



Scottish Natural Heritage Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

All of nature for all of Scotland
Nàdar air fad airson Alba air fad

PE 1500: 'to formally declare the Golden Eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*, as the national bird of Scotland'

The Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee considered the above new petition on 28 January 2014. At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to seek a response to the following question:

- What are your views on what the petition seeks and the discussions that took place at the meeting on 28 January?

SNH response

We believe that national symbols are for the most part cultural statements, of which the natural heritage of Scotland forms part, but there are other areas of our cultural identity for which we do not have expertise or can offer advice. We do however provide advice below on the natural heritage importance of the golden eagle and other bird species.

The Golden eagle is wide ranging occurring across Eurasia and North America. Scotland's population of 440 breeding pairs represents around 4.5% of the European population of 8,400-11,000 breeding pairs, with Turkey, Spain, Norway, Russia, Sweden and Italy having the largest. However, for its relatively small size, Scotland has a large population, with the Hebrides having some of the highest recorded densities of breeding golden eagles in Europe, and the Cairngorms having some of the most productive territories. The conservation importance of Scotland for this bird within the European Union is reflected in the suite of 14 EU Special Protection Areas classified for golden eagles.

The Golden eagle has long-standing cultural association with the Scottish people. It is well known in Gaelic culture, with the name '*Iolaire*' appearing in many place names, notably Creag na h-Iolaire, crag of the eagle, with some of these crags still used today. It features in many of our tradition-defining books, poetry and songs. From earliest times, the golden eagle was treated with reverence, with the Greeks and Romans viewing the birds a messenger of the gods. The great Scottish natural historian and writer Seton Gordon wrote in *Days with the Golden Eagle* (1927) 'A Highland chief wears in his bonnet three eagle's feathers, a chieftain two, and a gentleman one eagle's feather.'

It is emblematic of Scotland's wild realms, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, with affinities with the majestic and wild beauty of the land and rugged seascapes. It is a bird that most people wish to see, and in the Year of Natural Scotland events last year, it topped a poll of Scotland's Big Five animals.

Other bird species

There are other species which have a case, on natural heritage grounds, to be considered Scotland's national bird. The Scottish Crossbill is our only endemic bird species, though there are endemic subspecies of a few other birds. The crested tit features as the 'national' emblem of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club, and is popular amongst birdwatchers in north Highland pinewoods. Scotland's seabird populations are internationally important and we hold the large proportions of the world populations of Great Skua, Gannet and Manx shearwater. There are strong cultural links for some of these seabird species too. Some birds leave people with a distinctively Scottish sense of presence, and are more accessible than golden eagles – golden plovers (which nest at higher densities in some parts of Scotland than recorded elsewhere), curlew and red grouse (heavily managed in parts of their eastern and southern range) are examples. The osprey, which has recovered so remarkably in numbers, might be viewed as the species best associated with revival in Scotland. The white-tailed eagle could also be viewed in this way, and reflects special collaborative work with Norway (which donated the original breeding stock).

The Petitions Committee discussion

Although some reservations about the golden eagle being 'remote' from and 'not accessible to' the general public were raised during the discussions, there is a general connection with eagles in the public consciousness due to their long cultural association with man. As mentioned golden eagles are symbolic of the dramatic and wilder landscapes of Scotland and are a key part of the attraction for many tourists coming to Scotland to enjoy our landscapes and wildlife.

The need for a national bird or other national symbols was questioned. The concept of national or indeed regional symbols is established in other countries as noted by the petitioners in the discussions. We would add that national symbols such as a national tree or bird can be used to encourage interest in the environment be it via use as an educational tool or just to engender a wider connection with the general public. However, national symbols, for the most part incorporate a wider sense of national identity of which the environment forms part.

There was a suggestion that a consultation should be considered and that other birds such as the robin may be more appropriate. We agree that there may be other species that others may wish to put forward, but note the robin is already considered to the UK's 'unofficial' national bird.

SNH summary view

SNH is not recommending a particular species to be Scotland's national bird. We provide advice on the status of the golden eagle and other bird species and their connection with the Scottish people. In the event that a decision is taken to consider this further, the golden eagle is a contender, on the grounds of natural heritage, and its popularity with Scottish people and visitors. There are, however, several other species which have a close association with our sense of identity as a nation and which are also worthy of consideration. We recognise that national symbols in

other countries often incorporate a range of natural and cultural issues that reflect the sense of identity that the particular country wishes to portray for itself.

Yours sincerely

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