

Petitioner submission of 4 March 2024

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

The Scottish Government continues to demonstrate a lack of joined up thinking and policy.

During the recent Stage 2 consideration of the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill, ministers proposed and approved, through amendment 61, that falconers will NOT have to apply for a licence to hunt grouse. This was justified under consideration for the fact that falconers account for a tiny number of grouse, falconers hunting grouse are very small in number, and as is and has always been the case, conservation of species is always at the forefront of falconers' activities. Additionally, where falconers fly, raptor persecution (raptor persecution is the reason the Bill exists) is of course at zero - no falconer will fly their precious birds where persecution is likely so having falconers on land is an excellent way of eliminating raptor persecution.

I support this decision from ministers. It shows good sense and appreciation of the reality of falconry.

Grouse moor management methodology is designed to create the best possible habitat for grouse, both in terms of improvement of the environment for, and minimise predation upon them. This creates a very high grouse population. Grouse as a prey species naturally produce very large (single) broods of young. The shooting of the surplus birds is simply capitalising on that excess surplus which would normally suffer natural mortality and predation.

The moorland management methods used have the EXACT same effect on mountain hares. They too are a natural prey species that flourish in huge numbers because they benefit equally from the environment created for grouse, and from the minimal predation upon them on grouse moors. Mountain Hares (still listed as a Species of Least Concern by the IUCN) breed up to four times per year, generally producing 2 or 3 young per litter, meaning that each female can produce up to 12 young per year. This is the source of the massive proliferation on grouse moors where we wish to hunt with our eagles and other large hawks.

While ministers recognise the proliferation of grouse, the small numbers of falconers that take grouse with falcons, and the small number of

grouse that each falconer will take, (by nature, the number of grouse taken by falconry will be less than one tenth of one percent of the number taken by shooting) and thus have agreed that no licence is required for a falconer to hunt them, they equally continue to deny the right of falconers to hunt that same huge proliferation of surplus mountain hares, which ministers themselves have recategorised as a pest species for licensing. The hare proliferates as a by-product of the grouse moor management and will either proliferate beyond control, or be wiped out by disease if left unchecked.

The number of falconers that will actively hunt mountain hares in Scotland is a tiny fraction of the number who hunt grouse. The number of hares taken by falconers has already been confirmed by the Government's own advisory body NatureScot as being 'so infinitesimally small that its impact cannot be noted'.

The legislation was designed to prevent the large scale culls of hares in Scotland by shooting. Falconry is a bycatch that should be exempted - like grouse, the number of hares taken by falconry will represent a tiny fraction of those that were historically taken by shooting.

There are approximately 230,000 breeding pairs of grouse in Scotland. Falconry as a low impact and sustainable practice can hunt grouse with no licence.

There are between 135,000 and 200,000 mountain hares in Scotland living cheek by jowl with the grouse, but if my eagle hunts one, I will become a criminal. This is unjustified and discriminatory.

While I still believe that it was not this government's intention to impact falconry via the change in the status of mountain hares (unless there is a behind the scenes hidden agenda), it has done so, and it remains a welfare disaster, is discriminatory - you can kill a hare with your cat, your car or while exercising your dog, but our eagles remain incarcerated by the legislation for fear that this naturally occurring, non domesticated, highly evolved predator and obligate carnivore may catch a hare and incriminate the falconer.

The sensible and correct decision on exempting falconers from licensing for hunting grouse is further proof and justification that the government should join up its thinking and acquiesce to our request that the legislation pertaining to mountain hares be amended with the line 'Except in the practice of falconry'.