

## Action Countryside – SGA Year of the Wader

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association's Alex Hogg looks at how 'conservation isn't working' in Scotland

The headline reads **“Keepers step in to save threatened waders”**

'Conservation isn't working' claims the SGA as it declares 2014 the Year of the Wader and seizes the initiative on upland bird conservation

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association has seized the initiative on conservation by declaring 2014 the SGA Year of the Wader. The move will highlight the environmental benefits of traditional grouse moor management and make a strong case for licensed predator control.

SGA chairman Alex Hogg slammed existing conservation policies, and urged government to rethink its approach before it is too late. "Conservation in this country has centred around the advancement of protectionist policies, site designations and central hand-outs for habitat programmes without any stipulation for predator control," he said. The public were entitled to ask where the birds have gone and what value they are getting for their money.

The SGA's new initiative will highlight the plight of ground-nesting upland birds, including the lapwing, curlew and golden plover – all of which breed up to three times more successfully on grouse moors, due to heather burning and legal predator control by gamekeepers.

The benefits of predator control were proved in a study by GWCT scientists in Northumberland. The Upland Predation Experiment spanned the years 2000-2009 and showed that predation is a major factor in the decline of waders and other birds on moorland. These birds bred three times more successfully in areas where gamekeepers controlled foxes, crows, stoats and weasels.

The SGA says keepers are deeply concerned that wader numbers are now declining in kept moorland areas too. Scotland has lost 56 per cent of its lapwing and curlew in only 17 years. Conservationists blame climate change and habitat loss through farming practices, but gamekeepers who work the land every day reckon this is only a small part of the story, and the SGA will be highlighting the need for tougher action.

**The SGA warns that unless Scottish government listens to practical land managers, waders could pass the point of no return.** They point to Wales as an example, where 75 per cent have been lost in the last few decades.



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“It is clear that new conservation responses are needed to help our vulnerable ground-nesting birds,” Alex Hogg said. Millions of pounds of tax payers’ money has been spent on costly habitat programmes on the advice of conservation bodies, but this approach has failed to deliver the answers for birds such as waders – as proved by the State of Nature Report, which showed 60 per cent of the UK’s species continuing to decline, and the latest BTO Breeding Bird Survey.

“Our keepers, who have physically protected and work to protect curlew, lapwing and plovers on their ground for years, have been warning that this is happening. We now have an imbalance in our uplands that needs to be addressed by government before Scotland goes the same way as Wales,” Alex Hogg warned.

The SGA points to the disastrous fall in waders at Berwyn in North Wales since grouse shooting there ceased and it became a nature reserve. Formerly a rich grouse shooting area, the reserve is now run by the Countryside Council for Wales, with the largest block at Severn Trent Water operated as a bird reserve by the RSPB.



The Common Curlew population declined by 79 per cent between 1983 to 2002 on Berwyn



Owing to continued mismanagement lapwings were extinct in the Berwyn SPA 21 years ago



Golden plover numbers had plummeted from 10 to only one by 2002 in the Berwyn SPA

During the study period – in which grouse moor management stopped – lapwing became extinct, golden plover declined from ten birds to one, and curlew numbers fell 79 per cent. Red grouse declined 54 per cent, hen harrier numbers crashed 50 per cent, and black grouse declined by 78 per cent. Now 75 per cent of Wales’s surviving black grouse population exists on the one remaining kept moor at Berwyn. In the same period, protected buzzards doubled in abundance, peregrines increased seven-fold and raven numbers doubled.

During its Year of the Wader, the SGA will invite all grouse moors in Scotland to report counts of wading birds, as well as monitoring their productivity at two critical times of the year. The figures will give an accurate picture of how waders are faring on kept land, and will provide a baseline for similar counts in future years.

SGA officials hope the data can inform how proper management for waders, including legal predator control and rotational muirburn, can be delivered in areas that are failing. The keepers’ association believes that predator control will be a key part of the solution. Alex Hogg explains: “It has been widely accepted that predation by larger predators can have a devastating affect on the survival of vulnerable

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prey species, particularly when the predators are increasing and their prey decreasing significantly. The Welsh example shows this clearly.

“The government needs to adapt to this scientific reality and use the legal licensing powers it holds – as it has done in Orkney recently by allowing islanders to bring greylag geese numbers back to sustainable levels to protect cereal crops – to relieve the pressure on some of our precious wild birds.

“Licences have also been issued to protect sheep at lambing time from ravens so there are already examples where the powers the government holds can be used to bring about positive results.

“Throwing public cash, which will be siphoned by conservation groups for habitat schemes, without control of predators, is self-defeating,” says Alex Hogg. His argument is supported by research carried out by Dick Potts at the Game Conservancy (now GWCT) in the 1970s. This showed that predator control unlocked the potential of habitat improvement. Without predator control, generalist predators respond better to the habitat improvement than the birds it is designed to benefit.

Alex Hogg summed up his hopes for the scheme: “We believe the SGA Year of the Wader, and our ongoing counts, will help the government and the public realise what is happening and what needs to be done before conservation-listed curlew and lapwing in particular disappear.”

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