

Date: 12/05/2026



Andrew Gilruth

By email only: agilruth@moorlandassociation.org

Foss House Kings
Pool
1–2 Peasholme
Green
York
YO1 7PX

Dear Mr Gilruth,

This letter responds to your correspondence of 30th of April regarding the UK Merlin Survey 2026.

Thank you for your letter requesting assurance on access, governance and data safeguards for the UK Merlin Survey. We apologise that we did not engage with the Moorland Association at the outset, and that our approach has not aligned with your wider discussions with Natural England.

I can confirm that Natural England has not made any further access approaches to landowners and has instructed the RSPB to not enter any Moorland Association member land for the purposes of surveying Merlin or to use any Public Rights of Way across such land. I can also confirm that the RSPB Research Assistants have not surveyed any SSSIs where they do not have permission for access.

We would welcome the opportunity to learn more about the Merlin data gathered by Moorland Association members and whether this could be shared with Natural England in future.

Survey methodology

With regards to the current survey, there are two elements:

- Surveying breeding Merlin on SSSIs where the species is a notified feature; and
- Contributing to the UK-wide Merlin Survey.

The SSSI surveys are undertaken by the RSPB and Raptor Study Groups (RSGs). Natural England uses the resulting data to inform SSSI condition assessments.

The UK Merlin Survey is a collaboration between Natural England, RSPB, NatureScot, Natural Resources Wales, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and RSGs. It aims to update population estimates, assess trends and distribution, and inform SPA assessments. The 2026 survey repeats the 2008 methodology to ensure comparability. Data collected include Merlin presence, breeding evidence and broad habitat context, to support national- and regional-level analysis only.

Governance and data handling

Natural England is working with the RSPB and Raptor Study Groups to deliver the national Merlin survey. Results will be reported only at national, country or regional level, as in the 2008 survey. Natural England is a funding partner, with the RSPB employing and coordinating the research assistants. SSSI level information is held securely by Natural England and only summary information on condition at a whole-SSSI level published.

Access and safeguards

Fieldwork is undertaken by licensed RSG volunteers and RSPB research assistants. All RSG volunteers and RSPB Research Assistants have Schedule 1 permits. RSGs operate under existing permissions. The RSPB surveys only where landowner permission has been granted and does not have permission to access Moorland Association member land.

Survey visits are agreed in advance with landowners, including timing and access routes, and permission may be withdrawn at any time. Survey methods minimise disturbance and do not require nest visits.

We apologise again for the concern caused. I can follow this up with you in my new role which I start soon.

Yours sincerely,



Ruth Waters

Director of Evidence

Natural England

