

# NatureScot submission of 1 November 2023

## PE2035/C: Recognise legal control of generalist predators as a conservation act

The Scottish Gamekeeper's Association (SGA) have recently filed a petition with Scottish Government to have legal control of generalist predators recognised as a conservation act. We fully accept that control of predator pressures can have a beneficial effect on vulnerable prey species and continue to support the facilitation of legal, lethal predator control through both the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme and the Woodland Grant Scheme. The latter has provided targeted predator control support for capercaillie and is ongoing, offering the potential for quick improvements in breeding success where appropriate.

However, we would like to clarify any misunderstandings which may arise as a result of NatureScot's position on predator control for capercaillie conservation as reported in discussion on this petition.

### **1. The Scientific Advisory Committee**

In September 2021, the NatureScot Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) was asked to look at reasons for the decline of capercaillie in Scotland and suggest possible remedial management to restore populations, principally throughout the CNPA area. Their [report](#) was published at the end of February 2022.

The report by a sub-group of the SAC focused on a number of possible drivers of change likely to be affecting capercaillie populations. The SAC sub-group considered the situation to be urgent in light of the possibility of extinction in the foreseeable future, and that targeted, adaptive management would be necessary to restore the Scottish population to favourable condition. This included actions reducing predation on eggs and chicks as a potential means of rapidly improving productivity, alongside a range of medium to long-term measures targeting disturbance and habitat quantity and quality.

### **2. NatureScot recommendations**

Having considered the report which concluded that "It is unlikely that employing a single option ...will be sufficient to prevent further [capercaillie] population declines", the NatureScot Board advised a suite of new actions, which aimed to aid capercaillie recovery alongside supporting the restoration of the wider native pinewoods flora and fauna:

1. Further investment in action to achieve landscape-scale restoration of pinewood habitat over the long-term;
2. Generalist predator population survey work to better understand the size and impact of the predator suite, including policy principles and tests that would need to be met for management of any protected species with a demonstrable impact on capercaillie;
3. Development of a costed, spatially-explicit plan of positive management measures, including reducing disturbance, expansion of diversionary feeding of predators and fence marking or removal.

Whilst a reduction in predation is part of this suite, lethal predator control is not the primary NatureScot recommendation, not least because it is already available as a conservation tool. There is evidence that an increase in some novel nest predators in recent years may be contributing to a decline in capercaillie breeding success, but examination of the evidence available concluded there was uncertainty in how the guild of predators would respond to lethal control measures. For example, one (or more) individual may simply move into the space created by the removal of another, or a reduction in the number of one predatory species may lead to a numerical increase in another, resulting in no net benefit.

In addition, the SAC Sub group report concluded that removal of predators was only likely to be effective over a large scale, for many years. This widespread removal of a suite of species is not compatible with the overall biodiversity goals as set out in the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy. The CNPA Park Partnership Plan states: 'The scale of the climate and nature crises we face means that some tough choices will need to be made, particularly around single species interventions within overall ecological restoration'. Widespread removal of a suite of species at landscape scale would have serious implications for achieving the overall outcome of a biodiversity rich National Park with restored, well-functioning and resilient ecosystems.

A study by the University of Aberdeen just completing on diversionary feeding (using deer carcasses) of predators has shown significant promise as an alternative.

The Petition states that both a statement by NatureScot and the Minister's response were not aligned with the advice. This confuses the SAC report, subsequent recommendations put forward to the Minister and the Minister's acceptance of the recommendations. The actions currently being progressed by CNPA and NatureScot are aligned with these, implementing a suite of actions to deliver high quality, landscape-

scale pinewood habitats and securing a thriving and expanding population of capercaillie by 2045.