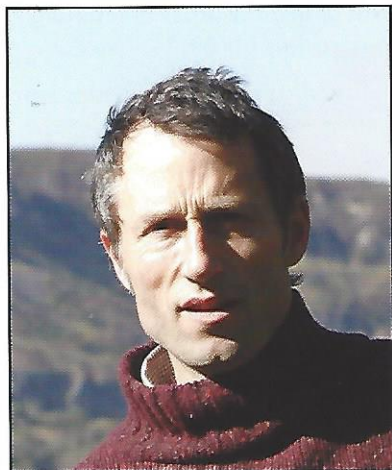


Healthier trust - for humans, for heather, for wildlife



Rob Yorke¹ is an independent rural commentator and chartered surveyor who works with conservationists, writes opinions/letters/blogs, chairs debates and here, for *The Heather Trust*, reiterates and tweaks a message from a piece he did on curlews for a conservation NGO about working closer together.

"How I miss the call of the waders on the hills".

The national park warden sighed as we headed down through overgrown 'leggy' heather towards the bright green silage fields. "years ago, land management was different on upland fringes - undrained boggy fields for snipe, cows grazing on the hills trampling bracken, shepherd sheep moved across mountains, spring-sown arable crops home to hare and hay meadows cut once ground-nesting birds had nested."

An anecdotally bucolic era sixty years ago before the BBC launched *The Archers* in 1955, effectively a government information program pushing efficiency in farming to boost production after the war. For an island, the fear of lacking self-sufficiency in food and timber runs an iron rod through whimsically inefficient rose-tinted rural policies. Post-war shortage of timber encouraged tree planting into the uplands supported by grants to drain moorland and rough ground ploughed with big kit while fertilizers boosted softwood growth to outcompete the heather. Later, European funding via headage payments for sheep in the 80s meant it was worth converting heather to higher yielding grass lay fodder and renewable energy markets competed with other land uses. 'We were encouraged to move with the times' is as common a refrain heard echoing through the same valleys as the silence of the waders. Both those farmers and foresters that followed policy at the time miss the birds sorely.

Wildlife - especially highly visible birds - has provided 'iconic poster species' that reflect both those declining species connected to open land use change (such as ring ouzel, cuckoos and whinchats) as well as lost connections with the countryside (curlew, hen harrier and lapwing). 'Shifting baseline syndrome' is a jargon term, but accurately reflects how we hark back to a golden era of how we perceive the countryside should be. But reality is that it's not stuck in aspic but is a continually evolving mesh of changing land use practices and habitats, in which wildlife species ebb and flow. It's complex for sure. Habitat is never stationary, nor is land management, subject to economic drivers, by both being able to guarantee long term continuity over landscape-scale areas. Birds such as blackcock are collateral damage in these dynamic processes as we continually address how to re-establish outcomes sought from upland areas increasingly under pressure to deliver multiple-outputs.

Let's focus on waders for a moment. 'Sink' populations² of some species (they cannot reproduce fast enough and are unable to increase their productivity within fragmented areas of habitat) and ruptured prey/predator³ food webs, further skew how ecosystems operate. In other words, curlew cannot live by habitat alone - until numbers are robust enough to stave off predators without our need to intervene with expensive fences or skilful lethal control.

Much research on curlews has been undertaken over the years. Research in 2001⁴ noted that 'considerable changes in land-use could benefit generalist predator species or increase the vulnerability of curlew nests to predation', while in 2013⁵, there were similar issues where 'direct predator control may also be important to conserve ground-nesting birds in those landscapes where moorland management and forestry co-exist as major land uses'. In Wales, overstocking of sheep accidentally trampled nests⁶, while cameras in the Curlew

2 https://definedterm.com/sink_population_or_species

3 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF00328906>

4 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1046/j.1365-2664.1999.00379.x/full>

5 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1365-2664.12167/abstract>

6 <http://www.conservationevidence.com/individual-study/5556>

1 <http://robbyorke.co.uk/>

Country⁷ (Shropshire) project logged visits from 'nest-hungry' badgers. In Ireland, a recently set up Curlew Taskforce⁸ has already moved to act on the control of foxes⁹.

Emotional issues around management of predators are valid and justifiable. But let's not conflate animal welfare¹⁰ with wildlife conservation, nor pre-judge the motives of those that undertake it. Any management must be done skilfully, more scientifically than 'wandering around with a gun or indiscriminate trap', to ensure that those predators, directly affecting the recovery of specific ground nesting birds, are legally removed at the right time.

While some have observed that 'we have hit a wall where people can't face up to what pragmatic conservation may mean on the ground', there's a need to come together to *engage public opinion* in having to swallow an unpalatable but necessary need to control predators if we really wish to *deliver public benefit* by saving certain birds.

The late conservation scientist, Dr Dick Potts, was an expert in saving birds such as the grey partridge. His so-called 'three-legged stool'¹¹, which referred to the three key elements all being in place at the same time - habitat cover for nesting, habitat providing invertebrate chick-food and management of predators - still applies to many ground-nesting birds. Research just published further reinforces this intricate relationship between habitat and predation in moorland areas¹²: it's unfortunate that much of this valuable information is locked behind academia pay-walls or trapped in our tribal inability to share information.

One such project that sought to unlock partisan posturing around the issue was the 'Understanding Predation' Project¹³ run by Scotland's Moorland Forum. The inception of this seriously collaborative project uncovered a 'high degree of common interests and shared goals' in how people want to move forward, in not just understanding the subject (it's written on the tin), but arguably more importantly, how we

can better understand that working together feels good. By embracing adaptive management actions to save wildlife without fear of political fall-out, allowing ourselves to be informed by uncomfortable evidence on a need to blend 'local' with scientific knowledge, we can bravely come together within cleverly facilitated stakeholders meetings in neutral spaces without seeking to own the process.

Alongside support from those that care for curlews, fund raising (*be franker on what actions are required*), conservation NGOs research (*more joint science please*), farmers like Patrick Laurie¹⁴ who 'keep on working for the birds this spring because giving up is not an option' - there is an opportunity for more of us to be part of smarter integrated land management and habitat-related action plans providing better outcomes from more moorlands across the UK.

Rob Yorke blogs at www.robbyorke.co.uk and welcomes feedback of any hue

A version of this article first appeared in as a guest blog for the RSPB on saving species (curlew) April 2017

14 <https://gallowayfarm.wordpress.com/>

7 <http://www.stiperstonesandcorndon.co.uk/curlewcountry/>

8 <http://www.ahrrga.gov.ie/minister-humphreys-announces-establishment-of-curlew-taskforce/>

9 <https://www.npws.ie/curlew-cooperation-scheme>

10 <https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/community-and-advice/garden-advice/unwantedvisitors/cats/>

11 [https://www.gwct.org.uk/news/news/2017/april/dick-potts-\(1939-2017\)/](https://www.gwct.org.uk/news/news/2017/april/dick-potts-(1939-2017)/)

12 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ibi.12488/full>

13 <http://www.moorlandforum.org.uk/understanding-predation-report-launch>

