

## **Karen Ballington**

Roy Critchlow and Karen Ballington farm at Heathylee House Farm, near Hollinsclough. This is a 200 acre hill farm at 1200 to 1500 feet above sea level. They have a menagerie of animals that include miniature donkeys, guanaco (the wild ancestor of today's llamas), and rare breeds of cattle, goats and pigs. Roy has farmed in the area all his life, while Karen previously worked in the army as a telecoms engineer. Sheila Hine interviewed Karen in August 2017.

## **Part Two. Wildlife and Conservation**

KB: We've got SSSI ground up on the tops, so that obviously drew Natural England in, this SSSI ground. It's supposed to be SSSI because it attracts all these lapwings and peewits. We have a wealth of bird life on there. They come to our ground, but actually they don't go to the field next door, the field the other side of it, and they don't go that side. They like to come to our strip. Don't you think Natural England should be looking at what Roy's doing to attract those birds instead of telling Roy how to farm it. If he's been there thirty years farming that ground, they should be saying Roy, what are you doing that nobody else is doing? Well, that's not how it works out. They restricted the way we could farm anything and you couldn't make a living and then your ground is deteriorating over the course of the 10 years so that, well the bales that we were getting were going down every year and the money we were getting wasn't covering the short fall and then with all the aggro we were getting off them, it wasn't worth it, so we've had to come out the scheme. We drove up earlier on in the year and there must have been a hundred lapwings set off from the ground when we went past. Not on the neighbours, on ours.

SH: Why do you think they like yours and not your neighbours?

KB: I think it's because we farm it more, daft as it sounds. Natural England want us to put 2 cows up there. It aint going to happen, because that land needs to be worked. So, typically there could be 20 to 30 cows up there when conditions allow, when it's not that wet or anything like that, so maybe that's it.

SH: So, they're on top of, shall we say, the grazing? There's room for the birds?

KB: Yes, Natural England would claim that it was over grazed, but actually we know that they're there. They like the clumps, but they like the rest to be really short. I don't know why that is, but they like that ground, they like the way Roy farms it.

SH: Is there any keepinging? I mean what are you like for pests?

KB: This probably has the biggest impact. You're mobbed by crows round the farm. You go out in the morning there might be 400 crows coming out the sheds in the morning. And I said to Roy, this is getting out of hand. We built a crow trap out of a silage ring and in previous years we've caught 50 at a time in this crow trap, but this year we only caught 16, but all the crows have gone. They know when somebodies

after them, I think, don't they? Either that or the neighbours put creep feed out and they go on there.

SH: So, you think that's helping your bird numbers?

KB: Well, the foxes and the badgers and the crows are the biggest problem for the birds, because they're not being kept on top of like they used to be in the olden days. I think that's probably having a bigger impact on the birds than any kind of modern farming is. I think if we looked at the decline in game keeping versus the rise in modern farming techniques, there's got to be some sort of correlation between the decline in game keeping and the decline in birds. The land hasn't changed a lot, but actual game keeping has. Roy does do some obviously, if there's a problem with foxes and such like that. We can't touch badgers, but badgers have been known to eat the eggs haven't they and there's badgers about, without a doubt.

KB: Roy, he loves owls and he always wanted a pair of owls, and I said it's not fair keeping 'em in a little box, you know, it isn't fair. So actually, he's spent a lot of money building a big open air aviary inside his new shed and we rescued a pair of barn owls from the centre of Burton on Trent. They lived in a little garden shed and we've rescued them from there. They've moved into this aviary and they can see a massive shed, they can see the outside through the walls and everything. But these are captive bred and they'll stay captive. Well, they were actually very successful at breeding. So, he was moving the youngsters into the aviary that he'd built next door and they escaped. It was just one of those things, there was a gap left in the netting and they escaped. Well, Roy was in quite a panic. They were fledged, fledged young owls you know, so fully feathered up. I'd say they were probably about 5 months old at this time. They were flying around the farm for a number of nights and Roy was putting out chicks for them, because he was scared you know. They'll starve he says, they can't feed themselves in the wild. So, he was putting chicks in the shed where they were hatched and they could fly in, get the chicks and fly back out and they were, they were taking the food. At least we think they were taking the food, it might have been crows. So, every now and then he gets a sighting of these owls in the local area even though the local owl conservation people say they don't live this high up. Well, next door to where this new sheds been built, is the remnants of an old house and the remnants of a bit of a chimney in it. It's actually on the neighbours land, but the hole in the chimney faces the shed where these owls hatched. The following year 2 owls moved into that shed and started laying eggs and hatched some chicks. Now when Roy went across with these little chicks to feed his owls that were captive, there was such a screeching from this barn over the way that Roy thought, they know I'm coming with food, so he started putting food out for these owls and they were taking it to feed their chick and they weren't shy about it, they were literally screeching whenever they saw him at the edge of dark. These were Roy's bred owls that had escaped. They've got to have been, wild birds didn't just come in randomly did they and start screeching at Roy to feed them. Now normally in the wild owls will only have one hatch, because of the food supply and everything, but those owls hatched twice that year in that barn.

They went away again and then they came back and they hatched again, so we think they probably released about 7 owls themselves from that pair there. They're back again now, this is 3 years on, they're in that chimney. He doesn't feed them now, but they still come back and I guess if the weather was bad Roy's not going to see them go hungry, he's going to put a bit of food out for them isn't he, and they know that. So yes, they've hatched twice in one year, because we were supplementing their feed, we think. So yes, owls can successfully live in this area and actually all our neighbours have sighted barn owls and they keep telling us where the barn owls are, because owls don't move to a new territory, do they? They overlap with the territory where they were born, so they radiate out into a different area. So, they tend to stay in the same area as to where they were, the parent birds were.