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Gamekeeper



Gamekeepers are prepared to jump through all the hoops to conserve our wading birds, but “professional committee-goers” continue to stall and dodge the issues

This year the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) will be asking for the legal measures, which are clearly written into the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, to be properly honoured and for applications for control licences to be judged on merit alone. This will give our members and others a chance to manage the conflicts they face — economic or conservation — appropriately and legally, something that the SGA has been pushing for since its beginning.

The main speaker at the SGA's annual general meeting in March will be Roseanna Cunningham, cabinet secretary for environment, climate change and land reform. We hope that she will have some positive news regarding species management in Scotland. I fear that the demise of the curlew is imminent, unless we pull out all the stops to save it. We also hope we can find a way to adapt to the reality of the ever-increasing numbers of badgers, buzzards and ravens and the effect the conservation success of these species has had on the UK's rapidly declining wader population.

Staff from the Scottish Natural Heritage licensing team will also be on hand to answer the many questions that gamekeepers will want to raise. Nobody in Scotland is more ready and willing to save our waders than the keepers. Nobody has the skill and knowledge base to do the job so effectively, yet time and time again we find ourselves treated at some stakeholder meetings with the same contempt as misbehaving children.

It was the gamekeepers who pushed for the Understanding Predation Project to be driven forward in Scotland to help waders. The project is still alive but the arrogance of some government officials and professional committee-goers, as I call them, knows no bounds. Over the past 20 years I have watched so-called professional people move from one committee to another, receiving public funds to do so, and all the time I question whether they truly have the intention of resolving any of the issues that affect our daily working lives.

Some are so stuck in their own world while, in the foreground, our wildlife is becoming extinct around them. Just look at the capercaillie, the grey partridge and the waders as examples. Salaried



The curlew is in danger — but no one in Scotland is more ready and willing to save waders than the gamekeepers

officials, tasked to help, have made things worse by constantly stalling and dodging issues.

The frustration among SGA members has been palpable. They feel that they have jumped through hoops since our formation 20 years ago, trying to work with the powers that be. We have sat on many committees and we have made big progress in our industry on deer best practice, hunting with dogs and terrier work, snaring, the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill, access, hill tracks, muirburn, traps, buzzard licences and tail shortening for working dogs, to name but a few.

“The demise of the curlew is imminent, unless we pull out all the stops to save it”

One of the reasons the SGA was set up was to stop the police raiding our houses without proper evidence of wrongdoing. Wives and children were being subjected to dawn raids, houses were being pulled to pieces; in some cases children's cough mixture was confiscated in case poison was being hidden in the bottle.

Hopefully, these bad old days are gone. The SGA has worked extremely hard with our members to drive the poisoning incidents almost off the map. We have been very successful and last year

it looks as if we had only two incidents of poisoning that involved a raptor. If the police had these results in any other form of crime it would be in all the news media for months.

Unaccountable

Still, all we hear from the RSPB is that this can only be the tip of the iceberg. The Scottish Raptor Study Group, along with the RSPB, has launched a petition calling for the licensing of Scottish shooting estates. This group has been publicly funded since inception and has taken access on estates for years without even having to inform the keeper or landowner. In this regard it is unaccountable as it can log whatever it wishes, with little or no checks or balances on the process or the effects of its monitoring.

It seems strange that a group lacking in accountability is calling for shoots to be licensed. We will not stand by and allow double standards to drive wives, children and grandchildren from their homes. Everybody who works and lives in the countryside must now be wary that compliance with such organisations, sadly, is compliance with people who are attacking our jobs and way of life. It should never have got to this stage.

If the SGA had not been formed 20 years ago, what we live for would have been swallowed up by different government bodies. Some people hate the truth, but we will always tell it. It is that honesty which has gained us the respect that we have. 🐦

This column is in association with the NGO and the SGA

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