



## **Fair Game - A Response**

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I am sure many of our members will have seen the BBC production, Fair Game, which was shown on Tuesday night (10 May 2011) on BBC2. Although initially put forward as a programme looking into Scottish sporting estates and activity, it was clear to us from the outset that this programme would seek to focus on some of the negative aspects in our sector. It was therefore vitally important that we engaged with the programme in a concerted effort to make the programme as balanced and factual as possible. My thanks go to Jamie Williamson at Alvie Estate, to Simon Blackett and Peter Fraser at Invercauld Estate and to Mark Oddy and Simon Lester at Langholm Estate for putting the time and effort in and putting across the very positive message about the huge benefits that flow from Scottish sporting estates.

While the programme, following a very dubious beginning, later sought to investigate the subject with more balance, it is very frustrating that both this programme and the RSPB tried to muddy the waters by creating the impression that landowners are seeking widespread culls of golden eagles and hen harriers. This is simply NOT the case and this myth is being created to divert attention from the real issue at hand. This is the fact that common raptors such as buzzards and ravens are now at very healthy population levels and as a result they are now having a significant negative impact in certain areas on both game birds, for which we believe there is a good economic case to require this problem to be addressed, and also on other protected wild birds which are worthy of more effective protection such as waders and black cock.

There is an urgent and real need for a management tool and process that works to address both these areas of concern and to allow an effective balance in how we manage our wildlife in Scotland. We will keep pushing for this with our colleagues in the industry. We have been very clear on these points both in this programme, although the BBC chose not to reflect this, and direct to the RSPB. As a result, I was particularly unimpressed with the RSPB comments in this programme as they clearly sought to scaremonger on this issue and to give the impression that landowners and estates were wanting to kill golden eagles and hen harriers.

Now it is worth noting that over the last two years there have been two working groups with the industry and Scottish Government to look at the licensing process and these discussions were focused at two principle problem areas - raven and buzzard impacts. The first looked at the process that issues licences to conserve wild birds and the second looked at the process that issues licences to protect livestock and how to extend that to cover pheasant and partridge poults in and around rearing/release pens. The RSPB was fully represented at these discussions as part of these working groups that worked together to agree and sign off the standards and guidelines. It is quite clear that the RSPB knows exactly the nature of the problem and what we are trying to achieve as they have been fully involved in the process. I therefore find it incredibly frustrating that despite being involved in the process and agreeing the standards and guidelines that would provide licences to control ravens and buzzards, they continue to ignore this as the issue at hand and seek at all opportunity, including in this BBC programme, to give the false impression we are seeking to kill birds of conservation concern like golden eagles. This muddying of the waters and trying to portray landowners as hell bent on wanting to legally kill golden eagles is unhelpful to say the least and is a blatant distortion of the truth and does nothing to help build progressive and positive relationships.

We cannot hide from the abhorrent fact that golden eagles do get poisoned, that is clear from the official SASA statistics which I accept as fact. Although thankfully very few in number, this is just totally unacceptable and has to stop. Anyone who continues in this illegal practice is doing his or her own sector, friends, colleagues, employer, employees and family a huge disservice and will ultimately destroy this part of the sector. However, I do believe that it is wrong to assume that because a golden eagle has been so killed, that it was the intended target. I do not say this in an attempt to excuse it, but my own personal belief and it is one I have shared with the Government, Police and the RSPB is that the golden eagle so killed is not the target of the poisoner who instead is seeking to protect what he or she values - game birds and other protected wild birds - from the ravages of buzzards and ravens whose numbers are now at significantly high levels and to which they currently

have no workable remedy. This is what I mean when I say we must look deeper at the causes of crime in this area to understand properly why this is happening and to cut through the unhelpful propaganda that is seeking to deflect the truth. We need to try to address the problem from all angles - effective prevention as well as effective enforcement, we need both. I personally do not see this as "bizarre" or as "holding society to ransom" as the RSPB accused me of in the BBC programme, but instead I see this as a pragmatic approach to finding a resolution to a conflict on which both sides have some very valid concerns.

I feel it was also quite disingenuous of the programme to seek to compare the RSPB estate at Abernethy and the National Trust for Scotland estate at Mar Lodge with other sporting estates where the production and management of grouse and deer is on a much more commercial basis. Between these interests the motivations for owning and managing land are different, as they are with many estates across Scotland, but all are equally valid. As a result the primary management objectives are very different and, most crucially, so is the need to make a viable economic return. So while the two conservation estates featured might be quite happy to have less grouse and deer on their estates as a result of their own management objectives and budget parameters, that does not mean that their model of management is transferable to other estates where the sporting operation and achieving a sustainable economic return is the priority. So really, such comparisons are quite meaningless and again only serve to muddy the waters.

As a final word, it has been very interesting for me to have had several discussions since the programme was shown earlier this week with people who I know and respect and who are not connected with sporting estates or our industry at all (in fact one is a geography teacher in a city school and another lives in the western isles and runs a community owned trust). From an outsider's point of view, as expressed by them, the overwhelming message they took from the programme was the huge economic and social importance of Scotland's sporting estates and the need for better balance in how Scotland's countryside and wildlife are managed. Interestingly the views as expressed by conservation interests on the programme were seen as unrealistic and uncompromising.

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