

NatureScot submission of 8 December 2023

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

Thank you for your letter of 10 November 2023 regarding the above petition which the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's considered at its meeting on 08 November 2023.

The Committee recommends that guidance is produced to clarify how falconers can practise in licensed activities; the areas in which there is not a high density of mountain hare; and what action to take if a bird accidentally takes a mountain hare. In particular, the Committee would like to know:

1. How NatureScot will monitor reports of mountain hare being taken in low density areas from Police Scotland
2. Whether NatureScot will work to produce maps for falconers to indicate which areas are considered suitable for birds of prey to fly within.
3. How NatureScot intends to evaluate and update these maps in light of reports from Police Scotland.

Monitoring reports of mountain hares being taken accidentally

NatureScot has frequent communication with Wildlife Crime Liaison Officers at the divisional level and regular liaison meetings with Police Scotland at the national level. Information and intelligence about wildlife crime and related incidents is shared under an Information Sharing Agreement. It is anticipated that incidents involving mountain hares will be infrequent and this information can be managed through established channels. We would encourage falconers to report any accidental take of mountain hares to Police Scotland, so that the police can provide appropriate advice and are suitably informed in the event of any reports or complaints from third-parties.

Maps indicating upland areas with higher and lower densities of mountain hares

In our submission dated 16 March 2023 we describe some upland areas of Scotland where the likelihood of an eagle catching a mountain hare is very low or non-existent. Our submission also mentions some moorland areas in eastern Scotland where the chances of an eagle catching a

mountain hare are much higher. To support the guidance for falconers NatureScot will provide small scale maps indicating upland areas of Scotland with: i) no known populations of mountain hares; ii) sparse populations of mountain hares; and iii) higher population densities of mountain hares.

How will information on the distribution of mountain hares be updated?

Mammal records are collated from a variety of different sources in the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) database and displayed on the NBN Atlas Scotland website. We will ensure that falconers' reports of mountain hares are entered on the NBN Database to add to our knowledge of the distribution of mountain hares. The guidance for falconers will also encourage them to take part in the Volunteer Mountain Hare Survey to help fill in gaps in knowledge about distribution and numbers of mountain hares.

The Volunteer Mountain Hare Survey was launched in March 2021 to gather information on the distribution and numbers of mountain hares in Scotland. Hillwalkers, naturalists and other outdoor enthusiasts are encouraged to record sightings when they are out and about using the free a smart phone app called Mammal Mapper or a paper-based recording form. Although the number of participating volunteers is promising, several more years' worth of data are needed before this survey can provide a clearer picture of the distribution and numbers of mountain hares.