

## Response to Countryside Alliance and National Gamekeeper Association attacks on those who care about bird of prey conservation

Recent attacks by shooting interests on the RSPB and others concerned about the near extinction of Hen Harriers in England illustrate how threatened the industry feels by the wave of conservationists now speaking out against their relentless persecution of wildlife. We, like most of the British public, welcome the RSPB's proactive and protectionist view of wildlife, and we stand with them against a minority of bullies who seek to exploit wildlife for sport and profit.

The pro-shooting lobby has deliberately misrepresented the facts on bird of prey numbers to obscure the continued threat its industry poses to the survival of certain birds of prey in Britain such as Hen Harriers<sup>i</sup>. The CA's own report confirms that two-thirds of Britain's bird of prey species are still of conservation concern, meaning their numbers remain so low that survival of UK populations could be threatened if efforts to protect them were to cease<sup>ii</sup>. Although population declines have also been seen in a similar proportion of non-raptor species, bird of prey conservation is of particular concern because it is impeded mainly by illegal persecution rather than habitat loss and climate change<sup>iii</sup>. And of the defendants convicted of offences relating to the persecution of birds of prey since 1996, around 75 per cent were gamekeepers<sup>iv</sup>. In other words, the actions of vested shooting interests are the predominant factor preventing the non-shooting majority from enjoying the reestablishment of these spectacular birds throughout the UK.

British populations of most bird of prey species have increased since 1970; however, their numbers had become so perilously small through persecution and pesticide use that they could only increase or become extinct. Despite these increases, the number of breeding pairs in the UK still remains at fewer than 500 for half of our birds of prey, and it is unlikely that any species has returned to early 19<sup>th</sup> century levels. It is widely recognised that most birds of prey in Britain, along with ravens, magpies and other crows, were numerous and widespread in the early 1800s, but suffered catastrophic declines in the latter half of the century when game shooting became widespread<sup>v,vi,vii,viii,ix,x</sup>. Hen Harriers, White-tailed Eagles, Ospreys, Goshawks and Marsh Harriers had all been persecuted to extinction on mainland Britain by the early 1900s<sup>xi</sup>. It is only due to the tireless efforts of the RSPB and other conservationists that we once again have breeding populations of these species in Britain. Sadly, lessons from the past have not been heeded and gamekeepers continue to persecute Hen Harriers, Goshawks and Marsh Harriers<sup>xii,xiii</sup>.

The shooting industry's claim to be protecting threatened species such as curlew and lapwing are disingenuous. These pseudo-conservationists are only interested in championing the small number of species that can survive in their intensively managed grouse factories. True conservationists recognise that healthy predator populations are an essential part of a functioning ecosystem and that it is gamekeepers' war on wildlife and destructive land management practices that lead to species imbalances.

Hen Harriers are not the only raptor species that suffers on grouse moors. Research on Peregrine Falcon pairs nesting on grouse moors in the north of England found that they fledge only half the number of chicks of those which nest away from this kind of habitat and suggested that persecution was widespread on grouse moors in almost all areas of England, countering claims that raptor persecution only occurs on few 'rogue' estates<sup>xiv</sup>. Other research has highlighted similar problems for Golden Eagles on the grouse moors of Scotland<sup>xv</sup>.

Britain's uplands need not be reliant on grouse shooting for income and to prevent the encroachment of wind farms and sheep grazing. Protecting these areas as nature reserves where birds of prey are free to make a comeback would bring economic benefits to upland areas through tourism. This is already happening in other parts of Britain where shooting interests do not exert such undue influence on local communities, including:

- The Isle of Mull receives £5 million a year from tourists coming to see white-tailed sea eagles<sup>xvi</sup>
- An estimated 290,000 people visit osprey-watching sites in the UK each year and bring an estimated £3.5 million per year to the areas around these sites<sup>xvii</sup>
- The peregrine watchpoint at Symond's Yat, where the RSPB protects a regularly occupied nest, is estimated to attract over £500,000 in visitor spending to the Forest of Dean<sup>xviii</sup>

It is time for the shooting industry to acknowledge the role it has played, and continues to play, in the decline of the Hen Harrier and in restricting the recovery of other birds of prey. Only when they take responsibility for their relentless persecution of wildlife, and end it, can we feel secure about the future of birds of prey in Britain.

<sup>i</sup> Scottish Natural Heritage, 2011. Report shows persecution is a significant factor stopping the spread of hen harriers. <http://www.snh.gov.uk/news-and-events/press-releases/press-release-details/?id=458>

<sup>ii</sup> Coalition of 26 nature organisations. 2008. Birds of Prey in the UK: on a wing and a prayer. [http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/wingprayer\\_tcm9-188788.pdf](http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/wingprayer_tcm9-188788.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> RSPB, 2013. Bird Crime: Offences against wild bird legislation in 2012. [http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/birdcrime\\_2012\\_tcm9-359007.pdf](http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/birdcrime_2012_tcm9-359007.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> RSPB, Bird of prey persecution, <http://www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/policy/wildbirdslaw/wildbirdcrime/birdsofprey/index.aspx>

<sup>v</sup> Cobham, D. 2014. A Sparrowhawk's Lament: How British Breeding Birds of Prey Are Faring. Princeton University Press.

<sup>vi</sup> Newton, I. 1972. Birds of prey in Scotland: some conservation problems.

<sup>vii</sup> Gibbons, D., Gates, S., Greenz, R.E., Fuller, R.J. & Fuller, R.M. 2008. Buzzards *Buteo buteo* and Ravens *Corvus corax* in the uplands of Britain: limits to distribution and abundance. *Ibis* **137**: S75-S84.

<sup>viii</sup> Sim, I.M.W., Dillon, I.A., Eaton, M.A., Etheridge, B., Lindley, P., Riley H., Saunders, R., Sharpe, C. & Tickner, M.. 2007. Status of the Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* in the UK and Isle of Man in 2004, and a comparison with the 1988/89 and 1998 surveys: Capsule The population of breeding Hen Harriers in the UK and Isle of Man

increased between 1998 and 2004, although country and regional trends differed. *Bird Study* **54**: 256-267

<sup>ix</sup> Coalition of 26 nature organisations. 2008. Birds of Prey in the UK: on a wing and a prayer. [http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/wingprayer\\_tcm9-188788.pdf](http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/wingprayer_tcm9-188788.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> Birkhead, T. 1991. The magpies: the ecology and behaviour of black-billed and yellow-billed magpies. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. T&AD Poyser, London.

<sup>xi</sup> Coalition of 26 nature organisations. 2008. Birds of Prey in the UK: on a wing and a prayer. [http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/wingprayer\\_tcm9-188788.pdf](http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/wingprayer_tcm9-188788.pdf)

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xiii</sup> RSPB, 2013. Bird Crime: Offences against wild bird legislation in 2012. [http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/birdcrime\\_2012\\_tcm9-359007.pdf](http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/birdcrime_2012_tcm9-359007.pdf)

<sup>xiv</sup> Amar, A., Court, I.R., Davidson, M., Downing, S., Grimshaw, T., Pickford, T. & Raw, D. 2012. Linking nest histories, remotely sensed land use data and wildlife crime records to explore the impact of grouse moor management on peregrine falcon populations. *Biological Conservation* **145**: 86-95.

<sup>xv</sup> Whitfield, D.P., Fielding, A.H., McLeod, D.R.A., & Howarth, P.F. 2004. Modelling the effects of persecution on the population dynamics of golden eagles in Scotland. *Biological Conservation* **119**: 319-333.

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<sup>xvi</sup> BBC News Scotland, 2011. Mull's economy soars on wings of white-tailed eagles.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-business-13783555>

<sup>xvii</sup> Coalition of 26 nature organisations. 2008. Birds of Prey in the UK: on a wing and a prayer.

[http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/wingprayer\\_tcm9-188788.pdf](http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/wingprayer_tcm9-188788.pdf)

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid