

“ ‘There are loads of people who are doing some great things with shooting at the heart of their land and wildlife management’ MARTIN HARPER, RSPB ”

# Shooters and birders, unite!

We have nothing to lose but the entirety of British wildlife. It's time to face reality, says **Charles Nodder**

**S**HOOTING can do some fantastic things for our wildlife.” These were the words of the director of conservation at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Martin Harper, during a debate at the CLA Game Fair. He went on to explain, “There are loads of people who are doing some great things with shooting at the heart of their land and wildlife management.” It seemed like maturity and common sense from the RSPB at last.

Disappointment followed in just three weeks, when the society issued its usual “hen harrier absence all down to grouse moors” press release to coincide with the Twelfth. Of course, raptor persecution is wrong and the RSPB has every right to condemn and pursue its perpetrators but, yet again, it did so in a way that rapidly led to media attacks on moorland gamekeepers in general – the very people who are in the best position to help the harriers.

That is always the frustration with this charity. It oscillates between rational, science-based policies and ill-founded emotion. It seems torn between what it learns from academia and practical land management, and what it suspects a largely urban supporter base wants to hear, influenced no doubt by the need to recruit more members and keep the funds flowing. Take the society's position on predation as another example.

Harper has recently, albeit quietly, published details of predator control carried out on the RSPB's UK reserves. In 2011/12 it killed 241 foxes, 77 mink, 292 crows, 11 magpies and numerous grey squirrels and rats. It also culled more than 600 deer. Although the figures are modest for a 130,000-hectare landholding, they imply a degree of practical land management and the society's new candour on such matters is both surprising and welcome.

**The RSPB needs to explain to its members that well-run shooting (left) helps wildlife and that lethal predator management is a necessity**

The reserves management policy behind these figures, based on science, so the RSPB says, is that where there is a threat to the population of a protected species (as opposed to individuals) posed by a predator that is not itself threatened, the society will carry out predator management. This is as sensible as you could want but the charity spoils this rational approach by imposing on to it a completely unscientific dogma: that all such predator management will be non-lethal if possible and lethal only as a last resort. This, in turn, leads to some wholly unnatural and highly undesirable scenarios, for example the coralling of huge areas of RSPB reserves behind kilometres of expensive, fox-proof fencing, which also restricts the free movement of other wild mammals. Such squeamishness in the UK seems odd when, farther from its paying public, the society is prepared to poison feral cats (Ascension Island) or drop 80 tonnes of rat bait by helicopter (Henderson Island).

Likewise, the organisation almost “gets it” with its warm acknowledgements that shooting does a lot for conservation, but then it just cannot resist attacking the release of pheasants, declaring them to be “non-native” and saying we should not liberate them without understanding their impact a great deal better. Well we do understand it and have done so for years: releasing gamebirds is the basis of 83% of all UK shooting and without it those “fantastic things” that shooting does for our wildlife would largely stop. So please, RSPB, by all means pillory the perpetrators of proven damage if you have the evidence but don't undermine the whole shooting enterprise through generalist attacks on pheasant release.

In fairness we should acknowledge that the RSPB has a difficult row to hoe. Its supporters range from credible, sensible conservationists to extremists who believe that nothing at all should ever be killed or managed. According to one blogger, the society lost “all integrity” when it supported a national ➤

Contrary to RSPB propaganda, moorland keepers are in the best position to help the hen harrier



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“ Radical thought: if the people who love the countryside, whatever their interest in it, appear impotent to reverse wildlife degradation working separately, could they perhaps achieve it by pulling together? ”



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Without the release of gamebirds (top) for shooting, species such as the pearl-bordered fritillary (above) would be in greater danger

cull of ruddy ducks some years ago. In others' minds, the organisation gained integrity then by accepting the need to eradicate a seriously invasive recently arrived species – but the reported price was the loss of 10,000 members.

The shooting world is an equally broad church, encompassing everyone from occasional pot hunters to big-bag merchants. It, too, has contrasting attitudes across all sectors: those who bluster that everything in the shooting world is brilliant and brook no criticism; others with serious doubts about aspects of the sport (how birds are reared, perhaps, or the intensity of operations on some low-ground shoots and grouse moors); and those who don't think much about any of these things.

Long experience of defending and writing about fieldsports has convinced me of one thing in particular. It is that just about all the weaknesses in shooting's position stem from bad practice. We have a set of relevant laws, we have unwritten ethics of safe and sporting behaviour and we have innumerable published codes stating how things should be

done: gamebird rearing, the setting of traps and snares, the use of non-toxic shot where necessary, correct methods of heather burning, game-meat handling and much more.

The bad publicity comes from breaches of these agreed norms: the keeper who traps a buzzard; the game farmer raided by Animal Aid and found to have dead birds everywhere; the guns who park carelessly for a particular drive, blocking the road; the shoot that has to throw birds away because it has not invested in a chiller to keep them fresh; the many who blatantly ignore the regulations on non-toxic shot. These and other wilful or careless mal-factors are our Achilles' heel and if we cannot stop them soon, the accumulating PR damage their actions result in will sink us all.

The two sides of this equation are linked, of course. Bad practice within shooting provides cheap runs for the RSPB, while its inconsistency on matters such as predation and gamebird release gives fuel for criticism. Thus the conflict rages on, with incessant, obsessive and almost tribal point scoring, which, I'll

admit, I haven't been above. It is almost addictive, sells copy, garners members for both sides and is a hard cycle to break. But what is happening to Britain's wildlife in the meantime?

The *State of Nature* report, a collaboration between 25 conservation and research organisations launched by Sir David Attenborough earlier this year, showed clearly that wildlife is in crisis. The performance of 3,148 species of British animals and plants was quantified from previous academic studies: 60% had declined in the past 50 years, 31% showing a strong decline; 10% of vulnerable species were found to be under threat of extinction. We have lost 44 million breeding birds in the UK since the Sixties. In many counties, a plant becomes extinct every other year; 72% of butterflies have declined in the past decade alone...

Shooting organisations reacted by criticising the RSPB, which co-ordinated the *State of Nature* exercise, for not including them. It was a justifiable criticism but a badly missed opportunity. Faced with such a dire prognosis for the wildlife that we all profess to love,

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and on which our sports ultimately depend, we could and should have done better.

Now here's a radical thought: the RSPB has numerical support, wealth and influence. It has nice nature reserves but has not been able to save Britain's wildlife. The shooting world has access to most of the countryside, an army of practical wildlife managers and great knowledge vested in the best of our keepers. We have flagship sites, too – Purdey Award winners for example – but the ongoing declines in wildlife nationally prove that we, too, cannot do enough on our own. So, if the people who love the countryside, whatever their interest in it, appear impotent to reverse wildlife degradation working separately, could they achieve it by pulling together?

A necessary first step would be a "truth recognition" process by both sides. As Rob Yorke, shooter, twitcher and rural commentator, succinctly puts it, "Poor shooting practices (high-density releasing and so on) are as bad for biodiversity as those who believe that nothing dies in the name of conservation."

Sportsmen need to get real about bad practice within shooting and game management; to acknowledge it and to end it through overwhelming peer pressure. The shooting organisations' current joint campaign for zero-tolerance of lead-shot abuse is a good start. It should be extended to all other areas of weakness within shooting. The Code of Good Shooting Practice already sets out what is acceptable and what is not. As a community we should turn away from those who wilfully and repeatedly do things wrong.

The RSPB, meanwhile, needs to get more robust with its members and explain to them, not just to its Game Fair audience, that well-run shooting helps wildlife and that lethal predator management is a necessary and reasonable tool. It must stop attacking gamebird release and grouse-moor management in general terms and be much more careful to ensure that any criticism of shooting correctly identifies the wrongdoers, thus reinforcing the shooting world's own campaign to clean up its act from within but without damaging

the infrastructure of a sport with so vital a contribution to make to wildlife restoration.

If mutual confidence can thus be allowed to grow, entrenched positions could perhaps be abandoned and the great and complementary resources of either "side" – and let's stop calling them that – marshalled to work together for the greater good. Pie in the sky? Edwardian sportsmen-naturalists wouldn't have thought so and look at the local instances of shooters and the RSPB working together already, on stone curlew conservation in Wessex and wildfowl management around the coast.

Alternatively, we could continue with the bickering until it is too late. If we don't do something dramatic very soon, in a couple of generations there will be so little wildlife of any value left in the wider countryside that whether we want to shoot some of it or just watch it will be immaterial – it simply won't be there. ■