

The UK Raptor Working Group: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This leaflet is supported by 18 voluntary bodies and provides a summary of the Report of the UK Raptor Working Group, which was set up by the Department of the Environment in 1995 and which reported to the Government in 2000. It considered the impact of birds of prey (raptors) on game management, racing pigeons and the populations of songbirds. It rejected the legalised killing of birds of prey, but made a series of recommendations to help reduce potential conflict between birds of prey and other interests.

- The report of the Raptor Working Group was built on consensus, agreed by representatives of landowning, game management, pigeon-racing and conservation groups.
- Killing birds of prey would place many species in permanent conservation jeopardy. Even in those instances where raptors may cause serious damage, there are very effective non-lethal solutions to reduce the conflict.

Background

The UK Raptor Working Group was set up to consider issues arising from perceived conflicts between the recovery of some bird of prey populations and their impact on game birds and moorland management and on racing pigeons. The Chairs and Secretariat were provided by the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (now Defra) and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. Its membership was a cross-section of all interests:

- Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (now Defra)
- Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC)
- Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department (now Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate)
- British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC)
- Confederation of Long Distance Racing Pigeon Unions of Great Britain & Northern Ireland
- Game Conservancy Trust (now Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust)
- Institute of Terrestrial Ecology (now Centre for Ecology and Hydrology)
- The RSPB
- Scottish Landowners Federation (now Scottish Rural Property and Business Association)
- Scottish Raptor Study Groups

The group produced the *Report of the UK Raptor Working Group* in February 2000, a consensus view from the Group.¹ The report did not recommend any actions which require changes in the law or derogations from the European Union Birds Directive. It rejected lethal control of raptors, but made 25 recommendations for action on a range of issues.

Monitoring birds of prey

The Report reviewed the status of birds of prey in Britain and recommended:

- ongoing support for bird of prey monitoring programmes
- five-yearly hen harrier surveys until the population is no longer threatened by illegal killing
- national sample surveys of the sparrowhawk, buzzard, goshawk and hobby
- investigation of declines in peregrine populations in parts of the Scottish Highlands.



Red kite

Criminal activity against birds of prey

The Report considered that illegal killing continues to restrict the population and distribution of several raptor species in the UK, notably the hen harrier, golden eagle, peregrine and red kite.^{2,3} It recommended:

- more Government action against illegal killing of birds of prey
- a broadening of the Government anti-poisoning campaign to encompass all illegal killing
- statutory licences for the possession of agricultural pesticides
- enhanced enforcement of existing legislation
- a review of crow trap provisions, since many appear to be used illegally
- a review of the legal status of raptor nests outside the breeding season to determine whether the Birds Directive is properly transposed by the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Birds of prey and red grouse

The Report recognised the conflicts between raptor conservation and grouse-shooting and made a series of recommendations designed to reduce the conflict and to benefit moorland conservation. It recommended:

- more support for good moorland management
- diversionary feeding of hen harriers to reduce their predation on grouse chicks in the short term⁴
- trialling methods to provide peregrines with alternative food
- the preparation of a European Union LIFE-Nature-funded project for birds of prey and moorland management



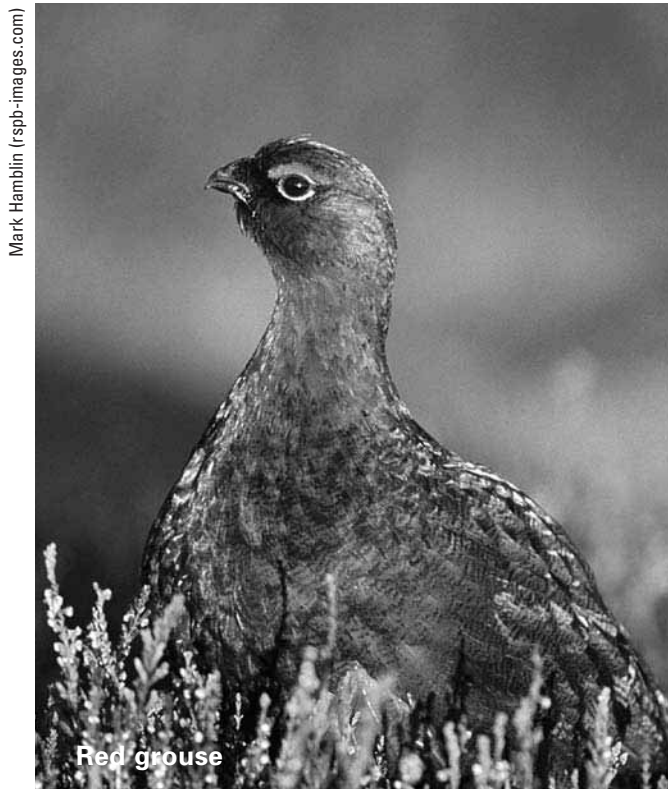
Steve Knell (rspb-images.com)

- setting up demonstration, training and awareness projects on moorland management
- research to understand declines in moorland soil fertility and possible declines in nutrient values of food plants associated with burning and grazing regimes.

Birds of prey and racing pigeons

The working group commissioned research which, for the first time, provided evidence of the causes of losses of racing pigeons.⁵ It found that over 50% of racing pigeons fail to return to their lofts each year. Only 7.5% of racing pigeons are lost to raptors; straying and collisions account for substantially more losses each year. The working group affirmed that there is no provision under existing law for birds of prey to be killed to protect racing pigeons, and it proposed that:

- research should be undertaken into the effectiveness of deterrents, both on the pigeons and around lofts
- the causes of pigeon-straying should be investigated in greater detail
- changes to the pigeon racing season and routes should be considered to reduce the risk of predation during the peak of the peregrine nesting season.



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Peregrine

Birds of prey and pheasants in release pens

The group commissioned research which showed that, overall, losses of pheasants in pens to raptors are small.⁶ It also recommended that the results of ongoing research, which is developing best practices to reduce predation, should be well disseminated to gamekeepers. This process is now well advanced⁷ and has led to greatly reduced levels of persecution in many lowland areas.

Birds of prey and songbirds

The group considered a range of evidence and concluded that 'there is no scientific evidence that birds of prey have affected population levels of British songbirds'. It acknowledged that the effect of modern agriculture is more likely to have been the major cause of songbird declines and recommended continued monitoring.⁸

The way forward

Conservation groups have welcomed the UK Raptor Working Group report and the consensual approach adopted in reaching its conclusions and recommendations. We continue to offer our co-operation to the Government with measures to implement the working group's recommendations and to other stakeholders in developing mutually acceptable solutions to conflicts, which otherwise can distract attention from the real problems affecting our countryside.



Sparrowhawk

Further reading

- 1 JNCC 2000 *The Report of the UK Raptor Working Group*. ISBN 1 85397 078 6.
- 2 Scottish Raptor Study Groups 1998 *The illegal persecution of raptors in Scotland*, 1998. The Stationery Office for Scottish Office Central Research Unit.
- 3 Holmes, J, Walker, D, Davies, P, and Carter, I 2000 *The illegal persecution of raptors in England*. English Nature Research Report 343.
- 4 SNH Moorland Working Group 1999 *Substitute feeding of hen harriers on grouse moors – a practical guide*. Scottish Natural Heritage.
- 5 Shawyer, C R, Clarke, R, and Dixon, N 2000 *A Study into the Raptor Predation of Domestic Pigeons*. DETR, London.
- 6 Allen, D, Packer, C, Feare, C, and Blanchard, R 1999 *Raptors and the rearing of pheasants: problems and management needs*. An interim report by ADAS for BASC.
- 7 BASC, *Birds of prey at pheasant release pens: a practical guide for game managers and gamekeepers*.
- 8 Thomson, D L, Green, R E, Gregory, R D, and Baillie, S R 1998 The widespread declines in songbirds in rural Britain do not correlate with the spread of their avian predators. *Proceedings of the Royal Society. Series B*. 265: 2057–2062.

Mark Hamblin (rspb-images.com)



Skylark

Illustration by John Busby

Supporting organisations



British Trust for Ornithology

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The BTO, as an impartial scientific research trust, has provided critical review of the scientific evidence-base underpinning this document.



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