



The All Party Parliamentary Group on

Game and Wildlife Conservation

Minutes

Don't fall into the trap – licensing for species recovery

Tuesday 16th July 2019

12:30pm -13:30pm

Jubilee Room, Westminster Hall

Attending:

Name	Representing	Name	Representing
Sir Nicholas Soames	MP and APPG Chair	Press	
Simon Hart	MP	Jez Fredenburgh	Farmers Guardian
Owen Paterson	MP	Philip Reynolds	Sporting Gun
Alastair Johnstone	Richard Benyon's office	Matt Clark	Sporting Gun
Lord Blencathra	House of Lords/Natural England	Edward Wills	Shooting Times
Earl of Caithness	House of Lords	Charlotte Peters	Shooting Times
Lord Cameron of Dillington	House of Lords	Simon Lester	Country Life
Lord Colgrain	House of Lords	Phoebe Southworth	Daily Telegraph
Lord Ridley	House of Lords		
Lord Shrewsbury	House of Lords	Guest speaker	
Amanda Anderson	Moorland Association	James Pearce-Higgins	BTO
Christopher Graffius	BASC		
Sophie Hutchinson	BASC	GWCT	
James Legge	Countryside Alliance	Sir Jim Paice	GWCT
Sam Durham	NFU	Teresa Dent	GWCT
Philip Merricks		Mike Swan	GWCT
		Alastair Leake	GWCT
		Jeremy Payne	GWCT
		Joel Holt	GWCT
		Henrietta Appleton	GWCT

Apologies received from: Lord Dear.

Minutes:

Dr Mike Swan (MS) of the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) commenced proceedings following a brief introduction by Sir Nicholas. Dr Swan emphasised that it was important that an open general licence for the conservation of species be retained and outlined evidence from the GWCT's Upland Predation Experiment and the Allerton project to support this assertion.

The Upland Predation Experiment (UPE) considered the reason behind the greater abundance of Curlew, Golden Plover and Lapwing on grouse moors than other uplands by assessing the impact of predator removal as undertaken on grouse moors. Predator numbers were monitored showing that Spring densities of foxes and crows were reduced by 43% and 78% respectively. Removing predators during the key nesting and brood rearing season resulted in the breeding success of the Lapwing and Curlew increasing three-fold whilst that of the Golden Plover increased 4x. MS emphasised the importance of this improvement for Lapwing conservation efforts. The UPE showed that without predator removal only 19% of lapwing pairs produced young. Hence, each successful pair would

need to produce 4.6 young annually merely to maintain breeding numbers. This is unrealistic in species that typically raise one or two young per season.

MS then reviewed data from the Allerton project on Song Thrush densities during kept and non-kept periods. During keeping Song Thrush pairs peaked at 60 plus but declined when keeping stopped back to the initial levels of 14 pairs, despite habitat improvements. Given that corvid control was part of the keeping regime, this suggests that predation by corvids has contributed to the decline.

Finally MS emphasised the reasons why it is important that corvid control is permitted via an open general licence. Predation is dispersed nationally with different pressure points across the landscape related to different habitat types and associated species. Issuing individual licences in response to this would be complex and burdensome to both operator and licensing authority.

Dr James Pearce-Higgins (JPH) of the BTO then followed by considering the trends in general predators, using the BBS data for a few key general licence species, namely: Jackdaws (+50%), Carrion Crows (+25%) and Wood Pigeons (+30%) have increased since 1995; magpies have plateaued since 2005; and Rooks have shown a decline in the last 10 years. He then went on to highlight other evidence on the impacts of predators using the Scottish Moorland Forum's Understanding Predation project and RSPB's predation review. The former identified land use change and predation as two of the most important drivers of wild bird population declines whilst the latter showed strong evidence that seabirds, gamebirds and waders were limited by predation, generally by a combination of foxes, corvids and others (mustelids). Consequently the strongest evidence is for predation by a suite of predators with little evidence to date on individual predator/prey relationships. JPH then focussed on the impact of predators on ground nesting species and the Curlew in particular where there is strong consensus that declines are due to a combination of habitat deterioration and nest and chick predation. The nationwide picture of changes in Curlew population densities shows widespread and rapid decline with pockets of population increases overlapping with areas of moorland managed for game.

Finally he considered that predator numbers are likely to respond to changes in prey populations. For example there is strong spatial correspondence between rabbit and fox densities and the recent BTO paper on game bird releases had identified a positive association with Carrion Crow densities which needs to be investigated further.

Sir Nicholas thanked the speakers and opened the discussion to the floor.

Q&A session

In answer to a question on the impact of Grey Squirrels by Philip Reynolds, JPH said that there was not a strong association with woodland and songbird survival as this was driven more by over-winter survival. Effects could be localised however. MS added that the GWCT was currently assessing their impact as a means of providing better methods of control.

Lord Ridley asked why, given the strength of evidence presented at the APPG, had the benefits of general licences not been communicated effectively. MS felt that it was not the evidence that had gone wrong but the wording of the licences themselves. Re-wording in 2014 had opened the door to legal challenge as this had resulted in moving the responsibility for ensuring their use was the most satisfactory solution from the licensing authority to the end user. Lord Blencathra on behalf of

Natural England said that the challenge was on a point of law and that delegating this responsibility to the end user would have been permitted if NE had undertaken to monitor their use.

Sir Jim Paice, GWCT Chairman, pointed out that general licences are not allowed to be used on protected areas ie SPAs etc which cover much of our uplands. There is a need for a clear message that their operation is necessary on protected areas in order to fulfil their conservation status. Defra's call for evidence showed this. Sir Nicholas added that he had asked a written question on SPAs and that the answer had merely repeated the ambition to have a robust licencing scheme in place by February 2020 including provisions for protected sites. No interim measures were mentioned.

Lord Caithness drew attention to the Songbird Survival research on corvid impacts. JPH distinguished between the national picture as identified by BBS data and local effects and that there is less of an association between the impact of predators as a driver of population change than on nesting success.

Amanda Anderson of the Moorland Association wanted to know whether it was possible to estimate how long it would be before the extinction of species such as lapwing and curlew under current scenarios and on the basis of this argue the case that predator control is necessary for protected area designation status. JPH answered that it would be possible to estimate this through modelling the data available. Teresa Dent (TD) of the GWCT said that the GWCT had already done some work on this. Lord Blencathra said that the only watertight approach was to do an individual review of each protected area which was too onerous.

Focussing further on the impact of predation on waders Philip Merrick pointed out that it is not just the uplands where restrictions on the use of general licences on SPAs and SSSIs are having an effect. Lowland waders are often found on these designations.

TD pointed out that by focussing on national trends, cause and effects of species declines are difficult to identify. What is required is a focus on local areas where declines are evident and to seek local area solutions. She gave the example of the Avon Valley Waders for Real project where a cluster of farmers have successfully improved Lapwing densities through predator management. Sir Nicholas asked whether foxes had been the most important predator. TD answered that it had been a combination of both foxes and corvids.

Simon Lester asked JPH about the BTOs work on the relationship between fox populations and rabbit populations with both showing a decline. JPH answered that the BTO had the data to do more in-depth work on what was driving fox populations. Sir Nicholas queried whether rabbit numbers had been affected by the increase in badgers. Lord Ridley asked whether the BTO had assessed the impact of roadkill and landfill on predator abundance. JPH responded that there are likely to be a range of factors at work such as garden feeding, lack of apex predators etc and that it is a challenge to identify the causes of population changes and relative contributions given the complexities.

The meeting was concluded by Sir Nicholas who thanked everyone for their contribution to a good discussion. The meeting ended at 13.22.

28th August 2019