

CABB Newsletter

Issue 1: Autumn 2018



Drain blocking Garron Plateau. Credit Darren Houston

Delivery of our Cooperation Across Borders for Biodiversity (CABB) project, funded by the EU's INTERREG VA Programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), is well underway.

Physical works to improve blanket bog and wetland habitat have started in three countries. Project partners are blocking drains in blanket bog on the Garron Plateau, removing scrub from important Marsh Fritillary butterfly habitat at Montiaghs Moss and cutting rushes to improve wet grassland for breeding waders in Fermanagh.

The CABB Project Board, consisting of reps from RSPB in Northern

Ireland and Scotland, BirdWatch Ireland, Butterfly Conservation, NI Water, statutory agencies and SEUPB, has been guiding delivery of our €4.9m project.

The main highlight to date is the sheer number of landowners of protected sites that have engaged with our CABB staff. The positivity surrounding our work confirms that many people are still strongly linked culturally and emotionally to their local landscape and want to see it looked after in perpetuity.

This biannual newsletter can only provide a flavour of what is happening. Visit our webpage or contact your nearest CABB rep for more information.

What is CABB?

CABB is a €4.9m partnership project funded by the EU's INTERREG VA Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body.

By the end of 2021, CABB will:

- ⇒ Deliver 2228 ha of blanket bog in improving condition.
- ⇒ Prepare 8 Conservation Action Plans (CAPs) for key peatland sites.
- ⇒ Map habitats at CAP sites.
- ⇒ Improve habitat for Marsh Fritillary, Hen harrier and breeding waders.
- ⇒ Share best practice and data.
- ⇒ Raise awareness of peatlands and key species.

NI Water

NI Water and RSPB have a history of working together to deliver blanket bog restoration and as such, we hoped to re-ignite old relationships and get off to a quick start with drain blocking at the Dungonnell catchment on the Garron Plateau as part of the CABB project.

Unfortunately, the 'Beast from the East' showed its face and save for some training on the technicalities of drain blocking, work had to be halted. When the snow eventually melted, contractors managed to get 173 drains blocked with peat dams before work had to stop for the bird nesting season.

Our contractors started physical work again in September and are working towards improving the condition of 444ha of blanket bog with all the associated ecosystem services this will provide including carbon storage, climate change mitigation, increased water storage, improved habitat for plants and animals and improved water quality.



'Your Place & Mine' broadcast from Garron. Credit Brian Campbell

BirdWatch Ireland

Since the launch of CABB in 2017, BirdWatch Ireland has been working in the border region of counties Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal to help protect and enhance populations of breeding waders.

For the second year, a comprehensive survey of eight species of machair breeding waders was carried out across 20 sites revealing a total of 359 breeding pairs. Declines between 2017 and 2018 were noted for several species such as oystercatcher (down from 114 pairs in 2017 to 80) and dunlin (five pairs recorded on Tory Island but now absent from other sites). Curlew are also being monitored, as they are critically endangered with a decline of 97% in Ireland since the 1980s. On a more positive front, a pair of golden plover was recorded at Magheragallan in Donegal, with a juvenile also spotted during the late summer: this is an unusually low-lying location for these birds to breed. Also, a pair of Dunlin was recorded at

Croaghonagh Bog.

BirdWatch Ireland has already taken steps to improve habitats for these endangered species. In 2017 a breeding pair of curlew was recorded at Inisheher Island on Lough Melvin, Co Leitrim. At this time the island was undergrazed and overgrown - unfavourable conditions for curlew who prefer sites with an open view of the landscape and potential predators. Following agreement with the landowner, rank vegetation and scrub were removed and with it the threat from hooded crows and magpies. A new grazing regime will maintain an ideal mosaic of vegetation cover. In spring this year the curlew returned and bred successfully. It is hoped the more favourable environment will now attract further curlew and other species of waders to breed there in the future.



Mobilising equipment Inisheher Island. Credit Daniel Moloney



Post scrub clearance. Credit Daniel Moloney

RSPB NI

RSPB NI is preparing Conservation Action Plans (CAPs), that will outline habitat management works for three Special Conservation Areas (SCAs): Montiags Moss, Garron Plateau and Pettigoe Plateau. Physical habitat management is already underway at two of these sites and at Lough Erne.

Montiags Moss, once a pristine raised bog, has slumped into 'unfavourable' condition mainly because of undermanagement. As a result key species face extinction. Project Officer Cathryn Cochrane has undertaken surveys of Irish Damselfly and Marsh Fritillary butterfly, commissioned a hydrology report and is liaising with key landowners. Plans are in place for scrub removal, fencing and grazing this winter.

Despite poor access, people still visit the Montiags to see the network of pools abundant with dragonflies, damselflies and water beetles. CABB will create a boardwalk and new parking to make viewing the spectacle easier.

RSPB is working in partnership with NI Water on drain blocking on the **Garron Plateau**. Over 200 volunteer hours were donated installing some 350 marker posts to guide contractors in their drain blocking this autumn/winter. Project Officer Darren Houston and Queen's University Belfast post-doctoral researcher Laura McAnallen have installed and are now monitoring three dipwells which will facilitate future water level monitoring. Volunteers have also done vegetation surveys on Garron and have removed non-native Sitka spruce saplings near Glenariff Forest. Surveys revealed a nest of hen harriers that fledged three chicks along with a sub-adult Golden Eagle, a rare sight in Northern Ireland.

Pettigoe Plateau is an extensive area of lowland blanket bog.



RSPB's new tractor fitted with low pressure tracks

It was once one of the most important breeding sites for golden plover, but unfortunately, a survey this year led by Katy Bell, Pettigoe Project Officer, did not record any of these birds. More positively, breeding snipe, red grouse, teal and common sandpiper were all recorded, along with the Marsh Fritillary butterfly. Katy recorded the first sighting in Co. Fermanagh of a bank of *Colletes succinctus*, a solitary bee that feeds on heather. Katy hosted an information gathering event for landowners and will be using the data to inform recommendations for the Pettigoe CAP. Urgent actions are needed to reinstate Golden plover and manage winter visiting Greenland white-fronted geese.

At **Lough Erne**, Assistant Warden Tom Irvine is managing breeding wader habitat using new specialist wetland-adapted machinery, a triangular-tracked tractor. He has mown rushes on four islands, is maintaining predator fencing and will shortly begin scrub clearance work.

RSPB Scotland

In Scotland work has been focussed on two adjacent sites in the south west of the country: the Muirkirk Uplands and Airds Moss, which together form the Muirkirk and North Lowther Uplands Special Protection Area (SPA).

Muirkirk Project Officer Clive Walton has worked with Scottish Natural Heritage to deliver a comprehensive study of vegetation communities distribution. A spatial analysis over time revealed a four-fold increase in commercial forestry in the area, much of which boundaries the SPA, since the 1980s. The encroachment of forest has placed particular pressure on the moorland breeding bird populations.

A combination of bird surveys, have revealed a concerning decline in many key moorlands species. The discovery of the nationally scarce flowering plant, the *Sedum villosum* (Hairy Stonecrop) was found.

Practical steps have already been taken to improve some of the challenges facing the area. At Airds Moss there has been a significant programme of habitat management aimed at attracting curlew. Rush cutting has improved grasslands and the overall botanical richness of the habitat, while volunteers

Volunteers checking fences at Airds Moss. Credit Mark Mitchell



have contributed to the removal of non-native Sitka Spruce saplings. Grouse markers have also been installed on older fences to reduce bird collisions.

Butterfly Conservation

Butterfly Conservation is working to protect the precious and threatened Marsh Fritillary butterfly and its habitat. Once a common sight, the butterfly is now confined to high-value nature conservation areas, particularly in the west.

Field Officer Rose Cremin has been working closely with other CABB Project Officers at Montiags Moss SAC, Pettigoe Plateau SPA and in sites across Donegal. These areas are strongholds for the species and field work has been undertaken to survey known sites and to identify potential new colonies.

Field survey work in and around Pettigoe Plateau has identified two new breeding sites, one with close to 40 webs. A similar discovery was made at Montiags Moss in 2017 after a two-year absence of the species. While analysis has yet to be

undertaken on data for 2018, it would appear to have been a bumper year for the species across the region!

Volunteers have played a significant role in monitoring efforts. Seven workshops delivered to date have given volunteers, recorders and CABB staff the knowledge and skills to undertake surveys themselves or with project officers. Rose is also working with farmers and providing advice on habitat and grazing management to protect the Marsh Fritillary's food-plant, Devil's-bit Scabious. When new breeding sites are identified, details are sent to DAERA. Farmers can then apply to the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS), DAERA's agri-environment scheme, for funding to enable them to get the habitat into favourable condition for Marsh Fritillary.



Surveying for Marsh fritillary webs. Credit Peter Lytle



Marsh fritillary larval web. Credit Peter Lytle

Further information

Visit our CABB webpage:

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/projects/co-operation-across-borders-for-biodiversity-cabb/>

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CABB partners, funders and supporters



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