# Urgent action called as gorse fires threaten hen harrier habitat in Co Tyrone



The recent gorse fire in Co Tyrone has raised urgent alarms regarding the environmental risks associated with such blazes, particularly as it encroaches upon a significant special area of conservation. The incident, which occurred in the Ballagh Road area of Clogher, has mobilised ten fire appliances and around 50 firefighters, with efforts extended to neighbouring Co Monaghan. According to the Minister for Agriculture, Andrew Muir, the fire is wreaking considerable devastation, threatening the habitat of the endangered hen harrier, a bird crucial to Northern Ireland’s biodiversity, particularly during nesting season.

Minister Muir's call for the public to remain “extra vigilant” highlights the precarious nature of the ongoing environmental threat. He stated, “The current fire near Clogher is another stark reminder on how quickly they can spread, creating significant risk to life and property while causing extensive environmental damage.” This situation is compounded by the dry weather conditions, which, as forecasted, may persist into the weekend, exacerbating the potential for further blazes.

Current data indicates that this incident is not isolated; rather, it is part of a troubling trend of wildfires exacerbated by human activity. There have been warnings issued by the Northern Ireland Fire Service (NIFRS) and police regarding the elevated risks associated with these fires, which can spread rapidly especially through dead grasses, gorse, and other flammable vegetation. Previous incidents, such as a significant fire in 2004 that devastated about 400 hectares and resulted in considerable wildlife casualties, underline the long-term consequences of gorse fires.

The NIFRS has reported more than 500 wildfire-related incidents just in April of this year, a substantial figure considering the exceptionally dry conditions. Provisional figures from the Met Office suggest that Northern Ireland has experienced only a fraction of its usual rainfall, with just 30.6mm recorded, 42% of the average monthly total. This has heightened the European Union's Emergency Management Service's warnings about potential wildfire scenarios across Ireland and Britain, creating an urgent narrative around responsible land management and fire prevention.

Such narratives are echoed in ongoing conservation initiatives like the Hen Harrier Project, which aims to address the declining populations of these birds through collaborative efforts with local farmers. Encouraging responsible grazing practices during critical periods in June and July is particularly vital, as this can help mitigate fire risk by controlling vegetation.

Additionally, it is crucial to consider the social dynamics surrounding wildfires. PSNI Assistant Chief Constable Ryan Henderson reinforced the message that deliberate fire-setting is a criminal act, urging citizens to report any illicit activities. The historical context of gorse burning for land management, particularly among farmers seeking higher subsidy payments, illustrates a complex intersection of agricultural practice and environmental stewardship. In areas like the Mourne Mountains, both controlled burning and unregulated fires have led to widespread ecological damage, emphasising the need for strict adherence to legal burning practices.

As citizens enjoy the warm weather, NIFRS Area Commander Barry Ross stressed the importance of responsible behaviour: “Dealing with wildfires is not only challenging and physically demanding… it is extremely resource-intensive for our Service and partner agencies.” The plea for vigilance extends beyond just knowing how to manage fires; it includes understanding the intricate balance between agriculture, wildlife conservation, and community safety.

In summary, the escalating gorse fires in Northern Ireland serve as a harsh reminder of the vulnerabilities inherent in our natural environment and the pressing responsibility each individual has in protecting it. The cooperation of local authorities, conservationists, and the public will be vital in safeguarding both the threatened hen harrier population and the diverse ecosystems that are so integral to the region’s heritage.

### Reference Map

* Paragraph 1: (1), (2)
* Paragraph 2: (1)
* Paragraph 3: (1), (5), (6)
* Paragraph 4: (2), (3), (4)
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* Paragraph 6: (4), (6)
* Paragraph 7: (5), (6)
* Paragraph 8: (1), (2), (5)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/minister-urges-public-to-remain-extra-vigilant-as-co-tyrone-blaze-rages-through-special-area-of-conservation/a1467592877.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-39849848> - A large moor in County Tyrone, near Fivemiletown, is ablaze, threatening the habitat of the protected hen harrier. The area, part of a Special Area of Protection, is home to about 10 breeding pairs of hen harriers, a quarter of Northern Ireland's population. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) has been battling the fire for two days, deploying dozens of personnel and specialist equipment. The fire may have been started in multiple locations, and there is a history of unregulated burning in the area, with a significant fire in 2004 destroying about 400 hectares of bog and hen harrier nests. The NIFRS urges the public to remain vigilant when in the countryside, as deliberate fire setting has major consequences, tying up vital resources and posing risks to people and property. Fires can spread easily, and even a slight change in wind direction can pose serious risks to life, property, and the environment.
3. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/farming/arid-40321646.html> - The Hen Harrier Project, a five-year European Innovation Partnership scheme funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, focuses on conserving the hen harrier population in Ireland. In the Musheramore Special Protection Area (SPA), near the Cork-Kerry border, the project achieved significant success with five breeding pairs of hen harriers fledging ten chicks. This success is attributed to the active involvement of local farmers, with nearly 75% participation in the project. The project emphasizes the importance of managing upland habitats to prevent fires, which can destroy entire upland areas and threaten the hen harrier population. Grazing upland grassland or bog heath areas in June and July is encouraged to reduce the risk of fires, as dense, dry vegetation in winter months can easily catch fire and spread rapidly.
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mourne_Mountains> - The Mourne Mountains in Northern Ireland have a history of controlled gorse burning to clear land for sheep grazing. However, many of these fires are unmanaged and can become out-of-control wildfires. In the 1950s, Emyr Estyn Evans noted that some shepherds in the Mournes tended to burn gorse and heather recklessly, leading to widespread destruction and impoverishment of the mountain environment. In the 21st century, hundreds of heather and gorse wildfires occur annually in the Mournes, with the majority started deliberately, often by farmers and vandals. Some wildfires are caused by sheep farmers and landowners carrying out unapproved burning to clear gorse and heather, aiming to maximize subsidy payments for grazing land. Under the law, farmers must follow specific rules when burning gorse and heather, including notifying the fire service, obtaining permission, conducting burns under supervision, and ensuring proper control with fire breaks.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-52851104> - As hot and dry weather continues, several wildfire warnings have been issued across Ireland. Temperatures have soared into the mid-twenties, leading to a significant increase in wildfire incidents. Provisional Met Office figures show that up to 27 May, Northern Ireland received just 30.6mm of rain, 42% of the average monthly rainfall. The EU's Emergency Management Service forecasts extreme wildfire danger across Ireland and Britain in the coming days. Fire crews in Northern Ireland dealt with more than 500 wildfire or gorse-related fires over April. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) has appealed to people not to start fires in the countryside for any reason, warning that they could spread quickly and draw firefighters away from where they are needed most. Area commander Mark Smyth emphasized the importance of not adding additional pressure on emergency services during this time.
6. <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/06/14/major-incident-declared-in-north-as-more-than-130-firefighters-battle-gorse-blazes/> - In June 2023, a major incident was declared in Northern Ireland as more than 130 firefighters battled gorse blazes in Clogher, County Tyrone, and Glenariff, County Antrim. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) declared the major incident due to the scale of the fires. Aidan Jennings, NIFRS assistant chief fire rescue officer, stated that the fires were expected to continue into Thursday. Gorse plants contain flammable oils and burn easily in dry, hot weather, making them particularly susceptible to wildfires. The NIFRS urged the public to avoid areas where incidents were ongoing and to exercise caution to prevent further fires.
7. <https://www.nifrs.org/be-vigilant-to-help-prevent-wildfires-this-summer/> - The Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) has called for the public to be vigilant in preventing wildfires as warmer weather approaches. In the previous year, NIFRS responded to 1,239 preventable wildfires across Northern Ireland, all caused by human behavior. While there was a 37% drop in wildfires compared to the previous year, the NIFRS emphasizes that every wildfire is avoidable. The service urges the community to be alert to the risk of wildfires when enjoying the countryside, advising against using open fires and being cautious with smoking materials, barbecues, or any other flames. Deliberately setting a wildfire is a criminal offense, and the NIFRS encourages reporting such incidents immediately. Responding to wildfires also puts added pressure on the service and partner agencies, as it can take hours or even days to extinguish these fires. The NIFRS aims to ensure the public can enjoy the countryside responsibly and safely.