) and land management/habitat restoration works on the farms. This work has given the local community a sense of ownership and place, better understanding the plight of curlew locally, and how important monitoring and land management are to their recovery in the South West Peak.

See over for a map of project area showing distribution of wader plans (green blocks) and PhD study sites (black diamonds) and their relationship to the planned three focal areas.



Map of Working for Waders project activity areas

What Made The Difference

The Farm Link Workers were essential to the successful delivery of this project. Their existing relationships within the local community enabled us to identify 50 farms to work with, and 15 which were willing and keen to undertake habitat restoration works. Without their input and support we would have likely struggled to form the connections, and truly understand the barriers and opportunities present within the local area.

Input from Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, particularly Jonathan Groom, the monitoring officer, was invaluable. His knowledge of the local area, as well as local habitat and species expertise, enabled us to support development and delivery of 50 wader plans. He was also able to support us with wader warden training events, which the volunteers showed great appreciation for.

Input from specialists at Natural England and Peak District National Park Authority, who have been working with landowners in the South West Peak for some 20 years, was invaluable in providing in-depth knowledge of the area, the waders and the people.

The data collected by the wader warden volunteers, especially under pressure post covid19 lockdown, will be invaluable in determining the distribution of waders, gaps in knowledge, and potentially the success of our restoration works on farms. With over 20 volunteers we were able to survey large areas of the South West Peak, and this data will be analysed over the coming months to inform future legacy planning.

Challenges

- Securing permissions – this was particularly challenging, as consent was required to deliver restoration works from the RPA, and involved input from the landowners. This is a very time-consuming process, both in terms of identifying the consents required, as well as acquiring them from the relevant agency. Allowing sufficient time to secure consent was essential to delivering the habitat works. Having NE staff on the steering group made a huge difference in helping facilitate this process. Similarly, planning considerations delayed the start of the habitat intervention work, as it took several months for the PDNPA planning team (due to staff capacity issues) to confirm that farms would not require planning permission to carry out works. This knowledge should be retained for future projects.
- Securing match funding – this took a huge amount of effort/resource and needed creative solutions.
- Staff changes – both the senior conservation officer and area manager roles were vacant/newly appointed during the project term. This led to a lack of continuity, affecting the management of the wader wardens and a minor delay in the restoration works. However, this was overcome by detailed handovers and the senior administrator picking up additional responsibilities (management of the wader wardens to ensure a level of continuity).
- Covid19 and lockdown – whilst this will have universally affected all projects to a degree, it had a particular impact on our monitoring, wader plan delivery, and habitat works. During 2020 our wader warden volunteers were unable to monitor their sites, and we therefore lack

data for this period of time; wader plan site visits had to be rescheduled; and habitat works were delayed.

- Lack of interest/communication – at times it was difficult to engage landowners, and secure agreement to works/consent etc. This was mostly overcome within a timely manner thanks to input from the Farm Link Workers, Dave and Andy.
- Identification of sites – a number of the sites initially identified for restoration works were unsuitable (due to disturbance, rush management issues, overgrazing, water drainage etc). As the project progressed this issue/challenge was naturally ironed out.

Case Studies/Photographs

Wader warden monitoring

Volunteers were recruited, trained and supported by RSPB staff and SWPLP staff to increase their knowledge and understanding of breeding wader distribution and ecology in the South West Peak. Volunteers were then paired with a farm near to them where the landowner had expressed keen interest. The SWPLP Farm Link Workers introduced the volunteers to the farm and the landowner, effectively then handing over the relationship. Volunteers were then confident to make visits to their farms at the appropriate time of year, and feedback survey information to the landowner and RSPB.

Photo of lapwings/eggs taken by volunteer on their farm



Testimonial from Sue and Simon Castle (wader wardens)

"After a tough year not getting out with covid19 and lockdown, the opportunity to get out and survey waders on our farm was absolutely great. The outdoor space and chance to connect with nature in the hills was all the more enjoyable having spent time away from it"

Wader plans

Over the course of the project, the design and content of the wader plans were fine-tuned with input from the project steering group. 10 plans were produced in 2018, 15 in 2019, 10 in 2020, and 15 in 2021.



Creation/restoration of wet features on farms – scrape



PhD research



Legacy

Skills/knowledge/experience

- Landowners and land managers have gained skills and knowledge on how to manage their land for uplands waders and other heritage.
- Local volunteers have gained knowledge of uplands wader ecology, farm conservation and upland farming.
- There are increased skills amongst local contractors in scrape creation.

Habitat/species improvements

- Creation/restoration of 38 wet features (e.g., scrapes/ponds) and other habitat management measures (e.g., 3 predator fences installed/repaired) on farms which will hopefully support breeding and feeding waders for years to come.
- The learning around processes and methods used to create wader scrapes within this project will be taken forward for future works in the area, hopefully securing funding from the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme.

Data

- Monitoring data on curlew, lapwing, and snipe distribution across priority areas, to inform monitoring and management of land in the South West Peak. Data will be shared with partner organisations.

Equipment

- Ornithological survey equipment (e.g. telescope and binoculars) were purchased for the PhD and volunteers, these will remain available for the volunteer wader wardens to use after the project to help with ongoing site monitoring.

Connections/collaboration

- Volunteer wardens supporting the project as part of ongoing 'Wader Warden' network.
- The establishment of the South West Peak Curlew Recovery Partnership connecting RSPB, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust and Cheshire Wildlife Trust under a combined ambition to increase the resilience of the curlew population across the South West Peak.

Educational Resources/Other Resources

- PhD thesis and published papers are available for the academic community.
- A technical guidance note for practitioners and policy makers was produced based on the findings of the PhD research.

Lessons Learned

Key lessons:

- We would have benefitted from securing funding to recruit a dedicated project officer. This would have enabled us to collect more data and manage that data more efficiently, and provide more robust outputs re. the distribution of waders in the priority area. Similarly, the project officer would have been able to set aside time to recruit more wader wardens, and deliver more restoration works.
- Agree a central point for data collection/ownership before the project begins – data collection methodology for wader wardens needs to be more consistent in the future, with one platform for storage (e.g. an app that records/uploads onto one system).
- The importance of an individual or group of individuals who are already embedded within the community. The Farm Link Workers were instrumental in delivering this project due to their existing contacts and knowledge of local farming.
- Allow sufficient time to secure permissions/consent. Allow additional time if you do not know what consent is required before the project begins.

The Big Headline

50 wader plans provided to landowners, several of which have already had restoration works on site following delivery of plans.

Successful completion of a PhD exploring landscape-scale management interventions for curlew and snipe. Publication of **2** journal papers.

23 wader wardens recruited, and network of skilled volunteer wader wardens that will continue the legacy of the project.

Appendix 1. Summary report evaluating the effectiveness of wader plans



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giving
nature
a home

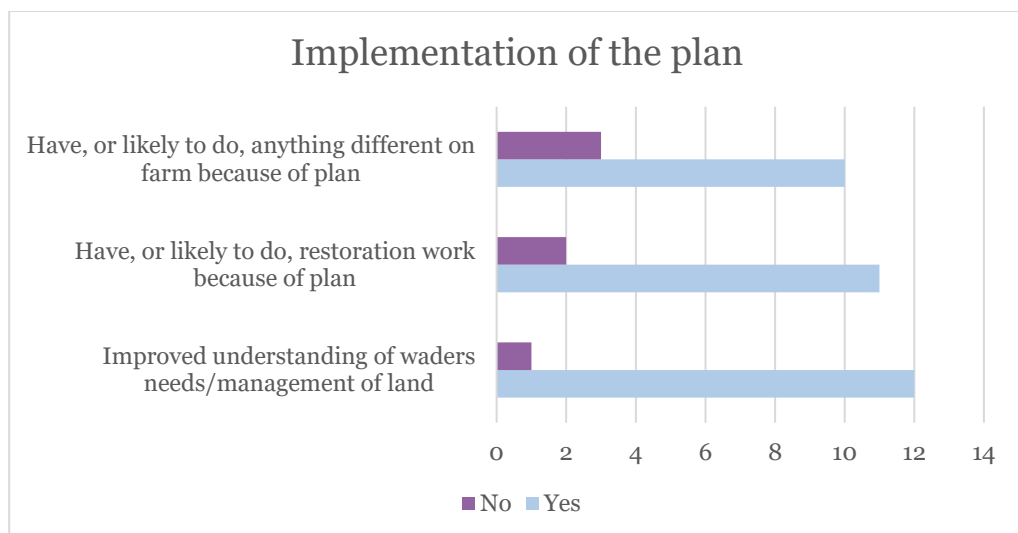
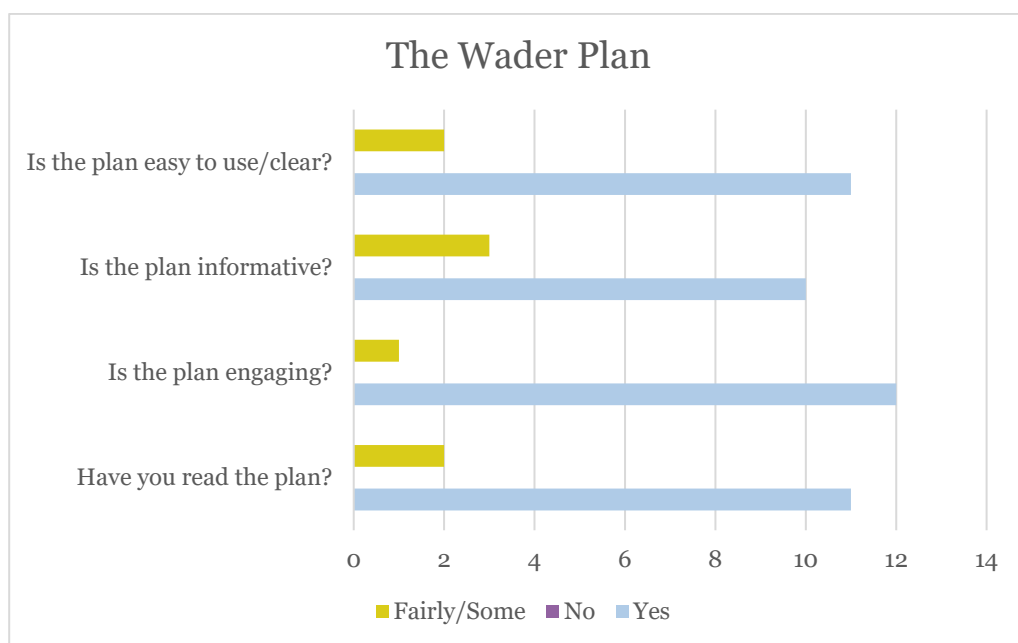
**Summary of Responses from Farmer Questionnaires
Regarding their Wader Plans**



Between 2017 and 2021 50 wader plans were produced, the final 15 were completed in November 2021. Prior to this the recipients of the first 35 plans were sent a simple survey questionnaire to evaluate the plans. 13 wader plan questionnaires were sent back to the RSPB. The questionnaires were anonymous, although 5 farmers chose to identify the questionnaire as their own.

Key points to note:

- 11 farmers read their whole wader plan, 2 read part of their wader plan
- The majority found their plans clear, informative, and engaging
- 12 of the 13 farmers felt that their understanding of waders and the importance of managing farmland sensitively increased following receipt of the plan. The only farmer who did not report an increase in understanding felt that they already had sufficient knowledge.
- The majority of farmers reported behavioural change following receipt of the wader plans. This included changes in rush management, restoration/creation of wet features, & stock management.



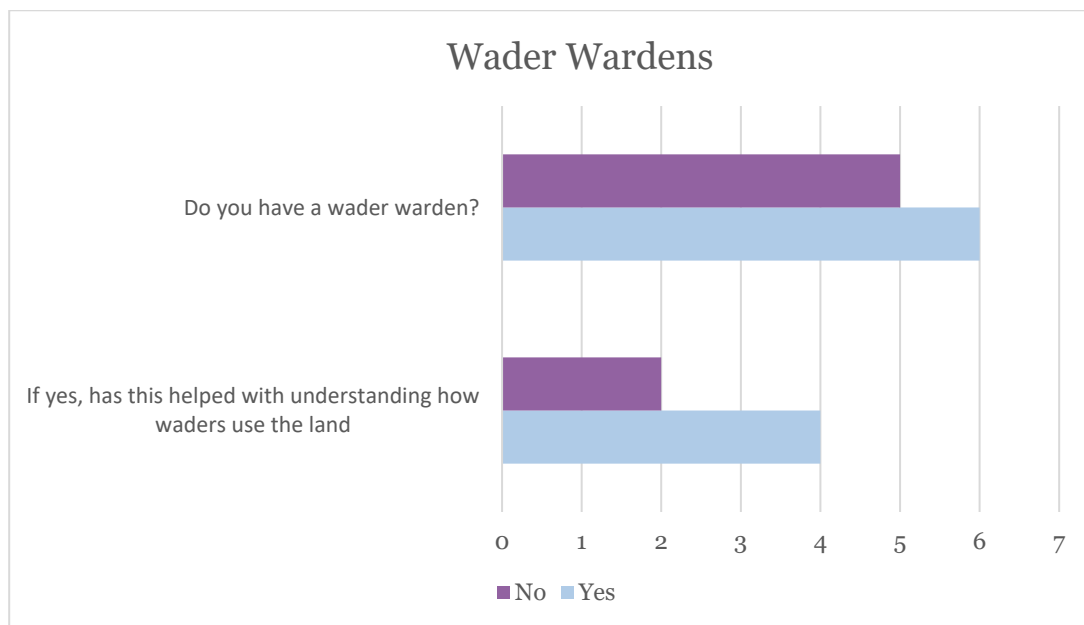
The Wader Wardens

We asked 3 questions about waders wardens:

- Do you have a wader warden?
- If yes, did they help with your understanding of the plan?
- If no, would you like a warden?

Key points to note:

- Approximately half of the respondents have a wader warden
- Two farmers were unsure whether they have a wader warden
- Several farmers do not have a warden, but would like one
- Of those with wardens, two thirds felt that they helped with their understanding of waders and their use on the farmland



Further support and input

Eight of the farmers requested further support and input regarding a myriad topics (all within the remit of this project), indicating trust and confidence in our ability to support their needs and those of the waders within the South West Peak.