

## **PE1664/A**

### **Scottish Natural Heritage submission of 12 October 2017**

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) is a non-departmental public body funded by the Scottish Government through Grant-in-Aid. We are the Scottish Government's advisers on issues relating to nature and landscape. Our statutory purpose is to:

- secure the conservation and enhancement of nature and landscapes;
- foster understanding and facilitate their enjoyment of them; and,
- advise on their sustainable use and management.

Scotland's nature and landscapes are recognised internationally, and this natural capital plays an important role in supporting economic growth, improving people's health and wellbeing, adapting to climate change and strengthening communities. We work with partners both nationally and locally to maintain and enhance these assets and to improve the public benefits generated from their sustainable use, both now and in the future.

With input from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), we have reviewed the available population trend data i.e. BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) mammal data and the GWCT National Gamebag Census (NGC) data, along with additional time series data from moorland sites in NE Scotland due to be published in a forthcoming scientific paper. The key findings are:

- The NGC and BBS trend data since the mid 1990's show some similarities and some differences. The BBS data show a statistically significant decline between 1996 and 2010/11 but data from 2012-2015 suggest an upward trend. This could be explained by a population cycle (known to span c.9.5 years in Peak District hares, but variable from 5-15 years), although more data are needed to verify this and any underlying long-term trend. Over the same 20 year period covered by the BBS dataset, a non-significant upward trend is apparent in the NGC data. In light of this, We consider that evidence of a national decline in mountain hares since the mid-1990's is not conclusive.
- The NGC data collected from estates across the mountain hare's range in Scotland show clear cyclicity but provide no evidence for an underlying decline in the hare population from the mid 1950's to 2015. However, gamebag data have their limitations, including the absence of a measure of effort, so caution is needed when drawing conclusions from this source alone.
- In contrast to the above, the NE Scotland data show a dramatic decline after 2003 at a range of monitored moorland sites. It is not known whether this downward trend is continuing. As this is not reflected in either of the other two datasets, it is difficult to draw conclusions, or extrapolate this, beyond the North East.

From the evidence available we do not believe the picture is of widespread decline, however we recognise that the evidence from NE Scotland indicates that significant local declines may have taken place since the early 2000's on some grouse moors

and this is at odds with the overall national trend. Given this mixed picture, we do not consider that a moratorium on culling is justified at present but we expect to have further discussions with SG over whether any additional measures are necessary to safeguard this species on a precautionary basis and to ensure no significant local declines occur.

Where there are concerns over the status of hares on NE grouse moors, we will be looking to ensure that these are initially addressed through the new *Principles of Moorland Management* (PoMM) guidance on sustainable hare management currently being drafted by the Moorland Forum. The PoMM guidance encourages collaborative working between estates to develop sustainable hare management plans. These would be informed by count data obtained according to a standard method, based on the findings of the joint hare counting study involving the James Hutton Institute, GWCT and SNH, due to be published in January 2018. It is intended that the PoMM guidance require estates to make all cull data available to SNH for monitoring and reporting purposes, to ensure there is a surveillance system in place with alerts for any changes of conservation concern.