

Ring Ouzel Survey – Wild Ennerdale Spring 2007

When Peter was asked to undertake some survey work for the Wild Ennerdale Project, he could not have been more pleased. Here was an opportunity to contribute to a locally-based venture which would raise awareness of the changes taking place locally and the potential impact of those changes on locally important species – and he would be paid. Who could ask for more out of life – Pete became a man with a mission; yet another mission!

The whole family became involved, with both our off-spring bivvying out with Peter in some of the remotest parts of Ennerdale, under the guise of health and safety. Whilst our kids are well-competent fell walkers who thought they knew every inch of Ennerdale, they soon developed a true understanding of the ‘wild’ Ennerdale they would have previously disputed existed. These expeditions were proper adventure. My involvement, of course, was to stay at base camp and worry.

The surveys began in March of 2007. This article focuses on ring ouzel, though dipper and red grouse were also surveyed. I actually did go out with Pete to check with him on his ring ouzel sightings and now have a too-intimate knowledge of the top end of the valleys either side of Steeple. I will have to be much fitter and stronger to venture up there again – but I did see and hear ring ouzel. I should point out that I am no bird watcher, but Pete is always willing to describe physical and behavioural characteristics for me so that I stand a chance of believing him when he identifies a species. For me, the walk is the objective and the birds, another dimension, whereas for Pete the birds are the objective – always!

Back to Wild Ennerdale and the ring ouzel. What follows represents my own edited highlights from Pete’s full report. For those of you who want to check out the information, the references and the maps, you can find a copy of the full report on the Wild Ennerdale website.

The ring ouzel is a long distant migrant that breeds in the high fells, usually above the 250 metre contour line and at times not far short of the high tops. It winters in the south of Spain and North Africa. It is a striking member of the thrush family and can be readily distinguished from its lowland cousin the blackbird by a white crescent on its breast. The song of the male is a simple two or three note phrase. This mournful lament is repeatedly delivered from a favourite perch such as a tree or rocky prominence and can carry for some considerable distance. Quite often the singing bird is heard yet it cannot be visually located. If the bird is disturbed near the nest site the alarm call is a harsh and scolding *chack chack*.

Most nests are located in areas inaccessible to sheep such as crags, gullies and cliff ledges. Cover of some kind is required to ensure the nest is well hidden; this is achieved by birds locating nests under sheltered rocky arbours, in rocky clefts and behind dense vegetation such as heather. Several eggs are laid in the neat cup-shaped nest and most pairs are double brooded. Ring ouzels are omnivorous during the breeding season; they eat earthworms, leatherjackets, insects and spiders. Moorland berries such as bilberry, crowberry and rowan are important in the late summer as the birds stock up on food before migrating.

The RSPB has suggested that the decline in numbers in the past 25 years is as high as 50%. Since 1989, monitoring in Mardale and Swindale at Haweswater, has indicated that numbers of pairs have reduced there from between 17-19, to only 11. Other parts of the country have also noted declines. Possible factors could include: changes in grazing levels, agricultural improvement, afforestation, disturbance, pollution, habitat loss in wintering areas, problems on migration routes and climate change.

The first mention Pete found of ring ouzel in the Ennerdale Valley comes from the annual reports of the local brothers Hendry, William and Septimus Watson who were engaged by the RSPB as “watchers” of the Ennerdale Valley from 1913 to 1939. Although their main task was to safeguard the breeding birds of prey and raven of the valley, primarily from egg collectors, they do mention some of the smaller birds. In 1923 they report: *“With regard to the smaller birds, the Wheatear seem to be in larger numbers this year, as are the Ring ouzels”* yet in the 1924 they report *“With respect to the smaller birds, they seem to be in their usual numbers except the Ring ouzel, which are less plentiful than formerly. We shall continue to keep a look out and protect bird life whenever possible”*.

Pete gives a detailed breakdown of all the sources of records in his report, the reality being that his work, in effect, was to be the first opportunity afforded for a systematic ring ouzel survey of Ennerdale, there being no other available baseline data, though the information there was indicated that breeding territories in the Ennerdale valley would be found predominantly along the line of crags and gullies that form the southern rim of the valley. As a result, the study area was confined to the “southern rim” of the Wild Ennerdale Project area, and was defined as all suitable habitat between Goat Gill (six figure grid ref NY077148) in the west, to Greengable Crags (six figure grid ref NY214108) in the east. His brief, in short, was to locate the singing males from mid-April to mid-June, pre/post dusk and pre/post dawn, these being the periods of peak song activity by males – hence the ‘bivvying out’.

Pete actually completed 17 dedicated ring ouzel surveys in the Wild Ennerdale project area. 8 of these surveys covered the crucial pre-dawn period. 4 of these involved bivvying out on the fell and therefore also covered the dusk and post-dusk period. 9 of these surveys were supplementary surveys carried out during the daytime period. During the course of his work, he walked over 90 miles and climbed over 28,000ft!

He identified 18 potential territories within the southern rim study area. Of these:

- 6 territories held either singing males or males which exhibited significant territorial behaviour.
- A further 3 territories where birds were seen, but these birds did not show any significant territorial behaviour.
- Ring ouzel were not recorded in 9 of the potential territories

Cumbria Bird Club archives are particularly useful as they accurately identify the locations of any sightings. Of the 18 potential territories within the southern rim study area, CBC archives (1997-2005) identified:

- 10 territories which held either singing males or males which exhibited significant territorial behaviour.

- a single territory where birds were seen, but the evidence was not compelling enough to fulfill the breeding criteria.
- 7 potential territories which did not have any history of ring ouzel.

Cross-referencing CBC archive records with the 2007 survey results, shows of the 18 potential territories:

- 5 sites have no records of any type.
- 10 sites have either singing males or males exhibiting significant territorial behaviour.
- 3 sites birds were seen, but birds did not show any significant territorial behaviour. 2 of these were newly identified in 2007 with no previous records from the archives.

All 6 sites holding territorial males in 2007 are known sites with a previous history of occupation, as identified by CBC archive records.

So what did Pete surmise from his research? With some caution he suggested that it is likely that sites at Ennerdale will have sustained similar declines to those noted in Mardale and Swindale and, given the absence of any systematic monitoring of the study area during the period up to 2005, a period representing relative stability of the ring ouzel population, we can only speculate as to what these higher population levels might have been in the Ennerdale study area.

There were three or four notable sites occupied in recent years, which failed to show any signs of occupancy in 2007. They included:

- Boathow Crag (Side) – singing male 2004
- Mirklin Cove/West Slope Steeple – male plus two fledged juveniles 2005
- Mirk Cove/East Slope Steeple – male singing/alarming 2005 (possibly same territory as Mirklin Cove?)
- Gable Crags – male alarming 2005

It is plausible that the above 3/4 territories, as well as the 6 territories still presently occupied would have been in use on a reasonably regular basis pre the recent decline post 2005.

It is therefore tempting to suggest that up to 2005 the study area could have held somewhere in the region of ten territories, even discounting the secondary territories which have never been systematically searched prior to 2007.

Fortunately, as the ring ouzel is a BAP species of high conservation concern and is recognized as an important member of the upland bird community within the Wild Ennerdale Project area, and as there are likely to be significant changes in habitat, the project recognizes the importance of establishing baseline population data and long-term monitoring for this key upland species, particularly due to recent worrying declines throughout its range. Pete has made three recommendations:

1. Establish the Wild Ennerdale southern rim study area as an area to promote the research and conservation of ring ouzel.
2. Adopt a long term monitoring programme.
3. Repeat the survey every three years.

It will be of interest to us all, to follow how the Project pursues these suggestions.

Sara and Peter Ullrich