

Petitioner submission of 22 March 2023

PE1859/JJ: Retain falconers' rights to practise upland falconry in Scotland

I have been analysing the data and claims made by protectionist groups (I use the term protectionist because this has nothing to do with conservation) and have exposed some false claims that throw even the suggestion that mountain hares be re-classified and placed into Schedule 5 of the Wildlife & Countryside act, into extreme doubt.

It has been widely claimed that the mountain hare is at or below 1% of its pre-1950's population. This claim is the foundation upon which the ban on hunting hares that has been a catastrophe for upland falconry and captive eagles and large hawks was built. This claim is false and it is insulting that we have been asked to believe it, and its exposure sees the entire foundation crumbling.

Currently, even the most conservative of estimates put the stable breeding population of mountain hares in Scotland at 135,000 - 200,000.

At 1% of pre-1950's numbers, this suggests that before 1950 Scotland held a minimum of 13.5 million hares and a maximum of 20 million. This is not true.

Scotland's land mass totals around 79,000 square km.

Of this, and being very generous, approximately 40,000 square km is at altitude and of an environment suitable for hares to survive in.

This suggests a population density in suitable habitats of 337.5 - 500 hares per square km pre-1950. This is a claim that is utterly ludicrous. Unless I missed the old stories of pre-1950's Scottish folk wading through hares on their way to the shops, work or school and how they destroyed millions of acres of crops and trees, this claim is utter fiction. A lie in fact.

As a comparison, it is worth being aware that in their continental European habitats they occur at a population density of between 2 and 3 hares per square km. This has a remarkable similarity to the numbers reported for the west of Scotland 0.5 - 3 hares per square km. (The area that, despite being super inaccessible and a massive drive away from us, that Ministers suggest we should go to fly our birds of prey).

By contrast, the managed moorlands of the east of Scotland host hares at densities of up to 200 per square km. This burgeoning and utterly unrealistic population that damages habitat and makes disease a huge risk is the reason the historic hare culls were executed. This is the area that most falconers fly eagles due to the safe accessibility on the managed mountain ranges, suitability and safety for our eagles, and the huge hare population that we will not impact.

The highest culling numbers quoted (between 3 and 12.4 hares per square km) have showed no relationship to contractions in hare ranges. Other factors such as habitat loss and changes (contraction of populations in areas not managed) plus climate change show a far greater impact. In the east of Scotland (managed areas) numbers are still believed to be increasing and the range expanding.

The request of Petition PE1859 is and remains that the legislation be amended with the line 'Except for the purpose of Falconry' which occurs elsewhere in the W&CA.

This petition has no bias either way over shooting, but it is clear that the high populations of hares in part of the country were created and are sustained by management for other shooting activities.

The clear fact is that shooting, and more to the point falconry, is an irrelevance to wider hare numbers in Scotland and has absolutely no impact on the stable biomass in this country which is much greater by square km than any other part of its European range.

With the clear, false and emotive rather than scientific presentation of information that coerced ministers into passing the legislation being further exposed, we are moving to a point where the entire bill should be questioned or the amendment to the Wildlife & Countryside Act be suspended while the truth is explored, and stakeholders given the opportunity to present the impact and truth.

I repeat the request of PE1859, that the amendment to the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 moving mountain hares to Schedule 5 be amended with the line 'Except for the purpose of Falconry'.