

# Wightman finds land ownership now ‘more concentrated’

**L**AND ownership in Scotland has become more concentrated despite two decades of land reform legislation, according to a new study.

Former Scottish Greens MSP Andy Wightman, a land reform campaigner who previously published data on Scottish land distribution in 2012, has calculated that half of all privately owned rural land in Scotland – equivalent to 3.2 million hectares – is held by just 433 people and companies, with only 2.76% held by community groups.

The latest data, as reported by The Guardian, found that hereditary peers own less land than previously, while the number of private investors who specialise in financially

lucrative “green capital” schemes to create forestry and peat restoration projects has surged.

Wightman’s, inset, analysis of Land Registry records found that Scotland’s third-largest landowner is US-owned investment firm Gresham House, which owns 53,775 hectares across 161 separate holdings.

The Duke of Buccleuch – who was Scotland’s largest private landowner when Wightman carried out his 2012 survey – placed second, holding 66,345 hectares.

This figure is 32% less than in 2012, as the estate has



been voluntarily selling land to local residents.

Scotland’s largest landowner is Danish billionaire Anders Povlsen, the largest shareholder in the online fashion retailer Asos.

He owns 88,296 hectares spread across 12 estates – an increase of 37% since 2012.

Wightman’s data has come from records held by Registers of Scotland, the official land register and more accurate land mass data from Ordnance Survey.

Alongside other land campaigners, he has argued that the latest data is evidence of a failure by the Scottish Government in

empowering community buyouts to diversify rural landownership, despite legislation to strengthen right-to-buy laws and asset transfers being enacted.

He added on Twitter/X: “I note surprise in some quarters that the concentrated pattern of land ownership hasn’t changed DESPITE past land reform measures. Note that reforms have never been designed to reduce this concentration. In this respect they have not FAILED, they’ve simply never been designed to do this.”

Despite several significant buyouts, including the sale of 4000 hectares on Langholm Moor to local residents by Buccleuch Estates and the purchase of the island of Ulva off Mull, part-funded with £4.4m from

the government-backed Scottish Land Fund, sales of that scale are very rare.

Scottish Government figures show the amount of community-owned land has grown by just 40,048 hectares in the last decade, from 172,294 hectares in 2012 to 212,342 hectares.

“Scotland has the most concentrated pattern of land ownership in Europe,” Wightman told The Guardian.

“There’s nothing in the current reforms which will make any substantial change to that. If we’re serious about changing that, we need to embrace reforms which will absolutely deliver.”

Gresham House, which markets its forestry projects as tax-efficient

investments, insists they are ultimately owned by its clients.

“Forests managed by Gresham House make a major contribution to Scotland’s rural economy and support hundreds of jobs,” it said.

Mairi Gougeon, the Scottish Government’s Land Reform Secretary, said the “targeted and proportionate” powers set out in the Land Reform Bill would apply to more than 50% of Scotland.

She continued: “I would like to see us own more of our own land and waters and for that public ownership to be clearly undertaken in the interests of everyone who lives in Scotland. But without the full powers, resources and levers of independence, our ability to do so is limited.”



Anders Povlsen owns 88,000 hectares of Scottish land



## Starmer ‘must not U-turn’ on workers’ rights

BY LUCY JACKSON

THE leader of Scotland’s largest trade union body has warned Keir Starmer he “must not U-turn” on Labour plans for a New Deal For Working People.

Speaking ahead of her keynote speech at the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (Usdaw) conference in Dundee yesterday, Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) general secretary Roz Foyer (above) said that trade unionists will “keep the pressure on” the Labour leadership to deliver their “New Deal” for workers within the first 100 days of government.

The New Deal, which is expected to ban zero-hours contracts, offer employment rights from day one of work and repeal all the Tory government’s “anti-trade union legislation” – such as the Minimum Service Levels Act, which means workers in six key industries are unable to strike under certain circumstances – has come under pressure from the business lobby in recent months seeking to water down the proposals.

In her speech to the Usdaw conference, Foyer set out the demands on the Scottish Labour leadership to go further on employment rights and devolve employment law to the Scottish Parliament.

“After almost 15 years of brutal Tory attacks on our movement, Labour’s New Deal For Working People offers light at the end of the tunnel,” Foyer said.

“It is imperative they stick to their word. This must not be another U-turn or false dawn. For trade unionists and the almost 550,000 workers we represent, the New Deal offered by Labour is non-negotiable.

“We also need to see Scottish Labour leadership upgrade and enhance this deal and our working rights by seeking the devolution of employment law to the Scottish Parliament.

“As we hurtle towards a General Election and, with much luck, kick the Tories out of power for good, Labour leadership must remain strong. Their commitment to working people cannot be sacrificed at the altar as they seek to enter Number 10.”

# Activists rejoice as raptor protection bill becomes law

## Bid to make illegal persecution of birds of prey thing of the past with new licensing scheme

BY ROSS HUNTER

**I**N 1998, then Scotland secretary Donald Dewar pledged that the yet-to-be-reconvened Scottish Parliament would take “all possible steps” to end the illegal persecution of birds of prey in Scotland.

Yet it wasn’t until earlier last week, more than a quarter of a century since Dewar’s comments, that MSPs passed legislation which aimed to fulfil that promise.

The Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill, which received the backing of MSPs on Thursday afternoon, is set to introduce a licensing scheme for grouse moors.

It means that grouse shooting estates will now have to apply for a licence to operate and risk losing it if they are found to have committed a relevant crime, such as illegally killing a bird of prey.

The trapping, poisoning and shooting of protected birds of prey on Scotland’s grouse moors has occurred consistently at least since

the RSPB first began gathering data on the issue more than 20 years ago.

On the very same day Holyrood voted to pass the legislation, the RSPB announced the “sudden, suspicious” disappearance of a satellite-tagged hen harrier in the Angus Glens in February.

Investigators were unable to find the bird – named Shalimar – in the area the tag last transmitted, although noted that it was a region with numerous grouse shooting estates in operation.

It is just one of hundreds of such cases recorded by Ruth Tingay on her Raptor Persecution blog over the past 14 years.

Since 2010, Tingay has documented the deaths and disappearances of various species of raptors on or near grouse moors, including often fragile populations of red kites, golden eagles, sea eagles and hen harriers.

Her blog – which she ran entirely unfunded for the first seven years of its existence – likely remains the most exhaustive central hub detailing the killing of raptors in Scotland and the wider UK.

“I get a bit of funding now but it’s certainly not a fully funded post,” she said.

“The vast majority of it is still done in my spare time.”

Her work has helped inform ministers, MSPs and the general public about the scale of the problem and put beyond doubt the fact that the grouse-shooting industry was culpable.

However, the efforts of campaigners like Tingay have been mirrored by attempts from gamekeeping and shooting organisations to maintain the status quo.

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation continues to describe the bill as “unworkable” and claims it would have a “ruinous” impact on the rural economy and “species that gamekeepers work to protect”.

“I think it’s a really fair and proportionate piece of legislation,” said Tingay.

“We know that it’s not all gamekeepers killing birds of prey but I think it’s very clear that a lot of them are.



**Estates could lose their licences if they are found to have committed a relevant crime against birds of prey**

“And I have to say that I was surprised that the shooting industry didn’t welcome this legislation because it could root out those who are still breaking the law.

“I know of some estates that are very enthusiastic about raptors and conservation in general.

“Those good people have nothing to fear from this bill. Yet it seems so many in the sector have reacted

negatively, claiming it’s being forced on them.

“But, to be honest, they’ve had decades to self-regulate and get their act together and they just haven’t done it.

“Birds keep disappearing, year after year.”

Ian Thomson, the head of investigations at RSPB Scotland, has been working to protect raptors

from illegal persecution for the past 17 years.

While his colleagues worked to improve habitat or increase populations, he attempted to seek justice for birds found poisoned or shot.

“The problem that we’ve faced is that although birds of prey are protected in law, actually securing convictions and meaningful penalties has been very difficult,” he said.

“These crimes tend to take place in rural areas, where witnesses are either absent or few and far between.

“It makes it very easy for perpetrators to conceal evidence.”

While the advent of satellite-tagging birds in the early 2000s has helped secure some convictions, the vast majority of deaths and disappearances go unsolved and unprosecuted.

The RSPB estimates that across the UK, people who commit crimes against birds of prey face a less than 4% prosecution rate.

It’s for this reason, said Thomson, that additional legislation was necessary.

**W**HILE these crimes may still be difficult to prosecute, it’s hoped the risk to gamekeepers’ businesses adds further incentive to comply with the law.

Thomson added: “Raptor persecution is a symptom of wider concerns about intensive management of our uplands, which has been entirely focused on producing unsustainably high numbers of grouse for the purpose of shooting them.

“While nobody questions that in some areas the grouse-shooting industry plays an important part in local economies, that has to be balanced against both the environmental impacts and illegal activities taking place.

“As a result of this bill, we hope to see the grouse shooting industry move from a 19th-century business model to one that’s fit for the 21st.

“Where it takes much more notice of its environmental responsibilities and stays within the law.”

As well as licensing both grouse shooting and the use of muirburn, the bill also completely bans the use of snares and glue traps in Scotland.

It’s a move that has faced fierce opposition from some land managers, who regularly use snares to catch animals such as foxes.

“I can’t quite believe it’s going to happen,” said Bob Elliot, the director of animal welfare charity OneKind.

“Scotland had already gone a long way with regulations regarding the types of traps you could use.

“But to get to a place where politicians acknowledge that you can’t make snares any less cruel and that the only solution is to ban them, it’s quite remarkable.”

Elliot, who previously worked for the RSPB, said the legislation would not have become law without the efforts of campaigners.

“We stand on the shoulders of giants,” he said.

“There are people who have spent their entire careers working on this, as well as countless volunteers and campaigners who have poured so much of their free time into it.

“So, to see it go through, I was both ecstatic and emotional.”

Agriculture Minister Jim Fairlie said there would be “no victory parade” in the wake of the bill’s passing.

Yet, while that may be true in the corridors of Holyrood, campaigners are celebrating with cautious optimism.

Of course, Scotland’s natural world still faces enormous problems. But the passing of this bill makes clear that, with enough effort and organisation, grassroots activists can have an outsized impact.

It shows that individuals like Ruth Tingay, armed with nothing but a laptop and determination, can change the way the country values wild animals in law.

“We did it,” said Tingay. “What a relief!”