

Mr J Sargeant MS  
Chair, Petitions Committee  
Welsh Parliament  
Cardiff Bay  
Cardiff  
CF99 1SN

Submitted by email to [Petitions@senedd.wales](mailto:Petitions@senedd.wales)

20 December 2021

Dear Mr Sargeant

**Petition P-06-1201 Ban the shooting of critically endangered birds... give them the protection they so desperately need**

Thank you for your letter of 23 November to Katie-jo Luxton, to which she has asked me to respond.

Although RSPB Cymru was not involved in setting up or supporting the petition, it is clearly borne of a genuine concern about the parlous state of nature in Wales and a desire to improve the legal protection for our threatened birds. We believe that the recent publication of the UK Birds of Conservation Concern & the GB Red List of birds<sup>1</sup> and the European Red List of birds<sup>2</sup> means that **this is the right moment to consider the quarry species that can be legally hunted in Wales and the periods of the year in which they can be shot.**

The RSPB is neutral on the ethics of shooting. RSPB Cymru works with those who shoot game and their representative organisations in a variety of ways, such as on the recovery of curlew in Wales, for which a 10-year plan recently received cross-party support. However, we can and do speak out if practices associated with shooting are found to be causing serious harm to wildlife and to the environment. For example, we believe that the use of



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**Cyfarwyddwr, RSPB Cymru/Director, RSPB Cymru:** Katie-jo Luxton

Mae'r Gymdeithas Frenhinol er Gwarchod Adar (yr RPSB) yn elusen gofrestredig: Lloegr a Chymru rhif 207076, yr Alban rhif SC037654

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lead ammunition should be illegal in Wales and supported a petition considered by your Committee in September 2021 (P-06-1184 *Immediately ban the use of toxic lead in all ammunition in Wales*). We are concerned that many elements of hunting wild birds have minimal regulation and that there has been a reluctance by government to review the Game Acts (some of which are almost 200 years old) or the species listed on Schedule 2 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 that may be hunted.

### ***Species of conservation concern***

*Birds of Conservation Concern Wales (BoCCW)*<sup>3</sup>, a periodic assessment of the status of native birds, led by RSPB Cymru with support from Natural Resources Wales and the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), includes seven huntable species on the Red List: black grouse, red grouse, grey partridge, European white-fronted goose, pochard, golden plover and woodcock. These are listed because of declines of more than 50% in the previous 25 years, severe historic decline or risk of global extinction. In addition, Wetland Bird Survey Alerts have been issued in Wales for pochard, goldeneye, pintail, mallard and coot.<sup>4</sup>

The risk of extirpation (extinction from a specified area) is assessed by the Red List, using criteria agreed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). These Red Lists have recently been updated for both Britain<sup>1</sup> and Europe.<sup>2</sup> On the GB Red List, one huntable species is Critically Endangered (pintail), two are Endangered (pochard and European white-fronted goose) and 10 others are Vulnerable.<sup>1</sup>

We are deeply concerned about the rate of decline of these species and urge an evidence-based approach to tackle the drivers of decline and recover their numbers. Changes in extent and quality of habitat as a result of unsustainable management are by far the biggest causes of decline, added to which factors such as the climate emergency, disturbance from a variety of human sources, and direct mortality from shooting can all play a part.

### ***Regulation of hunting***

RSPB Cymru believes there are three fundamental issues that prevent Welsh Government from being able to determine whether shooting is a sustainable management of natural resources:

- There is no means to review the legal status of quarry species, either to cease hunting or to permit it to restart, or of the duration of hunting seasons.
- There is no statutory monitoring of numbers of birds shot in Wales, which is very different to most European countries.
- Absence of an Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) plan for birds in Wales, which would be informed by data about the numbers shot and the resilience of their populations to mortality from shooting. This could, for example, determine thresholds that would need to be met for hunting to be permitted, and set limits on numbers that could be shot or the shooting season.

To take a couple of examples.

1. Woodcock may be legally shot from 1 October, but birds from the continent (where the species is listed as of 'Least Concern' on the IUCN European Red List) do not arrive in Wales until November, and in some years even later. These birds form a winter population many times larger than our breeding population, alongside some woodcocks that breed in Wales and northern England. However, there is a lack of reliable data on the extent to which woodcocks shot in Wales comprise UK-breeding birds or continental wintering birds, or the impact of shooting on Welsh breeding woodcocks while they are outside Wales. We believe that a precautionary approach is essential, given the Red List status of the woodcock breeding population in the UK and Wales. The Game &

Wildlife Conservation Trust states that “we cannot rule out shooting as a factor contributing to the decline of our resident woodcock”<sup>5</sup> and recommends delaying shooting until after 1 December in areas that they are known to breed. This will help, but there is no requirement to follow this advice, and Welsh-breeding Woodcock will remain at risk of being shot throughout the winter.

2. Most pochards wintering in Wales breed in eastern Europe. It is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List for Europe and as Endangered in Britain. Numbers wintering in Wales have fallen dramatically, leading the BTO to issue a high alert for its population following a decline of 89% over 25 years and a 68% decline in just five years to 2015/16.<sup>4</sup> In some Welsh counties, it is now a rare bird.<sup>6</sup>

Pochards can be shot in Wales between 1 September and 31 January (20 February below the high-water mark). In a review of hunting bags across Europe, Hirschfeld *et al.* (2019) expressed concern that “hunting may be an unnecessary pressure and potentially a contributing factor to the European population declines observed” in this species.<sup>7</sup> We are concerned that declines in pochards in the UK and across Europe may be driven by the demographic impact of both hunting of the birds themselves and by the lead pollution that hunting produces.

### ***Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM)***

For some declining species, the sustainability of hunting pressure has been assessed and found wanting. For example, pressure of hunting of turtle dove, taiga bean goose and ortolan bunting across Europe was greater than the population could sustain.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Adaptive Harvest Management is widely recognised as an efficient tool to ensure that any take is only allowed if it can be done sustainably. A multi-national AHM approach has already been adopted for turtle dove, an Afro-Paleartic migrant that has declined rapidly across Europe (and now extinct as a breeding species in Wales). This used data on population size, trends, breeding success, survival rates, movements between breeding and wintering grounds, and hunting bags. In its first iteration, the AHM resulted in a ‘zero take’ being agreed in Spain, Portugal and France in 2021/22, where hunting was shown to be unsustainable.<sup>11</sup> The adaptive nature of the plan means that the impact of hunting at different thresholds can be reviewed regularly, and if the population is sufficiently resilient, some level of hunting can be permitted.

The AHM approach is being put in place across the EU for quarry species that are in unfavourable conservation status. We believe that an AHM could determine whether a ban is necessary, and that Wales could lead the way in the UK by adopting this approach. However, an AHM depends on there being accurate and robust demographic data, and this is not easy to achieve for some species, such as woodcock and we understand that for this reason, there are no plans to include woodcock in AHM schemes in Europe.

### ***Immediate action***

We believe the onus on demonstrating that AHM is achievable in Wales should rest with the hunting community, and in the meantime, a precautionary approach to permitting shooting is required. The speed of decline in some of the species listed above necessitates additional action that we think Welsh Government should request of Natural Resources Wales:

- To conclude urgently its review of consents for shooting of Schedule 2 species on Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in Wales, and determine whether these are consistent with SMNR. No proposals were included in the recent NRW public consultation and RSPB Cymru has asked for a public statement on this aspect of the review. We believe that it is timely to review the species and consistency of conditions that consent hunting on SSSIs.
- to review the legal status of native gamebirds and of huntable species on Schedule 2 in all habitats in Wales, and whether as an emergency measure it is appropriate to cease hunting of any species at risk of extirpation from Wales or its breeding areas outside Wales until an AHM system is in place, allied to other measures to reduce disturbance and improve habitat condition.

We believe that to achieve sustainable management of natural resources (SMNR), as required by the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, it is important to assess all the contributory factors causing declines in wildlife. The declining populations of birds on the GB Red List and Birds of Conservation Concern Wales are, we suggest, a signal that moratoria on shooting should be considered until there is clear evidence that the hunting is not a contributory factor. Although there is uncertainty, this should not be a reason not to invest in robust Adaptive Harvest Management. We urge the Petitions Committee to ask Welsh Government to explore the options for AHM in Wales and to consider short-term emergency measures to address the issues raised by the petition.

Yours sincerely



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