

## **Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee**

### **PE01750: Independent Monitoring of Satellite tags fitted to raptors**

#### **Correspondence from Ian Thomson, Head of Investigations, RSPB Scotland**

##### **Satellite-tagging of birds of prey in Scotland**

Dear Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee member,

I write to you on behalf of RSPB Scotland, to provide some information and clarification about the use of satellite-tagging to monitor birds of prey in Scotland.

There are several reasons for this letter: comments made about satellite tagging were given in evidence during the recent Committee meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2020 (contained in the [Official Report](#) of the meeting); a [recommendation](#) about satellite-tagging was made in the report of the Grouse Moor Review Group; and, a [petition](#) by Mr Alex Hogg, of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA), calling for “independent monitoring of satellite tags fitted to raptor species” has been lodged before the Scottish Parliament.

The RSPB has been involved in the fitting of satellite transmitters, using experienced, trained and licenced taggers, to a wide variety of birds of prey and other species, both in the UK and abroad, for the last 15 years. As a key adviser and contributor to a number of high-profile conservation research projects involving the tagging of bird species across the world, we thought it important to share our experience to put the SGA’s claims and other more recent commentary into context.

In the UK, all tagging projects require approval from the independent British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)’s Special Methods Panel, who rigorously scrutinise all such proposals on behalf of the UK statutory conservation agencies, including SNH in Scotland, to check their scientific validity and that the welfare of the birds tagged is ensured. The BTO’s process also ensures all projects meet Home Office requirements.

All practitioners must demonstrate experience and capability to undertake this work and this is heavily scrutinised by the Special Methods Panel. Most of those involved with this technique are experienced bird ringers and handlers. An annual licence return is supplied to the BTO by all satellite practitioners for their records, and this is a condition of receiving further licences in the future. This ensures accountability, with this information available to SNH and Scottish Government for their consideration.

The RSPB also has considerable experience in monitoring the data coming from our own transmitters and in working closely with other individuals and organisations involved in similar projects, notably in the development of tag technology, sharing good practice and the analysis of satellite tag data.

We have been at the forefront of police training on the interpretation of tag data, making significant contributions to events in Perthshire and Yorkshire in 2019 to ensure that the police and officers from the National Wildlife Crime Unit are equipped to carry out independent scrutiny of tag data. Similarly, we gave a further presentation on the interpretation of satellite-tag data at a recent week-long training course for wildlife crime officers, held at the Scottish Police College at Tulliallan, and also recently, led a further 3-hour training session for all staff of the National Wildlife Crime Unit. We have also helped

ensure that, where satellite-tagged birds of prey are suspected of being illegally killed, relevant tag data is routinely provided to investigating officers as required.

The Grouse Moor Review Group report makes a recommendation related to satellite-tagging: “That SNH, possibly through their licensing agent the BTO, or directly, ensure that the licences issued for the satellite-based tracking of tagged raptors includes a condition that commits the data holder (i.e. the owner of the tag) to: (a) being listed on a register of data holders which SNH, BTO and Police Scotland have access to; and (b) cooperate expeditiously with Police Scotland and SNH in sharing data and associated information regarding tagged birds found dead or missing in suspicious circumstances. That on receipt of shared data and associated information, Police Scotland expeditiously processes the shared data and associated information to determine whether or not it warrants referral to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service.”

RSPB Scotland wholly supports this recommendation; indeed, much of what it suggests is already happening. Furthermore, we have assisted the police in numerous follow-up investigations where tagged birds have been illegally killed or have been suspected to have been victims of criminality.

In 2017, the Scottish Government-commissioned [review of the fates of satellite-tagged golden eagles](#) concluded that almost a third of young tagged eagles “disappeared (presumably died) under suspicious circumstances” and that “areas managed as grouse moors were strongly associated with the disappearance of many of the tagged eagles”. This independent peer-reviewed study was underpinned by data from tags that researchers from RSPB and several other organisations and agencies had fitted to Scottish golden eagles, and is key evidence that scientifically highlights the ongoing problem of raptor persecution on Scotland’s grouse moors.

Satellite transmitters have revolutionised the study of bird biology. They have proved invaluable research tools in understanding the movements of birds, from Asian vultures to English turtle doves, Welsh hen harriers and Scottish golden eagles. They have allowed us to identify important migration staging areas, key nest and roost site locations, allowing us to further protect these birds. They have also allowed recovery of dead birds, enabling post-mortem examinations to take place and identify causes of death which would otherwise remain a mystery. They are also shining a very bright light on areas of upland Scotland where raptor persecution continues unabated.

It is this latter point that has undoubtedly motivated a relentless campaign from some representatives of the grouse shooting industry to attempt to undermine raptor satellite-tagging and, in some cases, the reputations and integrity of the individuals and organisations involved. The petitioner himself, quoted in “*The Field*” in [January 2019](#), said “At the moment, satellite tags are like the wild west. Anyone with funding can buy one, have it fitted to a protected bird, and retain its data... ..Despite claims these devices are almost infallible, failure rates and unexplained loss are high and there have been numerous examples of lost birds turning up alive or birds re-appearing miles or days from last tag signals.” These remarks alone suggest a fundamental lack of understanding of the regulatory process governing tagging projects and an ignorance of tag technology, and are a perpetuation of unsubstantiated rumour & inaccurate social media commentary. Even the article in which Mr Hogg was quoted was based on the entirely false premise that a tagged Hen Harrier reported as having disappeared suspiciously in Angus had later turned up alive in Perthshire.

It is unfortunate that the SGA, which has consistently disputed the disappearance or killing of any bird of prey in areas associated with grouse moor management, unless there is a successful prosecution, has refused to take part in meetings of the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime (PAW Scotland) since the Scottish Government's satellite-tag review was published in May 2017. Had it done so, and contributed to the discussions at these meetings, perhaps inaccurate soundbites made to the media, such as that outlined above, or many of the misleading statements contained in the briefing document prepared to accompany their petition would not have appeared.

When the ECCLR Committee took evidence from members of the Grouse Moor Review Group on 21<sup>st</sup> January, Professor Colin Reid commented that "tags themselves are getting better and more responsive, they can provide data more quickly. They also allow for better discrimination between causes of failure, including whether it has been caused deliberately or accidentally." He later added that, with regard to tag data, "Great progress has been made to ensure that the information flows quickly and that there is a better understanding of what can and cannot be got from the information. It is still work in progress, but progress is definitely being made." We agree.

RSPB Scotland would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence to the ECCLR Committee during any future consideration of the report of the Grouse Moor Review Group or discussion of Mr Hogg's petition.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Thomson  
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