

The scientists who stare at goats

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Satellite technology is being used to track a herd of wild goats in an effort to understand where they roam and help protect our farmland and conservation areas.

Using Global Positioning Systems (GPS) loggers, experts from Newcastle University are hoping to map the movement of England's most northerly population of wild goats.

Roaming the wilds of the Cheviot Hills in Northumberland, the [goats](#) are known to congregate around Yeavinger Bell – “The Hill of the Goats” and the site of an Iron Age hillfort.

The area in which the goats are found contains open moorland, woodland and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) as well as being flanked by [farmland](#). As such, the area is a potential site of conflict between the goats, conservationists and farmers.

Led by Dr Richard Bevan and Dr Pete Garson from the University's School of Biology, and supported by Northumberland National Park and local landowners and farmers, the aim is to find out more about where the goats are foraging and therefore, just how much damage the goats might be causing.

“At the moment the goats are barely tolerated” explains Dr Bevan, who is also working with zoology undergraduates Aimee Palmer and Scott Barnes who have been awarded grants from the Sir James Knott Trust to undertake the work.

“Because the goats have no protection, if landowners decide that they don't want them, then they are within their rights to remove them. This poses a real threat to this small, genetically unique population.

“The aim of this project is to understand exactly how far the goats roam and how they use the local landscape, as well as recording when, where and how long they spend eating so we can advise on any future management of the goats.”

The project:

The Northumberland goat [herd](#) is one of a number across the UK and is made up of between 100-150 individuals. They are believed to be descended from the original goats introduced by the first farmers of the Neolithic period.

The animals tend to move around in groups making it easier for the team to track them. Initially, the GPS collars – similar to a dog collar – have been fitted to six goats and the aim is to move these collars around different individuals every 3-6 months, ensuring a mix of male and female, young and old.

The data are collected and stored by the device and then downloaded each time the collar is changed.

“The sensors in these collars are not only able to track the goats but also give us postural data which shows how they are moving,” explains Dr Bevan.

“For example, when they stop travelling we can see whether they lay down and rest or bend their heads to feed.

“This builds up a very accurate picture of their behaviour and should indicate to us how much they are to blame for damage to crops or trees

and how we might prevent it.

“Ultimately, the aim is to find a way for nature, man and goat to live together happily.”

Provided by Newcastle University

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