


Westminster Hall

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[Carolyn Harris *in the Chair*]

Driven Grouse Shooting

 4.30pm**John Lamont****(Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con)**

I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 700036 relating to driven grouse shooting.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. As a member of the Petitions Committee, I have been asked to open this debate, and it is my duty to present the petition reasonably and fairly. After doing so, I will share other views on the issue of driven grouse shooting, particularly those from the rural communities where grouse shooting occurs.

I begin by thanking the various organisations and individuals I met ahead of the debate, including petitioner Chris Packham, Wild Justice, the British Association for Conservation and Shooting, the Countryside Alliance, the League Against Cruel Sports and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds—I see many of them in the Public Gallery. I should also mention the many people who spoke to me about shooting and this debate during my recent visit to the Royal Highland Show. I also thank the amazing team at the Petitions Committee for setting up many of my meetings and discussions.

I know this issue generates strong opinions on both sides of the debate. The petition states that, “driven grouse shooting is bad for people, the environment and wildlife...grouse shooting is economically insignificant when contrasted with other real and potential uses of the UK’s extensive uplands.”

The petition seeks to ban driven grouse shooting. I note that it is the third petition by the creators, who are concerned about wildlife persecution, environmental impact and ethical issues. I question their position and will probe the validity of many of their conclusions, but I thank them for bringing the issue forward for debate.

The petition received 104,000 signatures, which reflects the strength of feeling that some people have on this issue. However, I must present alternative views and a fuller picture of the reality of grouse shooting. Although the petition is welcome, its proponents unfortunately do not seem to have a real grasp of the activity or a clear understanding of the benefits it brings to communities up and down Scotland, and indeed the whole United Kingdom. I do not doubt the petitioners' sincere and good intentions, but I note that, regrettably, there is often a great deal of misinformation surrounding grouse shooting.

Having spoken to many organisations that hold different views, and having canvassed a wide range of opinions, I am pleased to have the opportunity to set the record straight by sharing the realities of grouse shooting. I do so as the Member of Parliament for the Scottish Borders. Mine is one of the country's more rural and remote constituencies, and grouse shooting occurs there and provides great benefit to our economy, environment and communities, as it does in many other areas the length and breadth of the United Kingdom.

Let us consider the economic realities of grouse shooting. The British Association for Shooting and Conservation has conducted research showing that grouse shooting contributes £23 million in gross value added to the Scottish economy. The wider shooting sector is worth £3.3 billion to the UK economy every year. The economic benefits of grouse shooting are crystal clear. All that funding contributes to local economies, particularly in rural and remote areas where jobs are already scarcer.

Activists in favour of a ban claim that the industry has small economic value. They should tell that to those managing the land who have a job because of the industry. They should tell that to those running the hotels and bed and breakfasts that are sustained by it. They should tell that to those who run the small shops and stores that get by because of it. They should tell that to those working in the tourism industry that grouse shooting supports. They should tell that to the extended network of restaurants and bars that survive because of it. And they should tell that to the United Kingdom Treasury, which receives the tax revenues generated by the workers who pay income tax and by the businesses that pay myriad taxes because of the industry.

The economic reality of grouse shooting is clear: it provides jobs, supports small business and sustains the rural economy. Let us look at the facts: grouse moors in England and Scotland alone support around 3,000 full-time equivalent jobs. That figure

focuses on people directly employed in the industry, not the vast numbers of jobs that rely on it in some other way.

In my discussions with various groups, including the League Against Cruel Sports, it is accepted that a ban would mean job losses, but how would those jobs be replaced? Activists seeking a ban must answer that question, and not with fantasy and fanciful wishes of jobs that will likely never come to fruition. They must outline clearly what happens to those workers. How many would lose their jobs if a ban went ahead? What happens to those small businesses, and how many would shut up shop? What happens to rural economies? How many people would be forced to leave rural areas in search of a better livelihood if a ban occurred, and what would that mean for rural areas already suffering from depopulation?

I put some of those questions directly to the activists in several meetings with them prior to this debate. The responses were, to put it mildly, not encouraging. Vague and hazy ideas that there should be a more sustainable economic model, without any proposals for what should be done, have no merit. Some activists, although not all, have a brazen disregard for these jobs and businesses, and for the economic damage a ban would cause. Some even brazenly state that the money should be spent on other rural activities, as if the state could or should direct exactly how to use private land, or how citizens should spend their own money. Those are not serious suggestions, and we should not treat them as such.

As the Countryside Alliance and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation have made clear, grouse shooting underpins rural economies, jobs and land management—without it, investment and employment would decline sharply. I know that a small number of people argue that the economic benefits should be ignored because of grouse shooting's supposed cost to the environment. I value jobs, businesses, livelihoods, economic growth and tax revenue too highly to agree with that argument. But for a moment, I will play along and set aside those important considerations. Even doing so, ignoring all of the industry's economic benefits, the position of activists in favour of a ban is fundamentally flawed.

It is the contention of activists that grouse shooting somehow harms the environment, the countryside and biodiversity. They are fundamentally and conclusively wrong. This sector does not harm the environment; it protects it. It does not damage the countryside; it maintains it. It does not risk biodiversity; it enhances it. Studies have shown that grouse shooting scores highly not just on the economics but on environmental sustainability grounds too.

Before I return to the positives for wildlife and biodiversity, let us look at the benefits for the land itself—for maintaining the countryside's beauty. The Country Land and Business Association has shown that grouse moor owners in England spend £52.5

million every year on moorland management. Grouse moors account for up to 1.8 million hectares of the uplands. All of that land is preserved only by the hard work of land managers, and they do so for the benefit of not only themselves but the country—for the benefit of our environment and countryside.

BASC cites research that shows that grouse moors have restored 27,000 hectares of bare peat in the last 20 years. Those moors store between 11% and 35% of England's total peatland carbon, but emit only between 1% and 5% of total peatland carbon emissions. The evidence shows that grouse shooting lowers carbon emissions and helps to tackle climate change.

As I heard in many discussions, grouse shooting happens on UK uplands, which are home to 75% of the world's remaining heather moorland. Heather is an emblem of Scotland and Britain. It is a great symbol of our country's natural beauty. These heather moorlands have been described as Britain's rainforest. They are a natural feature that we should cherish and celebrate, but they are not maintained by some stroke of luck. They are protected only by the efforts of land managers and the practice of grouse shooting.

Organisations told me that grouse mainly eat the young shoots, seeds and flowers of heather, so moors must be managed properly or they could be eroded. The Country Land and Business Association says that the managing of moors for grouse maintains heather-dominated habitat better than other uses of the land. As it rightly pointed out, if gamekeepers were not present to preserve the land, it would have to be protected at significant cost to taxpayers.

As I have mentioned, grouse shooting is important not only for the maintenance of the land itself, but for the wildlife that inhabits it. It is estimated that two thirds of shooting activity controls pests and predators to protect wildlife, and around half manages woodlands, covers crops and puts out feed for songbirds over the winter months. The CLA has also demonstrated that in areas where grouse moor management has ceased, such as Dartmoor, populations of ground-nesting birds have reduced.

A study of upland breeding birds in parts of England and Scotland found that densities of golden plover and lapwing were up to five times greater on managed grouse moors compared with unmanaged moorland. Curlew doubled in number on managed moorland, with redshank also found to be more abundant. Hen harrier numbers increased seven years in a row, hitting a record high in 2023. The BASC also says that predator control of foxes, corvids and mustelids protects many threatened nesting species, such as curlew and lapwing. These birds are five times more common on managed grouse moors than elsewhere in the uplands. Where predator control is stopped, their numbers crash.

Our countryside would not only be less beautiful without grouse shooting; it would be much quieter and less biodiverse. We would lose the idyllic sounds that captivate so many birdwatchers and bring enjoyment to everyone who spends time in the British countryside. Despite claims to the contrary, grouse shooting protects a wide range of biodiversity and wildlife, in part because the industry is regulated effectively and because crimes are prosecuted.

I know that some groups, including the RSPB, would like to see tougher punishments for offenders. That is worth exploring for people who break the law, but that does not apply to the overwhelming majority of gamekeepers and land managers. Shooting organisations have a zero-tolerance policy on unlawful acts, and anyone convicted will face a large fine or potentially jail time. The issue is devolved, meaning it is the responsibility of the Scottish Government in Scotland. They have introduced a licensing system for the shooting of red grouse, which has its flaws but works adequately in other respects.

I conclude by reiterating what the consequences would be if the grouse shooting industry were banned: jobs and businesses at risk, rural economies ruined, lower tax revenue for public services, increased land management costs for taxpayers, more wildlife at risk and less biodiversity, the environment harmed and the countryside damaged. That is why, despite what a small number of activists would like to do, I oppose a ban on this crucial sector.

Several hon. Members rose—

Carolyn Harris

(in the Chair)

Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to speak.

4.43pm

Rishi Sunak

(Richmond and Northallerton) (Con)

It is a great pleasure to follow the excellent speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). I last spoke on this subject in this very place back in 2016. A lot has changed in the last nine years—notably, 10 Chief Secretaries to the Treasury, seven Chancellors and, indeed, five Prime Ministers—but one thing that has not changed is my view on grouse shooting.

For full disclosure, I should say that I have never shot grouse, pheasant or any other type of bird. That is not a request for invitations, but the fact that I do not shoot grouse has not changed my absolute commitment to grouse shooting. Why? Because grouse shooting is fundamental to hard-working people in constituencies such as mine. It is a

part of our local social fabric, and it is one of the world's great conservation success stories.

Advocates of a ban often think that the only people who will suffer are rich men in plus fours with port-faced complexions, but as I said back in 2016, nothing could be further from the truth. The real victims of any ban would not be caricatures, but ordinary working people: the farmer's wife who goes beating at the weekend so that her family can make ends meet; the young man able to earn a living, in the community that he loves, as an apprentice to a gamekeeper; or the local publican welcoming shooting parties with cold ales and warm pies. Let us be absolutely clear that those who support a ban on grouse shooting should only do so if they are prepared to look those people in the eye and explain to them why their livelihoods are worth sacrificing.

Some question shooting's contribution to the rural economy. As we heard, the petition itself uses the words "economically insignificant", but there is nothing economically insignificant about 2,500 direct jobs and tens of millions of pounds paid out in wages. If anything, those numbers are an underestimate. From the Yorkshire B&B welcoming ramblers drawn to our area by the moors' summer blossom, to the workshops of Westley Richards in Birmingham or Purdey in London, whose handmade shotguns are the finest in the world, the ripples of employment that grouse shooting creates reach every corner of our country.

Grouse shooting makes an invaluable contribution not only to the rural economy, but to our rural landscape. A tendency among some conservationists is to act as though farmers and gamekeepers are somehow trespassing on Britain's landscape, but without their hands repairing our dry stone walls or their dairy cows keeping the fields lush, the rural beauty of our countryside would soon fade. Heather moorland, as we heard, is rarer than rainforest, and 75% of it is found right here in Britain. It is a national treasure.

From Heathcliff to Holmes, the moors have become a proud part of our cultural heritage, and no one has set out a viable, privately funded alternative vision for those uplands. Without the million pounds of private income spent by moor owners on land management every single week, that proud heritage would come to an end. Overgrazed by sheep, used to grow pine timber, or abandoned to bracken, the moors as we know and love them would be lost. That would be a disaster for British wildlife.

Academic study after academic study shows that endangered wading birds such as curlew and lapwing are much more likely to breed successfully on managed grouse moors. The vast majority of rare merlin, the UK's smallest bird of prey, are found on grouse moors. A recent study by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust in Northumberland reveals the devastating ecological impact on plover, snipe, lapwing and curlew populations of the withdrawal of predator control carried out by moor owners.

There has been some discussion about the state of the hen harrier population, and although numbers reached a record high in 2023, more can and must be done, but we must be clear: a Britain without grouse shooting is not a Britain where the hen harrier would thrive. Research carried out on the Scottish grouse moor of Langholm and published in the *Journal of Applied Ecology* found that when gamekeeping ceased, the hen harrier population plummeted. Without gamekeepers to control the predators, they multiply and hen harriers pay the price. That is why the participation of 1 million acres of grouse moor in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs hen harrier brood management scheme is the right approach, and why gamekeepers supporting diversionary feeding is the right approach. Conservation will succeed only through partnership with the grouse-shooting industry and not through its destruction.

Joe Morris

(Hexham) (Lab)

The right hon. Gentleman is making an interesting speech. I was drawn to his comments about Scotland where, as this matter is devolved, there is a degree of responsibility—vicarious liability—on landowners. To crack down on wildlife crime, does he share my desire to see the Minister explore the potential of introducing more vicarious responsibility for landowners across the UK, so that if wildlife crime is taking place on managed estates, it can be properly prosecuted and the landowners ultimately held responsible?

Rishi Sunak

As I said, conservation will succeed only if it is done in partnership with the grouse-shooting industry. Let me be clear: I have zero tolerance for raptor persecution. It is rightly condemned by all shooting organisations and is, as the hon. Gentleman says, a crime. Those suspected of illegal activities should face the full consequences of their actions. There is absolutely no place for them in this sector.

I turn next to the petition's comments on the environment. The tightly controlled rotational burning used to manage heather moorland may seem odd to some, but without it, our moors would not regenerate as well or support the rich wildlife and biodiversity that they do; the risk of wildfires would also increase. I have found no clear scientific consensus to support a blanket ban. In addition, contrary to some claims, there is no specific evidence that links burning to flooding. Far from seeking to create drier moors, managers appreciate that wetter is better, and have blocked thousands of grips in order to ensure that peat on their landscapes is rewetted.

As for the myth that grouse shooting is somehow unregulated, I would be amused to hear what the gamekeepers in my constituency think of that. There are scores of regulations, codes and licences, and even Acts of Parliament, to comply with, covering

every aspect of the sector, including the possession and use of firearms, the use of lead ammunition, the length of the season, the methods of predator control, heather burning, the use of medicated grit, and the protection of wild birds.

Banning grouse shooting would undermine the balanced ecosystem of our countryside. It would leave not only many families but our landscape and wildlife poorer. A ban on grouse shooting would be a policy with no winners. It would be a case of a small section of urban Britain imposing its views on rural Britain, and that is not right. The failure to appreciate other people's views and interests will not bring our country together. I urge the Government to stand firm and reject these ill thought-through calls for a ban. Instead, we should all work together to build on this quintessentially British success story.

4.51pm

Sam Rushworth

(Bishop Auckland) (Lab)

I have supported animal welfare since I was a teenager, when I first visited the Redwings horse sanctuary in Norfolk, where I learned about battery farming. At college, I set up an animal welfare group, and I used to work for an animal welfare charity. I care about the welfare of all animals and birds, including grouse.

I have no interest in shooting grouse. I believe—although some may challenge me on this—that I represent England's largest grouse moors, in Teesdale and Weardale. I have never shot an animal in my life. I have shot a gun—during a short period in Canada, I greatly enjoyed target shooting—but I am not interested in grouse shooting. That does not mean we should ban it.

I am here as a Labour MP to represent my constituents. My first priority will always be the jobs and livelihoods of the people I represent. At a conservative estimate, 500 jobs in the Bishop Auckland constituency—in Teesdale and Weardale—rely on revenues from grouse shooting, including the gamekeepers, those who run gun shops, provide hospitality during shoots, maintain dry stone walls, look after the lodges and train dogs, and the young people for whom being a beater is a great way to earn a seasonal wage. I am here to speak for them. As the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), noted earlier, I really find it insulting when these people's wages are talked about as “economically insignificant”. Others may consider it economically insignificant in the context of the national economy, but if someone is doing a job that their dad did before them and their grandfather did before him, if they grew up on that land and that is the job they want to do, their livelihood is not economically insignificant; it is what puts food on their table.

To talk about conservation, I recently had the pleasure of attending an event called Let's Learn Moor with primary school children from my constituency. It was a wonderful day out, and I really enjoyed it. The children learned about the conservation of peat bogs, as well as all the various fantastic birds and wildlife that we have. Anyone can come to Teesdale and Weardale and see it for themselves; they will find no other place in the country where they can stand and within an hour observe curlews, lapwings and oystercatchers flying past. Those birds are there because they are preserved by predator control.

While I do not shoot grouse and never would, I have got up with friends at 4 am and gone out to the most remarkable and spectacular lek to see the black grouse that come together to the same spot every year to find their mate. We should be doing more to encourage eco-tourism in my part of the world, so that more people can enjoy the wonderful wildlife that we have because we live in a managed landscape.

At Let's Learn Moor, the children met the Bishop Auckland fire brigade, who had come up to the top of the moor to demonstrate how they put out a moorland fire. They had a pump down in the river, and the children had a wonderful time spraying a firehose, which nearly hit us. I asked the firefighters about the method for managing and putting out moorland fires, and they said, "Well, the first thing we do is call the gamekeepers. They're the experts at managing the fires, and they are normally first on the scene." A local gamekeeper talked to me about his responsibility to manage not only predators but the land around him. He talked about his experiences moving on campers, including one occasion when he discovered people who had created a circle of stones and lit a fire; he moved them on to camp in a local pub's garden.

To echo the point made by the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton about regulation, the gamekeepers also talked about how carefully they must tread when they come across foolish tourists who did not learn the countryside code in school. They told me, "If there is one allegation against us that we have been in any way aggressive, they will whip our guns away straightaway, because it is so tightly regulated." They did not deny that there is occasional bad practice, and they were as disgusted as me by the criminality that sometimes occurs on the moorland, but the point is that it is criminality; we already have laws against such practices. Perhaps we need to look at how we enforce those laws; we do not necessarily need to create a whole new set.

Of course there are questions about how we manage the environment, and how we stop criminality and animal cruelty, but simply banning a sport that people have engaged in for generations will not solve those problems. It is vital that we keep the money flowing into our community. If we lost that revenue, we would lose jobs, and we would even lose primary schools, which would have to close. We are already seeing far too many families leaving the tops of the dales because of the lack of work. We would also lose

the wildlife; it is not there by chance. With respect to those who signed the petition, and with a heartfelt understanding of their motives, I have to oppose it today.

4.58pm

Kevin Hollinrake

(Thirsk and Malton) (Con)

As instructed by you, Mrs Harris, I will restrict my comments only to the impacts of grouse shooting on Thirsk and Malton, due to my role on the Front Bench. I am very keen to speak in this debate, as I have lived in the area my whole life, and grouse shooting is hugely important there. I also declare an interest in that I have been grouse shooting once, although not very successfully.

My biggest concern right now for Thirsk and Malton is that it is a tinderbox, as its geography and landscape pose a risk of wildfire. Clearly, that is largely because of the exceptionally dry weather that we have had over recent weeks and months. I am also concerned that the policies pursued by Natural England are exacerbating the problem.

I am keen to speak because, having read the petition and its claims, I think the 400 people in my constituency who signed it have been misled. The petition describes driven grouse shooting as “bad for people, the environment and wildlife”, and bad for the economy—I want to talk about that in the context of Thirsk and Malton. The petition states that “grouse shooting is economically insignificant when contrasted with other...uses”, but it does not set out what those other uses are. The only ones I could find to replace the industry of grouse shooting were perhaps wind farms, forestation or sheep farming. My dad was a sheep farmer, and there is plenty of sheep farming in Thirsk and Malton. It is not particularly prosperous and I cannot imagine that the revenue attached to it would make up for the revenue loss if grouse shooting ended. With wind farms and forestation, a completely different cohort of people would potentially get employment from those uses, but it would be nothing like the extent to which my constituency benefits from grouse shooting today.

Hundreds of people in my constituency are directly employed in the grouse shooting industry and the jobs and businesses connected to it. Others have mentioned the same. I will mention one or two of my highest profile hostelries: the Star at Harome, somewhere very close to my heart; the Black Swan at Helmsley; the Talbot at Malton; the Owl at Hawnby; and the Feversham Arms at Church Houses. Those beautiful hostelries in a beautiful landscape very much contribute to the attractions of tourism in Thirsk and Malton. Many people in this House and people I meet all around the country have visited.

There are also the connected shops, such as Carters in Helmsley, and the caterers, the beaters—which my constituency neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for

Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), mentioned —the loaders and the picker-uppers. Not only do all these people get an income from grouse shooting, but the industry builds a community in our location and in communities around it. That is hugely important, and a mixture of people are present in the sector. I have beautiful moorland, including in Hawnby, Bransdale, Farndale, Snilesworth and Bilsdale—I am very proud of those areas and have visited a number of times.

So I do not believe that grouse shooting is bad for those people in my constituency—far from it. I also do not believe that it is “bad...for the environment”. What would be bad for the environment is a serious wildfire. We saw a very serious wildfire at Saddleworth in 2018. It was unmanaged locations that led to that wildfire, which affected 5 million people who were breathing in things like lead and cadmium that were released in it. Dozens of people passed away early because of that wildfire and its effect on air quality. The peat in those locations has been irreparably damaged.

Let me read a comment from a parliamentary briefing last year on wildfires. It explained that “older heather burns with greater intensity”, and that to prevent wildfires “vegetation management must be conducted continuously”. That is why Saddleworth ran out of control, and that is why there was a serious fire on the edge of my constituency at Fylingdales in 2003. That was the only area of moorland that was not being managed, and a fire happened in that location.

Peat is so important in carbon sequestration, but much of the carbon was released because of the wildfires. We saw on our TV screens recently the horrific wildfires in Los Angeles that destroyed properties and businesses and, of course, caused deaths. That was a result of negligence by the local authorities. I believe the policies being pursued by Natural England are a deliberate attempt to close down things like grouse shooting in my constituency and those of others.

There are potential risks for the Peak district. A report stated that there was “the frightening potential of fire... reaching extremes both in the rate of spread and flame lengths far beyond the capacity of control” of the fire and rescue service. The report continued: “Little can be done to control the topography of the area or the increasingly fire-supportive weather, but fuel loading can be addressed.” But that is not being addressed and it will get worse—that is my point. I think that this is an ideological position being taken by our regulator.

In terms of the benefits to wildlife, again, the petition states that grouse shooting is “bad...for wildlife”. Not at all: after grouse shooting ended in the Berwyn special protected area, the population of curlews dropped by 79% and the population of golden plovers dropped by 90%, but the population of corvids, such as crows and the like—which can, of course, be very destructive to wildlife—increased by 600%.

I am very concerned about the position that Natural England has taken. It is very important that the Government make sure that Natural England does the right thing, because there are many other measures that Natural England are considering that would further undermine grouse shooting in Thirsk and Malton. For example, Natural England is consulting on changing the definition of deep peat. Currently, if deep peat is 40 cm or more, burning cannot be used to control the fuel load. Natural England is considering a consultation on reducing that figure to 30 cm. That would mean that the vast majority of the fuel load on the North York moors would not be able to be controlled by burning.

Natural England's solution is mowing, of course. Could mowing be a potential solution? The Scottish Parliament hearing on this issue with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service warned that mowing excess vegetation can "leave a dry layer that actually encourages the spread of fire". However, winter burning "is by far the most effective because it removes a fuel in its entirety". But Natural England has banned winter burning, which is causing the increased fuel load.

We can add that to other issues, such as the withdrawal of general licenses for vermin control and the withdrawal of general licenses for the release of game birds in special protection areas, in terms of that burning. There is also a consultation now on raising the bar for getting a shotgun licence. That would mean that many people would not be able to get a shotgun licence, which would reduce the number of people participating in grouse shooting in areas such as Thirsk and Malton. If we add all these different things up, there is a clear picture: in my view, it is a back-door attempt to end grouse shooting across the country, not least in Thirsk and Malton.

5.07pm

Olivia Blake

(Sheffield Hallam) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Mrs Harris, and I thank all the Members who have spoken in the debate so far. It is fair to say that I will take a slightly different approach on this issue.

I am very proud to have a very active community when it comes to people contacting me, particularly about nature. Six hundred and thirty-five of my constituents signed this petition, which is the highest number of signatories for any constituency in the country. That stems from a deep concern about management practices that affect our community, where we have several grouse moors that are managed.

Grouse shooting has a profound environmental and ecological significance. It is a pastime rooted in privilege and exclusion, which inflicts immense harms on our

uplands, our wildlife and our communities. It is hard to imagine that it has any place in a modern, fair and environmentally responsible Britain. I saw on one website that £7,000 a day is how much some estates charge for this excursion.

I have been out and about with gamekeepers in my constituency. They have put to me all these arguments and after many hours of debate, we agreed to disagree. I understand some of the points that colleagues have been making, but I will set out exactly why I think grouse shooting is harmful and requires more regulation.

I am really concerned that grouse shooting is seen as a harmless countryside tradition or a nostalgic relic of rural life. It is a highly commercialised industry in which vast tracts of our uplands are intensively managed not for biodiversity or for the public good, but to produce unnaturally large numbers of one bird species, the red grouse, for the gun. In Scotland, there are vicarious responsibilities and a licensing scheme, and I wonder whether the Minister has a view on those.

To achieve such an unnatural level of grouse, landowners routinely undertake practices that are environmentally destructive and ecologically reckless. They include the widespread burning of heather in moorlands, as we have heard; the draining of some peatlands; and—I am sure no responsible landowner or land manager allows it—the illegal persecution of birds of prey, including many protected species, such as the hen harrier, for which I am the species champion, the golden eagle, the buzzard and the peregrine falcon.

According to the RSPB, the majority of confirmed illegal killings of birds of prey in the past 10 years were linked to land managed for pheasant, partridge or grouse shooting, and RSPB figures show that at least one bird of prey is illegally killed or injured every four days in the UK. Given how precious these species are to our biodiversity, that is a shocking statistic.

The petition was signed by 635 of my constituents. The Moorland Association's website states that just 700 people are directly employed in grouse moor management. I recognise that, as others have said, there are spin-out commercial opportunities. However, given how vast the contribution is—I think somebody mentioned £52 million earlier—if I were a beater, I might be unionising to take more of that profit home to my family.

The environmental consequences are well documented and grave. Burning heather damages fragile peat bogs, which are among the most vital carbon stores in the country. This degradation means that, instead of being locked away, carbon cannot be stored effectively, which accelerates climate change. The poor condition of our peat was recognised by the last Government. They brought in the peatlands strategy, which I welcomed but felt did not go far enough.

Burning heather heightens flood risks for downstream communities by stripping the land of its natural ability to hold water. I invite anyone to go to a moorland, pick up some sphagnum moss and give it good old squeeze—the water drips out of it, showing how much of a sponge it is. It stores water in our uplands, which is so important. I am very privileged to represent a city with so many hills and rivers, and downstream flooding in our region is very important. We want our peatlands to be restored so that that water is held upland, and this practice is holding that back.

We also want to ensure that our landscapes are not impoverished, stripped of biodiversity and managed for a single commercial interest.

Kevin Hollinrake

I congratulate the hon. Lady on being a hen harrier parliamentary champion; I am the puffin parliamentary champion, so we have something in common. She talks about somebody other than landowners managing biodiversity rather in these landscapes. Who would that be, who would pay for it and how much would it cost?

Olivia Blake

Those are very good questions, and there are a number of private resources that we could attend to. The Environmental Audit Committee did work on nature capital in the last Parliament, and I think it will this year be publishing a report on it, which am excited to see. For restoration practices, carbon credits are another option. There are also some great landowners who are doing the right thing, whether we are talking about water companies that lease land to grouse moors, which is the case in some places; our national trusts and similar bodies; or the RSPB itself. Smaller-scale land parcels are now even being bought up by organisations such as the Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust, which are trying to put nature at their heart.

The Government have been open and quick to the game on heather burning, and I welcome their recent consultation on the current ban on deep peat burning, which I get a lot of correspondence about. When the burning is happening, because of the direction of the wind, it comes down the valleys into my constituency. There are moorlands in my constituency, but the majority of people live downwind. It is causing real discomfort for my constituents who have health problems, whether asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or lung cancer. All those people have contacted me about the challenges they face with their breathing.

Mr Angus MacDonald

(Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD)

As we speak, there is a massive fire south of Inverness. All around that fire are the gamekeepers in that area. It is they who are controlling that fire, but they do not own that land. The heather has been allowed to grow long, lank and uncontrolled. Does the

hon. Lady agree that gamekeepers play an important role in stopping fires on moorlands?

Olivia Blake

It is interesting, because what we get depends on who we speak to, which shows there is space for more research. I have spoken to ecologists and specialists who say there is no further risk with the leggy kind of heather than without it, and that the damage done by so-called cold burns is significant, so that is a complicated issue. We have to think about it in the round. We need to communicate to people not to use barbecues or throw away cigarettes when they go on walks—all those simple things. We will face more wildfires as a result of climate change, so we cannot see this issue separately.

It is not only nature that suffers. The economic case made by those who defend grouse shooting simply does not stand up to scrutiny. While a handful of large estates and private shooting syndicates profit, rural communities would benefit far more from land uses that serve not just a privileged few but the wider community, such as nature-based tourism, habitat restoration, sustainable farming and community-led projects. Our uplands belong to us and should work in the public interest.

At the heart of this debate is the question of land, power and inequality. Just 1% of the population owns over half the land in England, and nowhere is that feudal pattern more evident than in our uplands, where vast moorlands remain in the hands of a privileged minority, often propped up by many taxpayer subsidies. That is why I want to see the House back a new community right to buy when it comes to nature. In Sheffield, a large campaign—which includes the great Bob Berzins, an expert in this area—has sprung up to tackle these issues. Giving local people and communities the power to take poorly managed land into collective ownership would be a transformative step. It would restore landscapes for nature, climate and people while creating jobs and opportunities rooted in sustainability and fairness. The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 legislated for a community right to buy, setting an example that this House can follow, or at least consider.

I have been involved in community-led rewilding projects to plant sphagnum moss. I see the transformation they have made and, compared with other such projects I have seen, those communities are the real pioneers of getting the work done, seeing what works and learning from it. We could be doing much more to engage with the communities that are getting on with the work of restoring our moorlands.

The public appetite for reform is growing. Conservation charities, environmental scientists, rural communities and tens of thousands of campaigners are calling on this destructive, outdated industry to halt. Scotland has already taken decisive steps to regulate grouse moor management; England cannot afford to fall behind. We have before us a rare opportunity to reimagine our uplands as thriving, biodiverse

landscapes; to restore carbon-rich peatlands, reduce flood risks and create rural jobs rooted in sustainability and nature recovery, not ecological harm; and to make these places not private playgrounds but shared natural treasures for the benefit of all.

Driven grouse shooting is a relic of a bygone age. Its environmental damage, ethical failures and economic myths are indefensible in the 21st century. It is time for the House to show leadership, listen to the evidence and empower communities to put our climate, our wildlife and our rural economies first, and consign this practice to history.

5.19pm

Mr Angus MacDonald

(Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD)

Rural Britain, and particularly remote Scotland, is in crisis. The young are moving to the cities, the schools are closing, healthcare is being centralised and the cost of living is far higher than in the conurbations. Soon, our glens will be populated only by incoming retirees.

I took my townie friend, a senior politician, along the beautiful 30-mile single-track road along the south side of Loch Ness. The road winds through a patchwork quilt of well-managed heather moorland. It is lined with well-kept cottages, pubs and village halls. As we drove, I pointed out where I had stayed as a teenager, grouse beating one glorious August. I explained to my companion the extraordinary social role that shooting plays there.

There were 50 folk from three generations together, many the descendants of those who have gathered there for the same purpose for two centuries. Back then, as no doubt today, the chat was great. We set off in a convoy of locally bought Land Rovers, ready to walk a dozen miles across the hill, with the beaters' spaniels dashing back and forth in front of us. Interspersed along the long line were the gamekeepers: men and women from various estates nearby. Fit and strong, they are the pillars of the local community. They serve in the volunteer fire service, they run the village hall, and their spouses and partners staff the medical centre and pub. Without their children, the local primary school would close.

The keepers are not in well-paid jobs. They earn a tenth of the income of a certain celebrity TV presenter who spends his time vilifying them. They do it for the love of the countryside, the wildlife, and the traditions of the land from which they hail. They know where the curlews nest, can identify a golden plover from 500 yards, and know how to restore a collapsed wall or lay a hedge. They keep the mink, rats, crows and other vermin under control. If they did not, our precious wildlife population would collapse. The founder of Curlew Action says that conservationists must choose between gamekeepers with curlew, or no gamekeepers with no curlew.

Yes, there are a few unscrupulous keepers who, egged on by grouse-greedy lairds, kill raptors, but raptor deaths are at an all-time low, and there are bad eggs in every profession, as we MPs know only too well. The owners of the moors could take their money elsewhere, and buy yachts, or chalets in the Alps. Instead, they choose to pour money into our area for the love of grouse. Their passion results in good jobs in remote areas, and lots of spin-off economic benefits for caterers, fencers, diggers, drivers, gamekeepers and so on. Grouse moor activities also play an important role in reducing loneliness and mental health in rural areas.

In the last 15 years, the big buyers of moors have been those wanting to conduct carbon offsetting by rewilding the land: conservation charities, corporates and wealthy individuals, almost invariably receiving massive Government rewilding grants, paid for by the unknowing taxpayer. Invariably, this involves the issuing of P45s and the loss of housing for the gamekeepers, some of whose fathers and grandfathers lived and worked on that same property.

If we love our moorland, if we want to see our wildlife thrive, and if we strive for the economic viability of remote areas and good local jobs, we must keep grouse shooting going. Do not let urban MPs once more hammer us rural people without knowing the awful consequences. I conclude with a little ditty:

“No more the keeper tracks the hill,
His shotgun cold, his bothy still.
The ghillie’s rod, the shepherd’s dog,
Lie idle in the creeping fog.
The red deer fall in bloody ranks,
Not for food, nor sport, nor thanks,
But culled like vermin, cast away,
So saplings might have room to sway.
No flight of grouse along the scree,
Just silence now, for every tree.
There is no healing of the glen,
When land forgets the touch of men.
The crofter’s roof caves in with rain;
The keeper’s track turns wild again.
The pub is shut, the school is bare—

What future grows when none live there?

So mark this truth in storm and soil:

This land must live by native toil.

Let birch and beaver find their place—

But not at the cost of the Highland race.”

5.24pm

David Simmonds

(Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I follow the tradition set by a number of Members by declaring that I am a resolutely suburban Member of Parliament. There are no grouse moors in Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner, although there is a significant number of members of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) made reference to the work of Purdey in manufacturing traditional British weapons; Holland & Holland has a base in my constituency and also makes a significant contribution, as both an employer and a creator of opportunities for young people locally. I place on the record my thanks to the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Countryside Alliance for their work to ensure that the Members who spoke in the debate were widely briefed on all the issues raised by the e-petition.

Like the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton, I have never shot a grouse. I have never shot a game bird of any kind, although I have enjoyed the opportunity in my constituency and elsewhere to shoot clay pigeons—I have always felt that the degree of harm involved is fairly minimal—but like many of my constituents I have a great interest in nature and biodiversity. My constituency is home to a number of significant reserves on the edge of London, including important locations for migratory species, such as the lakes at Harefield, and other significant habitats that, like grouse moors, were created largely by the influence of human beings but are incredibly important for the conservation of nature and biodiversity.

Habitats such as chalk streams throw up a similar set of issues. Environments that have been created by human hand for leisure and the enjoyment of the natural environment are also incredibly significant for the maintenance of the environment, for the preservation of species, some of which are at significant risk, and for the work we are doing as a country to tackle climate change, which a number of Members mentioned.

This debate is about not simply the narrow point of what happens on our grouse moors, but the bigger picture of how we, as humankind, exercise our responsibility to be effective stewards of nature.

The comparison between heather moorland and chalk streams was made in one of the briefings, and I want to draw that comparison again, simply because of the striking fact that 75% of all heather moorland is here in the United Kingdom and 85% of all the world's chalk streams are here in England as well. People's hobbies help to maintain both of those habitats: grouse shooting provides the economic infrastructure that maintains heather moorland and allows it to continue to act as a carbon sink, which makes such an enormous contribution to the UK's efforts to tackle climate change, and fishing contributes economically to the maintenance of chalk streams, which are a vital environmental asset.

In the debates on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which is now in the other place for consideration, a great deal of time and effort was devoted by the Government—I applaud them for considering the issue to be a high priority—as well as by Opposition parties and some Government Back Benchers, to the use of planning gain to enhance the environment, to ensure that the impact of planning legislation on natural habitats is minimised—at least one Member mentioned that—and to ensure that, where possible, it makes a contribution to maintaining them.

We also spent a good deal of time in our consideration of the Renters' Rights Bill on issues such as people's ability to access accommodation that is supported by not just grouse shooting but other kinds of game shooting, fishing and various types of countryside activities. The many BASC members in my constituency—most of whom are probably more on the side of the ratcatchers than the grouse shooters—see those activities as being an important part of the infrastructure of our country.

In the debate on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, with the proposal for swift bricks, we considered the impact that human measures can have on species such as swifts, and the impact of building and development on bird species' ability to access food that is critical to maintaining successful breeding populations. For all Members—even for those of us who are in the suburbs, much as we cherish our green spaces—it emphasised the need to recognise that one of the characteristics of our country that people value is its beautiful countryside. It is not there by accident. Much of it depends on the effective management by human beings of habitats such as grouse moors. None of that would be taking place were it not for the fact that there is a sporting and shooting infrastructure behind it, which brings the resource forward and means that this environment is conserved for the benefit of us all.

Whether it is the biodiversity net gain from our grouse moors, the effective management that reduces the harm caused by wildfires, or the wider contribution that the species

supported by that environment make to all kinds of other birds that are not part of the grouse-shooting fraternity, but are none the less incredibly important to the wider biodiversity of our country, it is clear that grouse shooting makes a valuable contribution and is worth our time and attention. Given that the Government clearly hint in their statement that they have no interest in banning grouse shooting, they must recognise that we should make appropriate policies that support our economy in supporting our environment, and vice versa.

Members from across the country, from my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth), to myself, speaking on behalf of the suburbs, recognise the value that grouse shooting contributes to our country and environment. We want to ensure that the Government get the clear message that what is outlined in this petition is not a helpful way to proceed if we want to conserve our environment, our bird species, and our biodiversity for future generations.

5.32pm

Jim Shannon

(Strangford) (DUP)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for setting the scene so well. He set out the landscape and introduced all the issues, and all Members who have contributed have, by and large, comprehended the importance of grouse shooting.

I declare an interest as I am a member of BASC, the Countryside Alliance Ireland, Sport Ireland and the Ulster Farmers Union. All four of those, along with the NFU, support grouse shooting. It was important to put that on record, in case anyone thought I was being biased. The reason I joined those organisations is because they represent my views. All those bodies have a clearly-stated opinion on grouse shooting; it is an opinion that I hold to as well.

I enjoy country sports, although, to be truthful, because of an incredibly busy schedule, I only attend shoots twice a year—maybe once a year. Every bird or rabbit I shoot—the number of animals goes down as my age goes up—finds its way to the table as dinner, and that is a fact. There is no wastage, as far as I am concerned. I see the bird or rabbit to table, and that is something I can endorse. I recall that when she was First Minister, my party colleague who is now Baroness Foster of the other place informed me one day that she enjoyed pheasant, so after some of my endeavours at pheasant shooting I would leave them hanging from her door at the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont. She would take them home and serve her family—farm to table was never as quick.

Many people contribute to and input into grouse shooting—I will enlarge on that later in my speech—and that is its importance. For the record, we own a small farm, but my mum and dad had nothing when they started off. I think my dad had the wheel of a cart when he started out in life. He did of course manage to buy a farm, but it was not given to him. He was not one of the landed gentry or one of the privileged; he worked hard for every pound that he had, along with my mum. Through their endeavour, they got the farm that we have today. On that farm, our contribution is 3,500 trees that we planted and that have now reached maturity. There are two duck ponds, the hedgerows have been retained and the raptors—the birds of prey—have a place. All those things were done because we understand the balance of nature and how we can contribute, making sure it is done right. I walked across the fields after silage cutting about four weeks ago, and I have never seen as many songbirds in my life on our land as I saw this time. Is that a contribution from someone who loves the land, or from someone who does not know about it? I shall let Members make their own decision.

I want to mention the Glenwherry shoot, which is the only grouse shoot in Northern Ireland. It is sponsored by BASC and the landowner. It is a success, but why is that? To start with, Glenwherry had no more than about 10 grouse, but it built that up. As others have said, the magpies, the crows, the greybacks, the foxes and the rats—all the predators—were controlled. It was gamekeepered, and the heath and moorland was burnt in a controlled burning, so that it could regenerate and produce the heather for the young birds and the grouse. Today, that is a successful grouse shoot. Why is it successful? Because grouse shooters know how to do it. They know how to deliver a successful grouse shoot. The lapwings and curlews also gathered momentum as a result. They have a place to breed every year because of the efforts of the gamekeeper and the landowner—the efforts of those who put money into the grouse shooting to make it a success.

I have never shot a grouse—never in my life—but I know that the principles of countryside management are in place and therefore sustainability is key. The shooting season begins on 12 August, which is referred to as the glorious 12th. I will celebrate a much more glorious 12th in two weeks' time in Northern Ireland—we will not be shooting any grouse, but doing something slightly different. The season finishes on 30 November in Northern Ireland and on 10 December on the GB mainland.

Grouse are prized by chefs and those who eat game. The first birds of the season are rushed to restaurants here in London and elsewhere across the United Kingdom. Nearly 100% of grouse shot will be food for the table. There is no wastage—no shooting for the sake of a number. The birds are used to feed people throughout the United Kingdom. We need to have an honest discussion about what grouse shooting entails. I mean not the skill of shooting straight—though I probably need a lot of lessons in that—but the year-

long hard slog that it takes to manage the environment to protect the habitat of the grouse.

Seventy-five per cent of the world's heather moorland is found in Britain, and we have a custodial responsibility to look after it. Who looks after it? The gamekeepers, the grouse shooters and those who own the land. Many have described heather moorland as our rainforests here in the United Kingdom. Up to 1.8 million hectares of uplands are managed as grouse moors, and a study of upland breeding birds in parts of England and Scotland found that the densities of golden plover and lapwing were five times greater on managed grouse moors compared with unmanaged moorland, as has been mentioned. Curlew have doubled on managed moorland and redshank are also more abundant, because of grouse shooting, predator control and management.

This will be of interest to you, Mrs Harris, as a Member who represents a constituency in Wales, and hopefully to everyone. In the Berwyn range, an upland area of Wales that lost management for grouse shooting, surveys showed a dramatic decline in upland breeding of waders between 1983 to 1985 and 2002. Overall, the abundance of all breeding waders declined by 80%. There is the evidential base—it is all about evidence, is it not? The evidence points to the fact that grouse moor management, alongside shooting organisations, landowners and predator control, leads to more grouse and more waders. Surely, that has to be good.

The equivalent of more than 33,000 cars' worth of carbon emissions is being removed from the atmosphere each year because of the environmental work of grouse moor estates in the north of England, and grouse moor management has restored some 27,000 hectares of bare peat in the last 20 years. Again, why are people doing this? Because they want to retain the land. Our grouse moors are our rainforests here in the United Kingdom—they are what we are trying to retain. Let us give credit to those who do that, rather than having those who do not understand it, or who do not respect those people, pass silly comments.

Time prevents me from continuing to outline the vast array of benefits, but I want to outline the financial benefits of shooting. Grouse moor owners in England spend more than £52.5 million on moor management, whereas other land uses in the uplands, such as farming and forestry, depend on Government subsidy. Indeed, businesses associated with grouse shooting benefit by some £15.2 million every year. We cannot ignore the contribution, the jobs and the money that goes into the economy. Grouse moors in England and Scotland support around 3,000 full-time jobs. Country sports tourism, including grouse shooting, generates £155 million annually for the economy in Scotland—the very place that the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire represents; he understands the commitment, as others do. With around 970,000 bed-nights purchased each year by domestic and international tourists, the benefits of this carefully curated aspect of country sports are clear.

I conclude by returning to my first point. Grouse are eaten and used, not wasted. No benefit to the environment or economy from grouse shooting is wasted. That is why I could not agree to a ban on this vital part of our countryside management. I hope that the House recognises—I believe it does—the good that comes from grouse shooting. Hopefully it will be portrayed as such in all the magazines and perhaps even on TV.

5.43pm

Greg Smith

(Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I draw the House's attention to the fact that I, like many hundreds of my constituents, am a member of both the Countryside Alliance and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, and I have been for many years, pre-dating my election in 2019. Likewise, I draw attention to my entries in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, largely from the previous Parliament.

It is a huge pleasure to speak in this debate. Mid Buckinghamshire does not have grouse moors, but shooting is important to us locally. From conversations with many of my constituents who shoot, I know that they travel to shoot grouse in Scotland, North Yorkshire and other moors around the country. Equipment—ammunition, cartridges and so on—will be purchased in our superb gun shops, such as the Oxford Gun Company, which, despite its name, is actually in the village of Oakley in Buckinghamshire, and that directly supports our local economy, too. I want to place on the record my firm support for grouse shooting in principle, not only as a traditional sporting pursuit, but as an activity that delivers measurable environmental, social and economic value to our countryside.

I will address the heart of the matter: the moorlands themselves. Over 75% of the world's heather moorland is found in Britain. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, this unique landscape is our equivalent of a rainforest: fragile, irreplaceable and internationally important. These are not wild, untouched places; they are shaped and safeguarded by generations of active management, much of which is centred around grouse shooting.

Opponents of grouse shooting often speak of the uplands as if they are best left alone, but the science and the lived experience of those who work this land tell a different story. Controlled heather burning, rotational grazing and predator control are not just practices for the benefit of grouse but the very tools with which we maintain habitat for countless other species. Ground-nesting birds such as curlew, lapwing and golden plover, all of which are red listed for conservation concern, are between three and five times more abundant on managed grouse moors than on unmanaged land.

Moreover, grouse moor management is vital in the fight against wildfires. Controlled cool burns remove the tinder-dry heather that fuels devastating wildfires, which in recent years have destroyed vast swathes of peatland and released hundreds of thousands of tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere. The Government's own figures show a sharp rise in wildfire incidents in 2025, with 48 reported by spring alone. Managed moors act as fire breaks. Unmanaged ones become kindling.

Some have raised concerns about moor burning and peatland drainage, but again the evidence shows that modern grouse moor managers are leading the charge in peat restoration. In the last decade, they have blocked nearly 3,000km of outdated agricultural drains and restored over 27,000 hectares of bare peat. Those actions actively sequester carbon, improve water quality and reduce downstream flood risk.

Let us not forget the human element. Grouse shooting underpins fragile rural economies. Across England and Scotland, it supports around 3,000 full-time equivalent jobs and injects over £52 million into moorland management annually. Hospitality businesses, equipment suppliers, game dealers and transport firms all benefit, often in communities where few other industries operate outside the tourist season. Socially, the benefits are also clear. Thousands of people participate in grouse shooting each year. It brings communities together, sustains rural traditions and keeps local schools, pubs and shops viable in areas that might otherwise face depopulation and decline.

What of the hen harrier, the emblem of those who seek to see grouse shooting banned? In 2023, a record number of hen harrier chicks fledged, the majority on managed grouse moors. That is not an accident, but the product of targeted conservation partnerships, predator control and habitat stewardship. BASC and others are funding brood management, habitat creation and even southern reintroduction efforts. Gamekeepers are not the enemy of the hen harrier; they are its strongest ally in the uplands.

Let me be clear: wildlife crime, including raptor persecution, is abhorrent and must be stamped out. We enjoy the red kites above Buckinghamshire, and I have yet to meet anyone who would even think of trying to harm one of those beautiful birds. Anyone who seeks to do so should be brought to justice.

Olivia Blake

I just feel that the hon. Gentleman is putting his head in the sand. Yes, there are more fledglings, but does he know what happened to them?

Greg Smith

The evidence is very clear that populations are up. I think all those who oppose grouse shooting, and who wish to see this petition as the gold standard, really should look at the evidence of the overall numbers in this country, which are up.

To return to the point about raptor persecution, this crime is not systemic; it is the work of a lawbreaking minority, and shooting organisations have rightly adopted a zero-tolerance approach. Anyone convicted should face the full force of the law.

Edward Morello

(West Dorset) (LD)

The hon. Gentleman has red kites in his constituency, but we have sea eagles on the south coast. They have recently been reintroduced but sadly there have been cases of them being poisoned. Given its rural nature, I was somewhat surprised that my constituency of West Dorset had one of the highest numbers of signatories to the petition. I know the point has already been made about the need for legislation to protect the environment, but if people had more confidence in rural police prosecuting criminals who attack sea eagles, red kites or other wildlife, might not the PR battle for grouse shooting be a little easier to win?

Greg Smith

There are different pictures in different parts of the country when it comes to prosecution. I am very lucky in Buckinghamshire to have Thames Valley police, which takes this incredibly seriously—particularly its rural crime taskforce, which does a lot of good work in this area. However, I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that the picture across the country is mixed, as in any walk of life, and that some forces need to do much better.

To ban grouse shooting would be to impoverish our uplands environmentally, economically and socially. This debate is not simply about sport, but about the stewardship of some of the most iconic landscapes in Britain. Grouse shooting is not the problem. It is a key part of the solution. As this debate has shown this afternoon, with voices not just from the official Opposition, but from the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the DUP quite clearly setting out the case for grouse shooting on all of those fronts, I think it is pretty clear where we stand.

5.51pm

Sarah Dyke

(Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD)

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for leading this important debate. I also thank the 348 petitioners in my constituency.

The red grouse is a unique wild bird, native to the moorland areas of the UK, but it is under threat. Challenges such as habitat loss, disease, predation and climate change act together to suppress population recovery. Driven and walked grouse shooting have

been a tradition in the UK for over 100 years, and it is important to recognise the benefits that well managed, sustainable shooting and moor management bring. It is an important part of the rural economy, providing both direct and indirect employment opportunities.

In England, grouse moor management creates 42,500 working days a year and is responsible for 1,500 full-time posts, particularly in remote areas where employment opportunities are limited. It generates at least £23.3 million annually for the rural economy. Grouse shooting also represents an important cultural pastime and is part of upland heritage. It supports land and habitat management and benefits biodiversity. However, that does not mean the practice is immune from illegal activity, as we have heard—particularly the persecution of birds of prey such as hen harriers, golden eagles and other raptors. That is why today's debate is so important. It enables us to discuss the benefits and the actions that can be taken to ensure grouse shooting can continue, how it can benefit nature and continue to play a vital role in supporting the rural economy, and, alongside all this, how a robust framework can be put in place to deter illegal practices and increase accountability.

Historically, red grouse lived in the moorlands of south-west England, but their population suffered and they are now considered extinct in the region, with the last bird sighted around 2005. It is imperative that we ensure the red grouse does not disappear from our uplands as well. It must be recognised that land managers have a huge responsibility in managing grouse populations. We must also be cognisant of the worrying reports of serious crimes against birds of prey.

We know it is illegal to kill, injure or take a wild bird of prey in the UK, but between 2009 and 2023, the RSPB recorded 1,529 confirmed incidents of persecution—the equivalent of one bird every four days. Rare species such as goshawks, peregrine falcons and hen harriers are frequently killed and their populations impacted, yet a worrying lack of prosecutions for such crimes means that the number of confirmed and suspected hen harrier persecution incidents has increased, with 102 recorded between 2020 and 2024. This has some stakeholders, including the RSPB, to call for the introduction of a licensing system for driven grouse moors like that introduced in Scotland in 2024.

The Liberal Democrats are clear that grouse shooting should be carried out with the necessary code of practice in place to prevent crimes against birds of prey, and we are clear that land managers and upland farmers play a significant role in protecting nature and preserving biodiversity by providing habitats for diverse wildlife such as curlew, lapwings and golden plovers. The UK is responsible for 75% of the world's heather moorland, and evidence suggests that the reason why the UK has largely retained its heather moorland is the presence of management for grouse shooting. More than 60% of England's upland sites of special scientific interest are in managed grouse moors.

Moorlands are also home to one of our most important natural habitats—peatland. Right hon. and hon. Members will know that I am very passionate about protection of our peatlands. In fact, later this week, my Horticultural Peat (Prohibition of Sale) Bill is due to have its Second Reading. Our peatlands are globally rare ecosystems, making up less than 3% of the Earth's surface. They are also natural resource assets for climate mitigation and adaption, so preserving peatlands is crucial if the Government are to hit net zero and environmental targets. Degraded and damaged peatlands have the opposite effect: they become a net source of emissions and their ability to act as a natural defence to climate change is hampered.

Somerset is the last place in England where active peat extraction still takes place; indeed, some extraction licences will be in place until 2042. That undermines the fantastic peat restoration work undertaken by organisations such as the Somerset Wildlife Trust. Shockingly, 10% of Somerset's carbon emissions now come from degraded peat. It is estimated that, across uplands and lowlands, an enormous 3,200 million tonnes of carbon are stored in peatlands, representing England's largest terrestrial carbon stores.

There is no doubt that protecting and restoring nature is an important tool in achieving net zero. If we continue to work against nature, our hopes of achieving our targets will just end up being warm words. Studies have shown that burning peatland contributes to the current poor condition of many upland SSSIs, special areas of conservation and special protection areas. That is why we must ensure that parties work together to ensure that grouse shooting is carried out sustainably, with the best-practice models being in place to prevent destruction of unique habitats.

The Government have taken some action, such as the 2021 prohibition on burning vegetation on peat more than 40 cm deep inside protected sites. It was recently announced that that ban will be extended, and defining deep peat as anything deeper than 30 cm will ensure that an extra 146,000 hectares are protected. It is vital that the regulations are firmly in place, as they create a best-practice framework, they must be upheld and enforced. There have been 632 records of burnings reported to the RSPB, which believes that a quarter may be in breach of the regulations, but there have been only two prosecutions under the Heather and Grass etc. Burning (England) Regulations 2021, with small fines handed out. That is clearly not enough of a deterrent to protect our precious peatlands.

Land managers and upland farmers know that they must work together to balance and enhance our precious environment, but these areas also provide grazing space for sheep, as they have done for hundreds of years, and they are central to the viability of upland farming. That is why the Liberal Democrats are concerned about the Government's lack of support for upland farmers, who manage land and produce quality food in some of the toughest conditions. Under the previous Conservative

Government, hill farmers' incomes dropped by 41% in just five years, and last year upland farmers received only 8% of sustainable farming incentive funding, despite uplands occupying 15% of England's area.

The Liberal Democrats want to see a greater commitment from the Government to supporting sustainable farming practices and our upland farmers and communities. The family farm tax, the decision to abruptly close the SFI scheme and the reduction of the farming budget in the recent spending review are all terribly short-sighted and will make it harder to achieve both environmental and food security goals. They will also force many farmers out of business. As we have heard, farmers are the guardians of our beautiful countryside. That is why the Liberal Democrats want to support them with a £1 billion boost to the farming budget.

It is important that we provide farmers and landowners with the support they need to fulfil their role as guardians of the countryside. Grouse shooting should be carried out sustainably. It plays an important role in preventing the destruction of unique species and habitats such as peatlands, and it prevents the illegal persecution of birds of prey. Stakeholders must work together to ensure a balanced and long-term future on the moorlands of which we can be proud. To achieve that, appropriate regulations must be enforced, and our rural communities must be empowered.

6.01pm

Robbie Moore

(Keighley and Ilkley) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for introducing this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and I thank the more than 104,000 signatories to the petition.

Let me be absolutely clear with the many petitioners and other interested parties watching this debate: it is not my view that grouse shooting should be banned. I hope that over the course of my remarks it will become clear why that is my view and, indeed, the view of the Conservative party.

We must begin by recognising that grouse moorland is not a natural habitat. Just as the charm of the British countryside is managed by farmers, grouse moorland is managed by gamekeepers, farmers, estates and shooting syndicates that use it. If grouse shooting were banned, the moorland would not be as it is today. I worked as a rural practice surveyor before entering this place, and I advised and was involved in many moorland restoration projects—as well as spending many a Saturday when I was a young lad beating on grouse moors to earn a small wage—so I know the economic, social, environmental and ecological importance of grouse shooting to our uplands.

Banning grouse shooting would have significant ramifications. Across the UK, 1.8 million hectares of moorland are specifically used for grouse shooting, and they account for about 75% of the world's supply of this remarkable habitat. Moorland is, in effect, unique to these islands, and we should be proud and protective of it. Red grouse, the species most commonly used in shooting, is also unique to these islands.

It is worth pausing to note that grouse shooting does not involve the specific rearing and release of birds. Grouse shoots use wild populations of birds that are carefully managed to create the numbers needed to prevent endangerment. The fact that grouse management straddles the line between true animal husbandry and wild hunting is precisely why the industry has such ecological and environmental benefits. The activity drives economic incentives to invest in the upkeep of grouse populations, manage their habitat for other species and provide significant environmental benefits.

Just as the careful management of heather benefits grouse, so it benefits other species, such as lapwing, curlew, golden plover and the rare merlin, as many hon. and right hon. Members have pointed out. Such protected species rely on good, healthy heather for food and shelter, and without proper management, their numbers would decline.

Much of our moorland is also peatland, and grouse moor management schemes have restored approximately 27,000 hectares of bare peat in the past 20 years. Colleagues may know that I have been a big champion of peatland to store and sequester carbon, so efforts to restore it are very welcome. Peat in the UK stores 26 times as much carbon as UK forests, yet it regenerates naturally by only 1 mm a year in depth, making its protection and proper management vital to reducing carbon emissions. Through its management of grouse moors, grouse shooting can only contribute towards the success of that, including its economic benefits.

It is right that I pause here to discuss the burning of heather, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and other Members. The concerns of proponents of a ban on burning may be understandable, but they fail to consider the full picture and, dare I say it, are sometimes completely ill-informed. Their surface-level analysis ignores the fact that moorland is a managed landscape and must continue to be managed if we want it to remain in the enhanced habitat state that we see it in today.

Olivia Blake

Can the hon. Member remind me which Government brought in a partial ban on peatland burning?

Robbie Moore

Clearly, the reason why our moorlands are in the state they are in today is the collective management that is taking place, whether by mechanical means or through the

moorland management burning plans that exist. If we were to end the burning of heather altogether, we would allow the woody stock to generate that has led to the very fires that were rightly referred to by the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald). Right now, gamekeepers are the people on the ground trying to cope with those fires and help our fire services out.

No burning would mean a build-up of vegetation and woody stock, which is itself a negative influence on the sustainability of heather for bird species of all kinds, but what is perhaps worse is that eventually, in the natural cycle, such overgrown heather is much more prone to catching fire. When it does, it will lead to huge and far more damaging wildfires, which are costly to communities and hugely damaging to the environment.

I have seen this for myself in my West Yorkshire constituency on Ilkley moor—another moor that is not managed, exactly the same as Fylingdales moor in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton. A series of smaller and cooler man-made fires, agreed and signed off via an approved moorland management burning plan, is vital for enhancing the ecological status of moorland, helps to improve the complex and desirable mosaic of the moorland, and significantly reduces the risk of dangerous unplanned fires. Once we understand that burning is the management of a natural process, and not destruction for destruction's sake, it is far harder to justify banning it.

Kevin Hollinrake

My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Is he also concerned, as I am, about the proposed change in the definition of deep peat? Currently, it is defined as peat deeper than 40 cm, but there is a proposal to reduce that figure to 30 cm, which would mean that much of our moorlands cannot be managed through burning, leading to a much greater fire risk.

Robbie Moore

My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I was just going to come to that. Natural England is engaged in that consultation right now. It is not just me who is concerned about the consultation process and the direction that Natural England is going in; the concern is shared by my hon. Friend and by Members across the House who have moorland in their constituencies where it is necessary to be able to burn in order to control the woody stock of heather, so that we can create a mosaic that benefits not just the peatland that sits below it but the many species that want to eat the new shoots of heather that come through. That would benefit not only red grouse but the many other bird species I have already spoken about. Therefore, I urge the Government and the Minister to look carefully at the steps that Natural England is taking, because its current direction is not sustainable for our rural economies.

The benefits of grouse shooting are not limited to environmental improvements. Grouse shooting and the management of our moorland provide an invaluable and highly successful land use for our upland areas that, crucially, relies on not just public money, but private investment. Directly within the industry, 3,000 full-time equivalent jobs are supported, contributing nearly £47 million to the UK economy. Those numbers may seem small compared with other industries, but the importance of grouse shooting is where that economic stimulus is felt.

Upland rural communities are some of the most remote and deprived in the country. It is a huge challenge to promote inward investment or deliver efficient and effective public services in those communities. Alongside activities like farming, grouse shooting provides a vital economic pillar to keep our communities alive. My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), like other Members, picked up on that very point. He rightly identified the complex social fabric in the hard-working communities up in Wensleydale, Hawes and beyond. Upland communities are some of the most remote. Banning grouse shooting would cause community centres such as pubs and hotels—like the Star near Thirsk, which I am familiar with—to shut, and those communities would be unable to rely on the positive benefits for employment, for families and for the viability of public services.

The benefits of grouse shooting extend well into our urban areas, as rightly mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who talked about Holland & Holland. That demonstrates the wider economic impacts of grouse shooting. We know how important access to green spaces is, and the public obviously agree: 3 million people visit the North York moors, the Yorkshire dales and the Peak district annually. Why? Because they love the landscape.

The wider public health benefits of how grouse moors are managed are there for us all to see. Research shows that the perennial leaf coverage of heather helps to reduce air pollution, but that coverage is sustained only by the moorland being predominantly funded and managed for the purpose of grouse shooting. Managed grouse moorland also provides a defence against tick-borne diseases. The management of ticks is in the interest of our groundkeepers and of our farmers, as it protects their livestock, but another benefit is fewer ticks to spread human-borne diseases, some of which can be fatal. If we take away the economic incentives to carry out that work by banning grouse shooting, we lose those additional benefits.

I have covered many of the positive consequences of grouse shooting, but I would like to talk about the petition itself. Campaigners for banning grouse shooting have raised flooding as a concern, yet many of the organisations I have spoken to that advocate for shooting to continue say that the exact opposite is true. In the words that I have heard continuously, the wetter, the better. Indeed, many groundkeepers have spent the better

part of the last few decades filling in and removing drains put in in the 1960s and 1970s, specifically to improve the outcomes for grouse shooting and to the benefit of flood mitigation downstream. I have seen that for myself on Keighley moor in my constituency. Without grouse shooting, those ditches and drains would still be in place today.

Another concern that has been raised, not just in this debate but in others that have preceded it, is predator control. We must strike a balance here. Many predatory species, such as foxes, are not endangered, yet many of their prey animals are. While grouse themselves are not endangered, other bird species that benefit from this predator control are. Where the control of predators has been relaxed, numbers of other bird species, such as the lapwing, golden plover and rare merlin, have dropped significantly. We must make a choice about what we wish to prioritise: an unendangered predator species or the endangered prey themselves. Taking no action is not a neutral action. It is heartening to hear that, thanks in part to moorland managed for grouse shooting, hen harrier numbers reached record levels in 2023, demonstrating the positive effect that moorland management can have on our bird of prey species.

We should also be absolutely clear that the harming of birds of prey is a crime, and I have yet to meet a grouse shooting organisation that believes that should change. Once again, the rising populations of our birds of prey demonstrate that grouse shooting works for our environment and not against it.

I am pleased that the Government's written response to the petition was that there are no plans at present to ban grouse shooting, so I hope the Minister will be able to confirm that this remains the case and, further, that no Labour Government will ban grouse shooting. I would also be grateful if the Minister could say what he will do with his ministerial colleagues to hold Natural England to account, to make sure that it does not run away with the narrative of wanting to reduce the definition of deep peat from 40 cm to 30 cm, as that would have catastrophic consequences for how moorland is managed.

Grouse moorland management is a real success story of balancing economic, social and environmental activities. Those who wish to ban it because they feel that an unmanaged, natural approach would be better should be careful what they wish for. Without the financial incentive of the shoot, none of these environmental benefits for our moorland, our bird species or our climate would happen. I am certain that they would not happen without an agenda driven by private investment.

I thank all those in the sector who work enormously hard around the clock to enhance our moorland—our gamekeepers, our groundskeepers, our farmers, our rural estates, our land managers and our stakeholders such as the Moorland Association, BASC, the

Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and the Countryside Alliance. I thank them for their continued work.

We all know that almost every acre of the UK is managed in one way or another, and has been for hundreds if not thousands of years. There is no Siberian tundra in the UK, no Australian outback, no Amazon rainforest or American wild west. We should not pretend that the land we love is the product of a random choice of nature, but instead we should recognise that it is a collective accomplishment of generation after generation of our ancestors and their stewardship of the land. Britain's natural landscape is, ironically, a product of unnatural human management. Grouse moorland management might only be a part of that wider story, but it is an illustrative and successful one that I hope will continue long into the future.

6.17pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs

(Daniel Zeichner)

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I start by thanking the Petitions Committee and the more than 100,000 people who signed the petition for giving us the opportunity to discuss this important subject today. I also acknowledge the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who opened the debate. I thought he was going to have a shot at making the case for the petition, but he fessed up very early. It was good to see him at the Royal Highland Show the other day.

It is clear from the petition and the discussion today that Parliament and the wider country care deeply about the issue of driven grouse shooting and managing our uplands in a sustainable way that protects wildlife, the environment and, very importantly, the people who live there.

I can confirm at the outset to the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) that, although the Government have no plans to ban grouse shooting, I appreciate it is a topic that understandably evokes strong opinions on both sides of the debate, and we keep options under close review.

I also listened closely to the powerful economic arguments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) and the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak). I fully appreciate the economic benefits that come from that part of the rural economy, but valid concerns have been raised on the issue of wildlife, most notably the birds of prey that live in those areas and that, sadly, have been all too frequently persecuted. It is disturbing to hear the statistics from the RSPB's recent publication, "Hen Harriers in the firing line".

I heard the statistics cited by the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk, but I also note the statistics and comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield

Hallam (Olivia Blake). There were 102 confirmed hen harrier persecution incidents in the last five years, with 89% taking place in northern England. In 2023 alone, 34 hen harriers were confirmed to have been killed or disappeared under suspicious circumstances. As the RSPB argues, it is a concern that only two people have been prosecuted for offences relating to the persecution of a hen harrier, and those incidents took place in Scotland.

While birds of prey are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, it is vital that the law is respected by those involved in the grouse shooting industry. I absolutely hear the comments made by Conservative Members, and we all agree that there is no place for raptor persecution.

Sam Rushworth

I thank the Minister for his balanced approach to this subject and for protecting the livelihoods of my constituents. I agree with him that we need to look after animal welfare. I do not think the economic arguments we have been making today apply to trail hunting. Will he confirm today that it is still the will of this Government to set out a timetable for banning trail hunting?

Daniel Zeichner

That is a manifesto commitment, and this Government keep their commitments.

Bird of prey crime is a national wildlife crime priority, and the Government take wildlife crime extremely seriously. There are strong penalties in place for offences committed against birds of prey and other wildlife, and anyone found guilty of such offences should feel the full force of the law. Penalties can include an unlimited fine and/or a six-month custodial sentence.

My Department is providing £424,000 in 2025-26 to the National Wildlife Crime Unit, which does valuable work to prevent and detect wildlife crime by obtaining and disseminating intelligence, undertaking analysis and directly assisting law enforcers. In 2024, the National Wildlife Crime Unit launched the hen harrier taskforce, which is using technology such as drones and strategic partnerships to detect, deter and disrupt offenders and is targeting hotspot areas and suspected hen harrier persecution. Early signs suggest that it is having a positive impact. I congratulate the National Wildlife Crime Unit and its partners on their valuable work in tackling the persecution of those iconic birds of prey.

Grouse shooting takes place in upland areas, which are of huge national and international importance, as we have heard, and when healthy, they provide numerous environmental benefits. Blanket bog provides a rich habitat for many species, sequesters carbon, filters our drinking water and helps with flood control. That is why, over the spending review period, we will be investing £85 million in our peatlands, as

well as seeing increased funding through landscape recovery and countryside stewardship.

However, 80% of England's peatlands are degraded, as we heard so powerfully from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Hallam. I know there are different views, but many argue that rotational burning is a contributory factor in the degradation of upland areas. It is commonplace in moorlands that are managed for grouse, where vegetation is burned to improve conditions for raising grouse.

Continual burning damages peatlands, as it affects their hydrology by drying them out. Those degraded peatlands then emit the carbon they once stored. That is why DEFRA recently held a public consultation on proposals to extend the Heather and Grass etc. Burning (England) Regulations 2021, to which the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley and others have referred. The proposed amendments would increase the area of moorland protected from the negative impacts of burning and extend the existing licensing scheme to allow burning to be used in certain limited circumstances.

The ritualistic denunciation of Natural England is disappointing, as it is made up of civil servants who are doing their best to provide sound advice to Government. As the Government's adviser on the natural environment in England, Natural England provides statutory advice to Ministers, but the final decision on whether to grant a licence under the regulations lies with the Secretary of State.

Kevin Hollinrake

I question how the Minister defines sound advice, because the advice that I have seen, from people who manage the moorland, is that if Natural England gets its way and changes the definition of deep peat from 40 cm to 30 cm there will be half—

Carolyn Harris

(in the Chair)

Order.

Kevin Hollinrake

In Thirsk and Malton—

Carolyn Harris

(in the Chair)

Order. Mr Hollinrake, you were asked to raise only issues connected to your own constituency.

Kevin Hollinrake

I apologise, Mrs Harris, but this is about my constituency. In half of my constituency, the moorland will not be able to be managed. The fuel load will increase, wildfires will occur, and it will make my constituency completely unviable for grouse shooting. Is the Minister not concerned that Natural England has a hidden agenda that will affect constituencies such as mine?

Daniel Zeichner

I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern. Natural England provides statutory guidance and advice to Ministers, but Ministers decide. We are looking at its advice, but no decision has yet been taken.

I now turn to the economic benefits that shooting sports can provide to rural communities. We recognise that shooting can be an important part of a local economy, and as we have heard, it provides direct and indirect employment opportunities. The Government recognise the cultural value that shooting sports can provide to rural communities, in addition to their economic contribution.

I listened with some joy to my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland talking about the wonders of the lek, but he also went on to talk about the potential benefits of eco-tourism, which may well be the way forward in the future. We must appreciate those things, because the Government are committed to improving the quality of life of people living and working in rural areas, so that we can realise the full potential of rural businesses and communities. To achieve that, we are ensuring that the needs of people and businesses in rural areas are at the heart of policymaking. Our priority is to achieve a sustainable outcome for landscapes that works to recover our environment and wildlife, as well as protecting the interests of people and the rural economy.

Jamie Stone

(Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

My humblest apologies for turning up late, Mrs Harris. I was coming from a very faraway part of the UK. I think the Minister would find it interesting to come to the graduation ceremony of the University of the Highlands and Islands, which happens every year, to see the number of young trainee gamekeepers going into the profession. They are going into local, rural jobs in some of the remotest areas, and they are highly trained in conservation and land management.

Daniel Zeichner

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I sympathise with his travelling a long way. It is not easy when some of the transport systems are not working. I acknowledge his point. I too have met gamekeepers and young people who see an important future for themselves. I applaud that university. Close work between land

managers and stakeholders will be paramount to achieving the kind of future we want to see.

Today's debate has been extensive, underlined by the wide range of opinions involved. I understand the concerns of the petitioners, Wild Justice and hon. Members who have spoken in this debate. They are passionate, and rightly so, about our precious native wildlife and the environment. I assure the House that I have listened with great attention to all the points made. To reiterate, although the Government have no plans to ban driven grouse shooting, it is vital that wildlife and habitats are protected, and that the law is respected by everyone.

6.28pm

John Lamont

Mrs Harris, you will be relieved to hear that I will not take the remaining hour to conclude the debate. I thank the petitioners; I thank the Petitions Committee for facilitating the debate; and I thank the 104,000 people who signed the petition. I suspect those people will be a little surprised by the lack of balance in this debate. I will come on to that shortly, but I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who contributed: my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak); my hon. Friends the Members for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) and for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith); the hon. Members for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth), for Sheffield Hallam (Olivia Blake), for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon); the Lib Dem spokesman, the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke); the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore); and the Minister. I thank them all for their remarks.

I think we all agree that any illegal behaviour should be dealt with very severely, including any killing of birds that is against the law. Part of the challenge is about police resourcing. Whether it is in my constituency, which is very rural and remote, or in other parts of the United Kingdom, ensuring that the police have sufficient resources to take action against those who act illegally is a real challenge, and that is a point of agreement on both sides of this debate.

I was struck by the personal experiences of the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland, who spoke powerfully in favour of grouse shooting, and I pay tribute to him for sharing that with us. The reality is that those of us who represent rural constituencies—as many of us do—understand the importance of grouse shooting to our communities. Whether it is for jobs, wildlife, the environment, biodiversity, shops and businesses or the sustainability of our rural communities, grouse shooting plays a key part.

With the greatest respect to the hon. Member for Sheffield Hallam, her constituency presents a unique challenge in its proximity to the moors. The reality is that, for those of us living and working in those communities, it is an essential part of our life and of maintaining our environment and biodiversity. I am therefore pleased to hear that the Labour Government have no plans to ban grouse shooting, which is a policy that I wholeheartedly endorse.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 700036 relating to driven grouse shooting.

6.31pm

Sitting adjourned.