



**BIODIVERSITY
CHALLENGE FUNDS**



Biodiversity Challenge Funds Projects Darwin Initiative, Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, and Darwin Plus

Half Year Report

It is expected that this report will be a **maximum of 2-3 pages** in length.

If there is any confidential information within the report that you do not wish to be shared on our website, please ensure you clearly highlight this.

Submission Deadline: 31st October 2025

Please note all projects that were active before 1st October 2025 are required to complete a Half Year Report.

Submit to: BCF-Reports@niras.com including your project ref in the subject line.

Project reference	DPLUS190
Project title	Improving St Helena's grasslands to benefit people and wildlife
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	St Helena
Lead Organisation	St Helena National Trust
Partner(s)	St Helena Government, RSPB
Project Leader	Helena Bennett
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	HYR3
Project website/blog/social media	https://www.trust.org.sh/ X: Shnationaltrust Facebook: Shnationaltrust Instagram: shnationaltrust Linkedin: @st-helena-national-trust

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months (April – September) against the agreed project implementation timetable (if your project started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up to end of September).

Output 1 – Effective pasture management is implemented across priority grassland areas

During Year 1, high-impact and intensive management techniques were scheduled and implemented, followed by low-impact management techniques in Year 2. Monitoring and ongoing management activities continued through Year 3.

Instead of supplementing the pastureland with grass seed to replace invasive plant species, the project team agreed to use grass runners of kikuyu grass, mat grass, and tallow vine—species that are already present on the island and considered naturalised. The project is currently monitoring the progress to ensure that these grass runners establish successfully and effectively replace the invasive plants.

There were considerable delays in implementing the free-range animal management technique on a private landowner's pastureland. Based on advice from the Livestock Section, the project was required to construct appropriate shelters for the free-range animals, which in turn required

planning authority approval. Additionally, limited communication from the landowner further delayed the trial.

Given these challenges, the project team concluded that there would be insufficient time to determine the effectiveness of the free-range animal management technique within the project's timeframe. Consequently, the Project Board agreed to discontinue this approach and instead apply the low-impact management technique of manually digging out invasive plants at Site 3.

Output 2 - Livelihoods of agriculturist communities (through existing farming syndicates) are enhanced through climate resilience initiatives

During the mid-project review, following the completion of the initial questionnaire aimed at understanding the drivers of land-use change and informing potential diversification schemes, it was identified that the data received from farmers may not have been entirely accurate. As a result, discussions were initiated with the Project Board to explore ways of modifying the questionnaire to produce more comparable and reliable results while rewording certain questions to obtain more meaningful responses from farmers.

At this stage of the project, a stocktake was also conducted to determine how best to ensure the project's legacy by encouraging farmers to continue implementing the management techniques that had been trialled.

The livelihood initiative involving the provision of rainwater storage tanks at sites where high-impact management techniques were applied was successfully completed. Anecdotal feedback from farmers indicates that the tanks are being actively used to water livestock and support fieldwork. Evidence is currently being collected and analysed to substantiate this positive feedback.

However, the development of a comprehensive Livelihood Enhancement Plan will require the establishment of best practices for pasture management and corresponding revisions to land leases. A pasture management template was developed and trialled at the Deadwood site (where high-impact management techniques were implemented). This template is intended to inform the St Helena Government's Environment, Natural Resources and Planning (ENRP) Portfolio in managing the Agriculture Policy and land lease processes.

In addition, the Project Team provided support to the Natural Conservation Areas, particularly in relation to the management plans for Important Wirebird Areas, which have now been prepared and are awaiting Ministerial approval.

Output 3 – The conservation and livelihood impact of pasture management are monitored and evaluated

Vegetation and invertebrate surveys for Year 3 commenced across all trial sites. However, to ensure data accuracy, one of the sites is scheduled to be surveyed during Quarter 4. The results from these surveys will provide valuable insights into the overall effectiveness of the pasture management techniques implemented.

Although the project successfully continued rabbit monitoring at the trial sites during the first half of Year 3, no rabbit culling was undertaken during this period. This issue was raised with the Project Board; however, due to farmers not obtaining the required firearm licences (including one farmer who has since left the island), the matter fell outside the direct control of the project, despite regular engagement and encouragement from the project team. As part of the project's legacy, the team will continue to work with farmers to promote rabbit control measures to reduce the significant damage caused to pastureland.

Flagging (ringing) of wirebirds, initiated in Years 1 and 2, continued to be monitored throughout the life of the project. To date, 19 resightings have been recorded—five individuals were sighted twice, and one individual was sighted three times.

A cross-cutting training session was also conducted between the Marine Ecology (Seabirds) Team and the Project Team, focusing on seabird ringing techniques. As no local personnel are currently trained to ring wirebirds without supervision, this collaboration provided an opportunity to build relevant technical skills within the local conservation workforce.

Output 4 – Enhanced in-territory capacity to implement and monitor effective management of St Helena’s grassland protected areas

The Wirebird Species Action Plan revisions have been completed. The updated plan will align with the Environment, Natural Resources and Planning (ENRP) Portfolio’s Natural Conservation Areas (NCA) Important Wirebird Areas Management Plans, and both documents will be presented together to the Minister in the new year for approval.

While the project has faced challenges in providing formal training opportunities to members of the farming syndicates, regular engagement has continued through one-to-one discussions during “sheep pound” days. The project team also maintains public outreach through radio presentations on the Trust’s programme and regular social media updates, ensuring ongoing visibility of project activities and outcomes.

Preparations are now underway for a “show and tell” event at the island’s Agriculture Show, which will provide an opportunity to showcase the progress of the pasture management trials and promote continued collaboration with farmers.

The project film also remains on schedule, with the film crew due to return in November 2025 to conduct final interviews and capture the latest developments across the trial sites.

2. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments/lessons learnt that the project has encountered over the last 6 months. Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.

Staffing

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

These staffing challenges caused delays in delivering several additional actions identified in the Year 2 Annual Report, as the project became temporarily under-resourced. The matter was raised with the Project Board, and our partners — St Helena Government (SHG) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) — provided significant support. SHG staff offered assistance in maintaining the regular monitoring schedule, while the RSPB contributed additional help with data collation and analysis.

Since then, stability has improved.

[REDACTED]

Lessons Learned:

Cross-training and professional development in wirebird ecology and habitat management across different conservation teams have proven essential. This ensures that wirebird conservation can continue seamlessly during periods of staff turnover, while allowing the project team to remain focused on completing core project initiatives. This lesson has been incorporated into the revised Wirebird Species Action Plan (2025–2030).

Low Impact Management Technique: Use of free-range animals

The proposed use of free-range animals, namely pigs, as a less-intensive management technique did not proceed as planned. The preparation required to utilise free-ranging pigs to naturally turn the pasture proved to be far more complex and time-consuming than anticipated. Obtaining landowner consent, securing planning authority permission, and constructing appropriate animal shelters all required significant lead time. As a result, there would have been insufficient time remaining within the project to implement, monitor, and evaluate the effectiveness of this technique.

A detailed timeline and cost estimate for the proposed work were presented to the Project Board. Following review, the Board agreed that there was not enough time to confirm the effectiveness of the approach. Consequently, the less-intensive method of manually digging out invasive species was applied at Woody Ridge instead.

Although Output Indicator 1.3—to apply lower-impact management techniques across three medium-priority trial sites—is still being met through manual digging and the targeted use of herbicide, the project had originally aimed to trial the use of free-range animals. The project did not fully anticipate the level of preparation required, including coordination with the government planning authority, engagement with private landowners, and collaboration with technical planners and the Government Livestock Section.

In hindsight, the implementation of a low-impact management technique involving free-range animals should have begun in Year 1 rather than Year 2, to allow sufficient time for approvals, infrastructure setup, and evaluation. Furthermore, it could be argued that a “low-impact” technique should also involve low administrative and management demand if it is to be considered viable and attractive for farmers to continue beyond the project.

Lessons Learned:

Hindsight has shown that, despite a mid-project review, the risk of not achieving this particular low-impact management technique was not adequately recognised. Going forward, both within this project and in any future initiatives, any management action that involves the construction of infrastructure or requires private landowner engagement should have its risks identified and mapped at the earliest planning stage.

3. Have any of these issues been discussed with NIRAS and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Discussed with NIRAS:	Yes/ No
Formal Change Request submitted:	Yes/ No
Received confirmation of change acceptance:	Yes/ No
Change Request reference if known: <i>If you submitted a financial Change Request, you can find the reference in the email from NIRAS confirming the outcome</i>	

Guidance for Section 4: The information you provide in this section will be used by Defra to review the financial status of projects. This review will identify projects at random for spot checks on financial management and will include requests for evidence of the actual spend information provided below. Please ensure the figures you provide are as accurate as possible and that you have the evidence to support it. You do not need to provide it now.

4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2025 – 30 September 2025)

Actual spend: £ [REDACTED]

4b. Do you currently expect to have any significant (e.g. more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this financial year (ending 31 March 2026)?

[REDACTED]

4c. If you expect an underspend, then you should consider your project budget needs carefully. Please remember that any funds agreed for this financial year are only available to the project in this financial year.

If you anticipate a significant underspend because of justifiable changes within the project, please submit a re-budget Change Request as soon as possible, and not later than 31st December. There is no guarantee that Defra will agree a re-budget so please ensure you have enough time to make appropriate changes to your project if necessary.
Please DO NOT send these in the same email as your report.

NB: if you expect an underspend, do not claim anything more than you expect to spend this financial year.

5. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to BCFs management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

Suspensions or allegations related to fraud and error concerns should be reported to fraudanderror@Defra.gov.uk

6. Project risk management

6a. If your project has an Overseas Security and Justice assessment, please provide an update on any related risks, and any special conditions in your award paperwork if relevant for your project.

6b. Have any concerns or allegations relating to sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment been reported in the past 6 months?

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Suspensions or allegations related to safeguarding concerns should be reported to ODA.Safeguarding@defra.gov.uk

7. Please use this section to respond to any feedback provided when your project was confirmed, or from your most recent Annual Report. As a reminder, all projects that were scored as 'Not Yet Sensitive' in the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) assessment of their latest Annual Report should demonstrate how they are meeting the minimum GESI-Sensitive standard.

Contingency and Exit Planning

With reference to point 2 above, due to the unanticipated staff turnover between April and September, the project team was unable to complete and document contingency planning for delayed activities during that period. Now that the Head of Terrestrial Conservation has returned to post and assumed management of the project, contingency planning and the development of an exit strategy are actively underway. These plans aim to ensure that the project's legacy is sustained within the pasturelands beyond its completion.

This also extends to training delivery and stakeholder engagement, as discussions are ongoing with farmers to support their continued management of the pastures once the project concludes.

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI)

The St Helena National Trust and the project team remain committed to integrating Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) principles into all aspects of our work. While female representation within the farming syndicates remains limited, the project continues to make significant efforts to ensure that women are meaningfully included in activities and decision-making processes.

For example, the film crew scheduled to return in November 2025 has been instructed to include female farmers among the interviewees. Similarly, the initial livelihood assessment conducted early in the project included only two women; however, for the final assessment, specific direction has been given to engage and interview all women farmers who are willing to participate.

The project is also pleased to report that during Year 3, a female work experience student joined the team during the school holidays. Prior to her placement, the Education and Outreach Manager conducted a risk assessment to ensure that both the student and the team were comfortable with the working arrangements. The Director also reviewed the team's conduct and inclusion efforts during a team meeting. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive—the student was well supported during fieldwork, expressed that she thoroughly enjoyed her experience, and has already requested to return during her next school break.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]