

Heads Up for Harriers Project and the Role of Species Champions

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-08342, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on the heads up for harriers project and the role of species champions. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament commends the Heads Up for Harriers Project on what it sees as its intense efforts to protect the hen harrier from extinction; underlines what it considers the importance of the role of species champion, with currently over 90 Members signed up to be champions, in promoting and protecting many of the wildlife found across the country; believes that, with specific regard to the hen harrier, there is need for action to protect the species in light of 2016 national hen harrier survey, which suggested that there had been a 9% decline in the number of sightings in Scotland from the previous study in 2010, falling from 505 pairs to 460; understands that this national population decline is further highlighted in Angus North and Mearns and across North East Scotland, where the 2016 study found that the number of hen harrier pairs had plummeted from a peak of 28 in 1998 to just one in 2014; commends the considerable efforts of the Heads Up for Harriers Project in trying to reverse the declining population, with 2017 figures showing that 37 young birds successfully fledging from nests in seven of the 21 estates that have signed up to the project, and recognises both the specific challenges facing all species currently represented by a Member species champion and the pivotal role that it believes the champions play in promoting and preserving Scotland's wildlife.

17:06

Mairi Gougeon (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I start tonight's debate by speaking first to the second part of my motion and thanking Graeme Dey for all the work that he has done in promoting the species champion initiative. If it had not been for that, I would not have brought the debate in my role as species champion for the hen harrier—which is, sadly, a red-listed species of conservation concern.

It is also fair to say that I did not, when I took on the role, know what I was letting myself in for. It has been one of the most challenging and contentious things that I have undertaken in Parliament, but I am glad that I did it and that we have the dedicated time to discussing the subject today. In spite of its being challenging and contentious, my interest today is exactly the same as it was when I assumed my role as species champion for the hen harrier. My interest is the welfare of the bird itself—a magnificent raptor that I want to see flourishing in Scotland. Unfortunately, however, we are not at that stage

yet. One of the main reasons for that has been illegal persecution of the species over a long period.

Historically, the hen harrier was persecuted to extinction on mainland United Kingdom in the 19th century. A population survived in Orkney, and during the 20th century harriers managed to re-establish themselves on the mainland. In some areas the population grew to expected levels because of the suitability of the habitat. In most areas, though, harriers were still subjected to persecution, which continues to be one of the main reasons for there being so few of those raptors today.

Across Scotland, we have the habitat for the species to exist. Almost half of Scotland has habitat that is capable of supporting a hen harrier territory, with nearly 37,000km² estimated to be suitable for breeding harriers. Work that was carried out by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, based on three national surveys of hen harriers in 1998, 2004 and 2010, and using its predictive modelling, estimated that the national hen harrier population of Scotland should be in the range of 1,467 to 1,790 breeding pairs. Instead, we have fewer than 500. The latest hen harrier survey shows that there are only 460 breeding pairs, which is a fall from 505 in 2010. In the past 12 years, the population has dropped by 27 per cent.

Harriers are particularly scarce in my constituency of Angus North and Mearns, which is an area where they have existed in the past. The British Trust for Ornithology's birdtrack project has recorded only nine sightings of harriers in Angus and eight in Aberdeenshire for 2017 so far.

So, what is being done about that? Since the "Natural Justice" initiative report in 2008, the Scottish Government has had in place a process for prevention, investigation and prosecution of wildlife crime.

There is the partnership for action against wildlife crime in Scotland—PAW Scotland—and the PAW Scotland raptor group, whose membership comprises representatives of a variety of organisations and sectors including the police, the shooting industry, the science community and conservation groups, and whose ultimate aim is to reduce raptor crime. With so many groups involved, one would think that harrier conservation would be progressing, but that has not necessarily been the case. Only this year there was the disappearance of hen harrier *Calluna* and the shooting of a hen harrier in Leadhills.

This type of crime is particularly hard to prosecute. I heard direct evidence on that in the Justice Committee when we held an inquiry on the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. The

nature of the crime means that it happens in remote areas and is particularly hard to police, given the huge areas that wildlife crime officers are expected to cover.

When I attended the hen harrier day at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' Loch Leven reserve in the summer with Andy Wightman and Alexander Stewart, we heard from people who are involved in investigations across the UK, looked at the simply horrific footage of what is being done to the birds and heard about how hard it has been to prosecute cases in Scotland because of the law on corroboration, in particular. We will all be aware of the case earlier this year in which video evidence of a hen harrier being shot was deemed to be inadmissible in court.

The Scottish Government held a satellite tagging review earlier this year, and measures were introduced by the Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform as a result. I look forward to hearing how those are progressing, in the hope that they will tackle some of the issues that have been identified.

On preventing crime and supporting conservation, an issue that is at the heart of all this is the lack of trust between conservation groups and the commercial interests of the owners of upland habitats. I completely understand that lack of trust, but the heads up for harriers project is specifically trying to tackle it.

The project is led by Scottish Natural Heritage for PAW Scotland, which works with estates to identify, monitor and, thereby, protect hen harrier nests. It is vital because it highlights the other reasons why hen harrier nests fail and gives a fuller picture of what the species is up against. I met SNH, the wildlife crime unit and Scottish Land & Estates to discuss the project, and I saw for myself the other factors that lead to the failure of nests, including fox attacks and chicks simply overheating.

The project is still in its early stages, but the number of estates that are involved has gradually increased over the past few years, from five two years ago to 21 this year. The number of estates that are managed for driven grouse that are part of the project has risen from three in 2015 to 14 this year, and the number of estates with successful nests has risen from two in 2015 to six this year, with 37 young having successfully fledged. Those 21 estates are only a fraction of the number that exist across Scotland, so I urge the many others to get involved and to get onside with the project. Although the heads up for harriers project has its critics, we have seen the number of successful nests and successful fledglings increase, which can only be a good thing.

Another positive is the work that is carried out by the Langholm moor demonstration project, which ran from 2008 until this year, in which the use of various techniques including diversionary feeding has seen populations of hen harriers grow alongside grouse, although the final findings are still to be published. The project is not without its critics, but it is a hugely important piece of work.

If my role as species champion for the hen harrier has taught me anything, it is that this is an extremely complex issue. There is a delicate balance to be struck in conservation of this vital species. I genuinely want to thank Kelvin Thomson, Duncan Orr-Ewing, Iain Thomson and the countless others who have taken the time to meet me and help me to get to grips with some of the issues involved.

The heads up for harriers project might not be the immediate panacea, but it is a promising step in the right direction and, along with the Langholm moor demonstration project, it shows how a balance can be achieved.

We need to take every available measure to crack down on the serious crime that is committed against raptors, and to tackle the illegal persecution, of which we have all seen direct evidence and which has brought the species to the verge of extinction.

At the same time, we must recognise the good work that is taking place. We cannot tar all estates with the same brush: we must acknowledge the positive steps that some estates and gamekeepers are taking to promote the species.

We need conservation groups and shooting interests to set aside their natural distrust and to try to work together. Only then we will have a hope of protecting and encouraging growth in the numbers of this magnificent species.

17:14

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I own a landholding in the Highland region.

I thank Mairi Gougeon for bringing this important issue to Parliament. As species champion for the merlin, I have a keen interest in the conservation and protection of our indigenous birds of prey, especially the merlin.

I recently met members of the Scottish raptor monitoring scheme, and I want to acknowledge their crucial work in surveying birds of prey. Indeed, members of the SRMS won the political advocate of the year award at the recent nature of Scotland awards, which is further proof of the important work that they have carried out.

As Mairi Gougeon said, it is important to appreciate the wide range of factors that influence raptor populations. In other words, in addition to human persecution, birds of prey face existing underlying pressures through indirect human activity and processes including urbanisation, which can cause habitat loss.

Merlin populations were heavily affected by organochlorine pesticides from the 1950s, and the species hit an all-time low in the 1960s. Despite a decrease in pesticide contamination levels since the 1980s, the merlin is still the most heavily contaminated species of raptor in the UK, according to the RSPB. Populations have been slow to recover and have been hindered further by human activity, which can directly affect the breeding success rate. In 2015, the merlin had the highest percentage of breeding failures that were caused by direct human activity.

As we are all aware, deliberate and illegal persecution continues to threaten the very existence of raptors. We need to end that persecution and find a way in which we can grow and sustain raptor populations in Scotland.

There has been much criticism of people in the grouse industry who actively persecute birds of prey. I think that we all acknowledge that grouse shooting is an important industry for the rural economy of our country. The vast majority of land managers, whether they are owners or employees, use sustainable environmental management practices to a high standard and operate within the law.

It is important to note that many estates carry out measures to conserve and preserve raptor populations. Although I have become quite involved in issues to do with the merlin, I did not know a lot about harriers until this debate about the heads up for harriers project. I commend Mairi Gougeon for promoting the work, and I am delighted that 21 estates have signed up to the project.

Raising awareness is only one side of the coin; we need to work with projects and with estates to encourage people to take an active role in protection of birds of prey. In my view, collaboration is key. I note the supportive briefing that Scottish Land & Estates has provided for the debate. The heads up for harriers project is certainly a model to be followed in other parts of Scotland.

We have to acknowledge that there remains a small minority of people who continue to take a number of extreme and illegal measures to increase grouse populations, including unlawful persecution of raptors. Those actions are deplorable and we should all condemn them.

One of the main challenges that we face in conservation of birds is the collection of data. The number of confirmed cases of persecution fluctuates noticeably, largely due to the fact that cases are stumbled upon by chance. The Scottish raptor study group insists that such cases

“represent just the tip of a large iceberg”,

when it comes to the real figure for crimes that are committed. That is why the work of projects such as heads up for harriers and the Scottish raptor monitoring scheme is so important. Their continuing efforts to gather more data will help us to establish how best to deal with the issue.

However, there is room for optimism: the problem is not beyond our control. Over the past 30 years, we have seen numbers recover in several raptor species: buzzards are now common in many parts of Scotland, and ospreys have been the subject of significant investment in nest protection schemes. I am acutely aware of osprey success in my home, Lochaber.

By raising awareness and encouraging active engagement with conservation schemes such as heads up for harriers, I am confident that we can save our indigenous birds of prey from extinction.

17:19

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate Mairi Gougeon on securing this debate and I declare an interest, as a member of the RSPB.

I speak in a more light-hearted vein, as species champion for the house sparrow. I have every right to do so, as every morning without fail I feed a flock of some 20 house sparrows, which commute from my neighbour's holly tree to my plentiful feeding stations, take a dip in another neighbour's bird bath, perch on my weeping birch to preen themselves and then return to the safety of the holly tree. They have living the good life down to a T.

But let me take members back 66 million years, to the time when dinosaurs ruled the world. Then, an asteroid struck what is now the Yucatán peninsula in Mexico, sending a rain of debris around the world that set every forest ablaze. The soot, ash and debris that were thrown into the atmosphere blocked out the sun for several years.

Life on earth was devastated. With the sun blocked out, plants would have died off around the whole globe, decimating the plant-eating dinosaurs and the carnivores that preyed on them. Perhaps only seeds would have survived, and a small group of dinosaurs existing primarily on seeds and insects, for which teeth would not be necessary.

Birds have no teeth, which brings us back to the house sparrow. As a small seed-eating bird it is very close to the kind of dinosaur that would have survived that mass extinction. Their size would have allowed some to hide and shelter when the blast wave came, and their seed-eating habits would have given them a plentiful supply of food. That leads me to an observation that we do not hear very often: are we listening to bird song in the morning, or is it dinosaur song?

That diversion explains why that wee unglamorous bird knows to this day how to make it through life's challenges. I conclude, as I have before, with Norman McCaig's poem "Sparrow", which wraps it all up.

“He's no artist.
His taste in clothes is more
dowdy than gaudy.
And his nest—that blackbird, writing
pretty scrolls on the air with the gold nib of his beak,
would call it a slum.

To stalk solitary on lawns,
to sing solitary in midnight trees,
to glide solitary over gray Atlantics—
not for him: he'd rather
a punch-up in a gutter.

He carries what learning he has
lightly—it is in fact, based only
on the usefulness whose result
is survival. A proletarian bird.
No scholar.

But when winter soft-shoes in
and these other birds—
ballet dancers, musicians, architects—
die the snow
and freeze to branches,
watch him happily flying
on the O-levels and A-levels
of the air.”

Yes—his dinosaur predecessors survived the asteroid attack, so it is no skin off his beak to survive a Scottish winter.

17:22

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I congratulate Mairi Gougeon for securing the debate and thank her for her work as species champion for hen harriers. She seems to be extremely conscientious in that and she gave an excellent speech.

I am species champion for the great yellow bumblebee and once a year, for these debates, the great yellow bumblebee badge gets taken out of the box so that I can proudly wear it in the chamber. It is a species that was once found across the whole of the United Kingdom, but it is now found only on the north coast of Scotland and some of the islands.

Like the great yellow bumblebee—as we have already heard—hen harriers are facing serious

decline and need urgent help. That is why it is important that we get the opportunity to congratulate the heads up for harriers project and to discuss the further work that needs to be done to protect those birds.

According to the latest study by the RSPB, the numbers of the iconic raptor have fallen by nearly 10 per cent since 2010. As we have heard, hen harriers are down to 500 breeding pairs, which makes the species vulnerable to the effects of habitat degradation and wildlife crime. Studies suggest that the main reason for the decline in hen harrier numbers is persecution—illegal killings and trappings of nesting pairs. The number of harriers near driven grouse moor areas is particularly low, and in some areas they are regionally extinct.

The hen harriers are wonderful birds of prey. They are native to Scotland, and they hold much interest due to the males' sky-dancing mating display to attract females, in which they circle above the ground and then plummet to the earth before sweeping up at the last moment, rolling over and heading down again. I recommend that for Christmas parties, perhaps—people might want to try to interpret it.

With more than 80 per cent of the UK population of hen harriers based in Scotland, it is an extremely worrying sign when the numbers here drop. By the end of the 19th century, they could be found only in the northern and western isles, where there was no persecution. Conservationists have been working extremely hard since then and numbers peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, but they have since started to decline again. As we have heard, in 2017, 21 estates signed up to the heads up for hen harriers scheme, and seven estates had successful nests, with 37 young fledglings.

More needs to be done. Getting more estates, particularly those with grouse moors, signed up to the project would increase research on how many young there are, but the work cannot stop at the nest, because once the chicks leave, illegal persecution is still a problem.

Almost all the losses have occurred in areas managed intensively for driven grouse shooting. There should be more investment in satellite tagging. The birds must be monitored so that their progress can be followed. I strongly endorse the RSPB's LIFE project, which incorporates satellite tagging, on-the-ground monitoring, nest protection and work with volunteers to protect hen harriers across northern England and southern and eastern Scotland.

We also need to support the Scottish SPCA and the police in cracking down on wildlife crime across Scotland, and ensuring that both the penalties and the conviction rates are increased significantly.

I thank the member again for initiating this debate. Hen harriers are a barometer of the health of our biodiversity in rural Scotland. We must support every initiative and opportunity to support this iconic raptor.

17:25

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I congratulate Mairi Gougeon on securing this debate, and apologise to you, Presiding Officer, and to the members in the chamber, for having to leave before the debate has concluded, owing to another engagement.

The issue of hen harriers—or lack of them—in areas of Scotland is deeply serious. The polarised views on the subject sadly reflect the wider argument on raptor persecution.

Nothing can be done to change the past unacceptable, criminal and historical persecution of these birds, so, without in any way seeking to gloss over what may have happened, I will focus on the here and now and, indeed, the future, which undoubtedly must have the heads up for harriers project at its heart.

Although the headline figures of having 21 estates participating in the scheme, which produced 37 young this year, are pleasing, particularly when 11 of those estates are located in the Angus glens and Aberdeenshire, which have such a poor reputation around hen harriers, I was more intrigued by the underlying data. A total of 11 nests were monitored, with nine producing those 37 birds. Incidentally, that compares with five nests fledging 14 chicks in 2016. The reasons behind the failure of the other two nests were what caught my eye. The first failure was down to fox predation; at the other nest, which was located on a grouse moor in the Angus glens—an area where, notoriously, no hen harriers have been recorded for many years—natural causes were at the root of the failure.

In the black and white world of raptor persecution, the absence of hen harriers, or nest failure, is almost inevitably blamed on illegal activities—and let us be clear that such activity is utterly unacceptable—but here we have evidence to back the counterargument that, sometimes, although not as often as some might argue, there are other explanations. Therefore, although we need to clamp down hard on human predators, there must also be a role for managing the other issues.

For those of us who occupy that middle ground—who abhor raptor persecution, but are frustrated by the attitude and approach adopted by some at the other end of the argument—the key to making progress is evidence, as well as, I would contend, enforcing the muirburn code and thereby

ensuring that potential hen harrier habitat is not removed by burning hillsides of a certain gradient in breach of the regulations.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): Does the member agree that, on persecution, it is important that we analyse the possibility of not requiring corroboration for the terrible crimes that happen, because of the remoteness of the areas in which they happen. Leadhills, which is in my constituency, is an example.

Graeme Dey: That is a difficult topic to address in a debate of this nature.

As I was saying, it is only with evidence and by enforcing the muirburn code properly that we will challenge those who are guilty of exaggeration and those who are indulging in deflection and denial, and make the progress that the overwhelming majority of us want to see being made.

To that end, let us send a message from this Parliament tonight that we want to see many more estates, particularly those involved in driven grouse shooting, participating in the heads up for harriers scheme, thereby restoring species numbers and developing our understanding of the impediments to that.

Mairi Gougeon's motion references not only her championing of the hen harrier, but the wider species champion programme. I am proud to be an active participant in the programme, but rather than wax lyrical about my role, I will highlight the work of some of the real heroes of the scheme—not the MSPs who front it, and not even Scottish Environment LINK and its member organisations, but the people who are out in the field almost daily, seeking to save these species. Right at the heart of that work stands the staff of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.

I had previously visited the botanics to learn about the work that it was doing to restore woolly willow numbers, and I heard about its replanting activities in Glen Doll in my constituency, but three months ago I joined the staff on an expedition to Corrie Sharroch and saw up close and personal the lengths that they go to in order to deliver their objectives. They were in the area to replant alpine blue-sow-thistle, which is another of the 181 threatened Scottish plant species. I tagged along in order to view the nearby woolly willows; I say that they were nearby, but the alpine blue-sow-thistle was in some rather high-altitude, inaccessible locations. The heights that the botanists scaled to plant alpine blue-sow were quite literally on another level. It was dangerous work.

Those guys are the real heroes of the species champions programme, but the irony is that, as a non-non-governmental organisation, the Royal

Botanic Garden Edinburgh is not a member of Scottish Environment LINK and so is not formally part of the programme.

I wish that there was time available for me to more fully illustrate the role that the botanics performs in this area but, frankly, we would be here all night—besides, I noticed the Presiding Officer warning me to wind up. Therefore, I will settle for reiterating my absolute respect and admiration for the work that it does.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You milked that rather well, Mr Dey.

17:31

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): I thank Mairi Gougeon for securing the debate, which covers two topics: the heads up for harriers project and the role of species champions. I agree with her and other members that the role of the champions is important in raising awareness and promoting the protection of various threatened species of wildlife, and I am delighted to be one of the 90 species champions who are lending support to the initiative—I am championing the mountain everlasting wildflower.

I also endorse the member's concern about her species, the hen harrier, and the need for action to protect the declining Scottish population. However, I cannot support her view that the heads up for harriers project has undertaken

“intense efforts to protect the hen harrier from extinction”,

nor her assertion that the project has made

“considerable efforts ... in trying to reverse the declining population”.

Rather, the project fails to address the fundamental threat to hen harriers, which is the illegal persecution of the species on some intensively managed driven grouse moors. That fact is recognised by decades of scientific publications, and it is acknowledged in the Scottish Government's most recent annual wildlife crime report, which was published just the other week.

Indeed, I believe that the project is being used as a greenwashing exercise to hide the criminal activities that are undertaken by some in the driven grouse shooting industry and to promote the misleading impression that it is voluntarily co-operating to clean up its act.

The main objective of the project is

“to better understand the threats facing Scotland's hen harriers, and ultimately promote recovery of the species, by working in partnership with land managers”.

That is to be achieved by placing cameras at hen harrier nests on private estates to identify the cause of nest failures. The approach is flawed,

because people who are intent on killing hen harriers will not target a nest if they know that a camera is present, so the project will not officially identify illegal persecution as a cause of nest failure, whereas natural causes, such as poor weather and fox predation, which Graeme Dey told us about, will be disproportionately recorded.

Graeme Dey talked about the need for an evidence-based approach and obviously the project will result in biased data; indeed, the grouse shooting industry has already pointed to it as official evidence that hen harrier breeding attempts are failing only because of natural causes, and has suggested that illegal hen harrier persecution is an “historical controversy”, as Tim Baynes of the Scottish Land & Estates moorland group wrote in June this year.

Claudia Beamish: Does Andy Wightman agree that a consultation on the licensing of driven grouse moors would go some way towards providing an appropriate analysis of the very serious problem of persecution?

Andy Wightman: It might do, but the problem with the crime that we are talking about is that it is committed out of sight and there is no corroboration, as Claudia Beamish pointed out earlier. Therefore, I think that such a consultation would be of limited value in targeting and resolving illegal persecution and getting better data on it.

In addition to the flawed approach is the issue of transparency—or, more important, the lack of it. As has been stated and as members have pointed out, in the three years that the project has been running, seven of the 11 successful nests have been situated on estates managed for driven grouse shooting. That claim is disputed by conservationists, who believe that the nest cameras have been deployed only on estates where intensive management of driven grouse shooting does not take place. However, when a freedom of information request was submitted, asking for the names of the estates to enable scrutiny of the claim, Scottish Natural Heritage refused to release the information. A publicly funded project is being used to portray an image of positive co-operation from driven grouse shooting estates in the name of hen harrier conservation, but the names of the participating estates are being kept secret from the public and even from one of the project’s partners.

I commend Mairi Gougeon for her work and for taking up the difficult hen harrier species. However, the heads up for harriers project is flawed and risks undermining the hard work that is needed to eliminate wildlife crime.

17:35

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I, too, thank Mairi Gougeon for not only her motion and securing the debate but, as others have said, her work as a species champion for the hen harrier. The species champion initiative has been innovative and has captured people’s imagination. Although Graeme Dey rightly pointed to the fact that the real champions are those who do this work day and daily on behalf of the various species, the initiative has nevertheless raised the profile of an issue that very much needed to be bumped up the agenda. I certainly take my responsibilities as champion of the Scottish primrose seriously, and I will return to it later.

As other members have said, hen harriers are in need of being championed. David Stewart indicated that Scotland is a stronghold, with 80 per cent of the UK’s population, but the most recent hen harrier survey showed a worrying decline of around 9 per cent between 2010 and 2016, the second successive decline in such surveys. I am pleased to say that Orkney, along with the Western Isles, has bucked that trend—over the same period, the number of territorial pairs in Orkney rose from 74 to 83—but the overall picture is not at all good and I think provides the context both for the debate and for considering the heads up for harriers project. Indeed, Mairi Gougeon helpfully pointed out the on-going problems with illegal and deplorable raptor persecution, as well as the impact of habitat loss.

I do not in any way wish to denigrate the efforts of the estates participating in the project—they deserve to be commended for what they are doing—but we should bear it in mind that none of them represents a raptor persecution hotspot or, it has been suggested, operates as an intensively managed driven grouse moor. Until that issue is addressed, we would be well advised not to draw too much comfort or potentially misleading conclusions from what emerges from the project. As I have said, that is no criticism of those taking part; it is a cautionary note that needs to be sounded in the debate. As for the current project, it might be helpful if the minister or one of his colleagues could confirm whether the birds under observation are tagged, because there certainly seem to be a case and a logic for their being so.

In the limited time still available to me and with Mairi Gougeon’s indulgence, I will mention the *Primula scotica*, on whose behalf I have happily volunteered to take up the cudgels. Gail Ross, who—rather impudently, I thought—laid claim to Orkney’s KW postcode in a debate last week, will no doubt be quick to point out that the primrose is the county flower of Caithness. On this occasion, I am happy to share with her this most iconic and rarest of flowering plants, the entire global

population of which is to be found only in our respective constituencies. In Orkney, its location of choice tends to be the windswept Atlantic coast cliffs, dune stacks and headlands of Yesnaby, Hoy and South Walls, Rousay, Westray and Papay, although I gather that there are some outliers on Shapinsay, too, which bucks that trend.

Say what you like about the Scottish primrose: although it might be tiny, it is as tough as old boots. However, it does need a helping hand. It needs grassland to be grazed, so the traditional farming practices that have maintained these habitats in the past are vital to the flower's future. In turn, we need to support those farmers who are committed to carrying out that type of grazing management, because if we do not and if we fail to make progress with tackling climate change, then

"O flower of Scotland
When will we see your like again"

might be a question that we are asking ourselves sooner rather than later.

I again congratulate Mairi Gougeon on bringing this debate to the Parliament, and I wish her all the best in her endeavours on behalf of the hen harrier population.

17:39

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I thank my friend and colleague Mairi Gougeon for bringing this debate to Parliament, which allows us all to speak about our own species, and for all the work that she does to highlight the issues that the hen harrier faces.

When a person is made a species champion, they could go down the route of championing something cute or cuddly or, like Ms Gougeon, they could champion a species to campaign for. They could, like me, go for the high drama and choose something that is a sprawling behemoth, a life saver, a record breaker and a spiritual icon. I figured that, if a person is going to champion anything, it is best to go big or go home. I have gone big in choosing to be the champion of the yew, which is Scotland's oldest tree.

I can reveal that, when I was a teenager, I was a bit of a goth. That is hard to imagine now, but 16-year-old Gillian Taylor, as I was then, loved a bit of Bauhaus and the Sisters of Mercy. I liked to crimp my black dyed hair, I wore the odd crucifix for non-religious reasons, and I never wore anything that was not black. Therefore, when the Woodland Trust told me that the yew tree was the tree of death, I was sold. Members might say that the tree of death is a bit depressing, but it is far from depressing; the yew symbolises death and resurrection, mainly because it resurrects itself all the time. When its branches touch the ground, it

forms new trunks so, in effect, it is immortal. It regenerates itself: it is the Dr Who—the Time Lord—of trees.

Throughout history, the yew has also been among the most spiritual of trees. It was a sacred tree for the druids and represented longevity and regeneration. For us Celts, it also symbolises death and resurrection. For Christians, it is often associated with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is why it makes an appearance in many of our churchyards. Its proximity to graves in churchyards might be the reason for its either very unfortunate or very cool emo nickname, depending on our perspective.

The Fortingall yew, which is in Roseanna Cunningham's constituency, is thought to be Scotland's oldest tree. It stands in the churchyard there, and it has been there for between 3,000 and 9,000 years. One of the myths that surround it is that Pontius Pilate was born under its branches. One thing is for sure: that yew is one of the oldest living things in Europe.

People like to make a connection between their species and why it is appropriate for them. I could be negative about the age thing, but I have decided that I very much like the idea of being associated with longevity. Anyone who has been to see the Fortingall yew will know that the old girl looks pretty great for her age. I would like to try to associate myself with that sentiment, particularly because next year is the last year of my 40s. Therefore, I need all the positive vibes that I can get.

The yew is also a life saver. Its toxic needles are harvested and used to produce cancer-combating drugs. In fact, the incredible Pitmedden garden, which is in my constituency, has some of the most stunning yew hedges and trees in the whole of Europe, and it sends its yew hedge cuttings to pharmaceutical companies for that very purpose. When I visited it in the summer, the head gardener gave me my own little yew tree, which I now have in my garden. I like the idea of both of us growing very old together.

17:43

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I declare an interest as a farmer and an owner of land that is part of a hen harrier special protected area.

I, too, congratulate Mairi Gougeon on securing this debate on her motion. I ask members to note that I am the species champion for the Grayling butterfly.

This debate, which is largely on the future of hen harriers, is a welcome one. As we all know, the hen harrier is, regrettably, a species that is very much under threat. That is why I support the

heads up for harriers campaign. It is, of course, a matter of regret that the number of sightings of hen harriers in Scotland in 2016 fell by 9 per cent since a study in 2010, but I note that 2016 was a particularly poor breeding year and that the vagaries of nature have a dramatic effect on the breeding patterns of all birds on our Scottish hills and mountainsides.

Andy Wightman: I am curious to know how John Scott knows that, given that we do not know the numbers that are illegally killed.

John Scott: If Mr Wightman checks the Official Report later, he will find that I said that weather has an effect on the breeding patterns on the hills and mountainsides. Checking my own notes, I see that it is a recorded fact that 2016 was regarded as being a poor breeding year.

Having lambed blackface sheep in what is now a protected hen harrier habitat, I know from bitter experience that lamb crops can vary hugely between good years and bad in the same habitat that hen harriers are trying to breed in; and I know all too well what an impact bad weather such as late snow, heavy rain, high winds and frost can have on the survivability of chicks and lambs alike on those moors. In addition, snow, frost, wind, rain and often a lack of sunshine also affects the food supply of hen harriers. In bad weather, voles, which are a natural food supply of harriers and the staple of fledgling chicks, also do not breed easily or well, so the survivability of hen harrier chicks becomes harder. For example, 21 April 1981 is forever etched in my memory because a freak snow storm hit south-west Scotland, where I farm, and I spent days looking for, and digging out, ewes and lambs buried in snowdrifts at that most unexpected time of year for snowfall. Working from dawn till dusk and beyond on that occasion, we lost only about 25 lambs because of that unseasonal blizzard, but neighbours I know lost over 100 lambs. I would confidently bet that 1981 was also a bad year for hen harrier chick survival.

In addition, fox control or the lack of it, particularly on land adjoining forestry, reduces all ground-nesting birds' abilities to rear chicks, affecting peewits, curlews and snipe as well as hen harriers. That is a growing problem, with forestry planting targets increasing—of course, I am in favour of that, but it is nonetheless a growing problem—and foxes coming out of forestry areas on to open moorland to hunt for food. Although it might be different now that Forestry Commission Scotland is coming under the control of the Scottish Government, certainly in the past the Forestry Commission did not control foxes or other vermin in its forests. Forestry land provides a terrific breeding habitat for foxes and crows, but their natural food supplies are much reduced by blanket sitka spruce afforestation and

those predators have to find food on adjoining moorland and farmland: namely, ground-nesting birds. Given that the Forestry Commission has historically not controlled foxes or carrion crows, will the new Forestry Commission Scotland under Scottish Government control now consider taking on that responsibility in order to play its part in reducing fox predation of hen harriers and other ground-nesting birds? Indeed, it is worth noting the correlation with the decline of other moorland ground-nesting birds where there is no suggestion of human persecution in comparing that with the rates of decline of hen harriers.

I welcome the fact that 21 estates have now signed up to the heads up for harriers project. Notwithstanding the alleged predation of hen harriers by land managers, I still believe that the safest place for hen harriers to raise chicks is on well-managed grouse moors where foxes are kept under control and a good supply of voles and grouse chicks exists. I hope that more estates will join the scheme and I hope that hen harrier numbers are restored in the future, notwithstanding the pressures that they face.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Joe FitzPatrick to respond to the debate. You have around seven minutes, please, minister.

17:48

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Joe FitzPatrick): I congratulate Mairi Gougeon on securing this opportunity for Parliament to help to raise the profile of the hen harrier and the challenges that that iconic bird faces, and for allowing our other species champions to raise awareness of their species. It is important to note, as we heard, that the matter is not about cuddly animals, but is a matter that crosses the animal and plant kingdoms. In that respect, we heard from Liam McArthur, Gillian Martin and Andy Wightman that they are champions for plants of different sizes. It has been an interesting debate and many valuable points have been made.

As I mentioned, the hen harrier faces serious challenges. There has been a worrying 27 per cent decrease in territorial pairs in Scotland over the past 12 years and, over the past six years, we have seen a further 9 per cent decline in the Scottish population, which is down from 505 territorial pairs in 2010 to 460 pairs in 2016. Those falls in population numbers are particularly important for the conservation status of the hen harrier because, as David Stewart said, Scotland has about 80 per cent of the total UK population.

We know that a number of factors can affect hen harrier numbers, including habitat loss and the cyclical nature of prey availability, which John Scott and Graeme Dey mentioned. However, hen

harrier populations remain in good health in Argyll, the Western Isles, the western seaboard and Orkney, and most of those areas are not optimal for the hen harrier in terms of habitat and prey availability. Is it because those areas have little or no driven grouse shooting? Conversely, in the central Highlands, the north-east glens and the southern uplands, where there are good prey availability and habitat, hen harriers are not thriving, and those areas are associated with driven grouse shooting. It is our view that there is no coincidence there, and that illegal persecution is on-going in those areas.

We know that recorded crime figures for hen harriers are low, but we also know that if there are no carcasses or other hard evidence of criminal activity, it is difficult for the police to record each missing bird or missing tag as a crime. However, the report on golden eagles that was published at the end of May made a powerful case that a significant volume of illegal killing is taking place that does not make it into the official recorded crime figures. There is no reason to suppose that the same analysis would not also apply to hen harriers. With the golden eagle report, there was a degree of reliance on the tags. I cannot confirm whether that opportunity is available in relation to hen harriers, but a point has been made on that and I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform will hear it.

The situation does not mean that unrecorded crime goes unnoticed or that we are not actively seeking to tackle it. However, to understand what is happening, we need good data. Donald Cameron told us about the work of the Scottish raptor study group in that respect.

We have a track record of introducing innovative measures to tackle raptor persecution, including the introduction of vicarious liability, the development of a poisons disposal scheme and the restriction on the use of general licences where it is suspected that wildlife crime has taken place. At the end of May this year, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform announced a further package of measures to tackle the problem, which included a strengthening of police resources to tackle wildlife crime in the Cairngorms national park and the establishment of an independent group with a remit to look at how grouse moor management can be made sustainable and compliant with the law. Licensing will be one of the options that the group will examine.

To be clear, we do not think that all grouse moor managers are persecuting hen harriers: some are working positively to find ways for grouse shooting to coexist alongside harriers, and we need to encourage and support those businesses—which

brings me to the heads up for harriers project. The project is working well with a growing number of estates, with the figure up from five in 2015 to 21 this year. It is led by a partnership of the RSPB, Scottish Land & Estates, the national wildlife crime unit and Scottish Natural Heritage. That partnership and co-operation are good for hen harriers. To answer Andy Wightman's point to an extent, no one is suggesting that that project alone is the answer, but it is bringing together those groups in partnership to change the culture. The project has to build on the progress that it is making in some parts of the country. I encourage more estates to work with it.

The heads up for harriers partnership deserves a lot of credit for its collaborative approach and for the excellent on-the-ground relationships that it has established. I stress that the project was never intended to catch criminals, but was set up to raise public awareness of the hen harrier, to gain information on nest failures and, most important, to build trust and partnerships with land managers to improve the outlook for hen harriers on estates that are managed for shooting. It is succeeding in meeting those objectives.

Of course, we want to push the project in areas where harriers are not thriving. We do that already; for example, heads up for harriers now works with estates in the Angus glens, where there is a history of lack of tolerance. Rather than saying that that work is not the answer, we should encourage it to continue.

I will speed on to say a few words about the species champion initiative before the Presiding Officer ticks me off. It is an innovative and fun way to raise awareness for species that need conservation attention. A number of colleagues have mentioned their particular species. Christine Grahame told us how she is single-handedly saving the house sparrow and making sure that it sustains and is well washed. She gave us a lecture on evolution and the links between dinosaurs and birds that, as a scientist, I found very interesting. Graeme Dey's tales of the woolly willows and his expeditions were very interesting. Gillian Martin gave us a vivid picture of the yew, and I loved her comment that the yew is the Time Lord of trees.

Graeme Dey: Will the minister take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Very briefly.

Graeme Dey: If the question is not too cheeky, is the minister a species champion? If he is not, would he be prepared to become one?

Joe FitzPatrick: That question was well below the belt. I am not—and I suppose that I will.

Members: Oh!

Joe FitzPatrick: Mission accomplished by Graeme Dey. He told me that a difficult question was coming up. I should have pre-armed myself by signing up before the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:57.

The Scottish Government is very supportive of the initiative. It is gratifying that the idea has been copied not just by Parliament but down south and in other countries. I take the opportunity to congratulate Scottish Environment LINK and Dr Eleanor Harris for coming up with and developing the idea and, of course, I thank Mairi Gougeon for bringing the idea to the chamber.