

## PE2151: Grant protected status to primitive goat species in the Scottish Borders

The petitioner is calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to help ensure the survival of primitive goat species in the Scottish Borders by granting them protected status.

### Background – feral goats on Langholm Moor

The petitioner raises concerns that feral goats found around Langholm and the lower Scottish Borders have their origins in the native species of the Iron Age, and they are “in danger of extinction due to loss of habitat, and systematic and ongoing culling”.

In 2023, Oxygen Conservation purchased [Blackburn and Hartsgarth](#), two upland farms in the Scottish Borders, totalling 11,366 acres, [from Buccleuch Estates](#). This land forms part of Langholm Moor – an expansive moorland lying between the Eskdale and Liddesdale valleys.

[Oxygen Conservation](#) is a company that invests in the acquisition of land to restore natural processes. It seeks to develop ‘natural capital’ projects on its landholdings e.g. with a view to marketing carbon credits from forest creation or other activities. It has acquired a number of sites in Scotland in recent years. It has been reported that Oxygen Conservation had announced plans to manage the goat population on its land using lethal methods to support its land management objectives, [and a cull had started but was paused in response to local community concerns](#) about loss of animals considered to have local historical significance.

[Feral goats were managed in this area](#) by the previous owner Buccleuch Estates. It was [reported for example in 2014 as part of a wider land management programme on Langholm Moor](#) that the feral goat population had been reduced to around 100 as part of efforts to tackle overgrazing.

### Feral goats in Scotland

There are a number of feral goat populations in different parts of Scotland. NatureScot [published a blog on feral goats in Scotland in 2017 which said:](#)

“Some Scottish feral goat herds have been established for a long time and may be described as naturalised. Feral goats are an invasive non-native species with the potential to cause serious damage to habitats.

Feral goat herds are held in affection by people and often have strong local cultural links. They are an example of the hardy types of livestock breeds in Scotland before the agricultural revolution. In many places they provide opportunities for wildlife watching. Goats are incredibly widely distributed but often quite difficult to spot because of the way their coats have bred back to dark colours and their predilection for grazing on often steep and broken craggy hill ground...

...Trying to estimate how many goats are out there is a tricky art. In 1993, the RSPB estimated that there were at least 45 herds scattered throughout the Highlands and Islands and southern uplands. Estimates vary from just under 3,000 to over 4,000 feral goats in Scotland. But scientists think the overall population has remained constant since the late 1960s”.

## **Why are feral goats managed?**

There is no prohibition on shooting feral goats at any time of year. As set out above, [NatureScot considers feral goats to be an invasive non-native species](#) which it states have “the potential to cause serious damage to habitats”. The above-mentioned 2017 blog set out:

“They may be a fascinating spectacle, but goats have to be managed as they can cause damage to native woodlands and scrub. The International Union for Nature Conservation (IUCN) lists feral goats as one of the 100 worst invasive non-native species globally. In Scotland, there is evidence feral goats are contributing to grazing pressures on at least 18 different protected nature conservation sites. The habitats most affected by goats are woodlands, willow and juniper scrub and vegetation on cliff ledges.

Feral goat populations have the potential to increase in size rapidly if they are not controlled properly. They can also cause damage to young trees in forestry plantations. Wildlife managers must actively manage herds of feral goats to control numbers”.

In Scotland, [browsing, grazing or trampling by feral goats can impact on designated sites for nature conservation](#) or on other land management goals such as forest creation (potentially in combination with browsing pressure from other herbivores such as deer). Feral goats are or have been managed at other sites with the aim to reduce those pressures (although note that both under-grazing and over-grazing can cause issues in relation to some land management goals). For example [NatureScot culls feral goats at the Rum National Nature Reserve](#), and Forestry and Land Scotland [manages feral goats on the Scotland National Forest Estate](#).

Land managers can also seek to reduce overgrazing pressures by herbivores (e.g. deer, goats, sheep, hares) through other methods such as fencing, or a combination of methods. RSPB Scotland has [trialled controlling goat numbers at its Inversnaid reserve via contraceptive darts](#), although it is unclear if this practice has been continued or adopted more widely as a management tool.

Some shooting estates in Scotland have also offered the option to shoot feral goats. It is unclear to what extent this is current practice. Concerns were raised about the animal welfare implications of “trophy hunting” of feral goats in 2018, and the issue was raised in a motion [in the Scottish Parliament](#). The Scottish Government was reported at the time [as committing to review the matter](#) and consider whether any clarifications to the law may be required.

## **Potentially relevant protections and welfare standards**

Feral goats are not a protected species in Scotland.

A key piece of legislation in this area is [the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 \(WCA 1981\)](#), under which various and detailed protections and restrictions apply to species set out across various schedules. Under the WCA 1981, it is an offence for example to intentionally or recklessly kill, injure or take any wild animal included in Schedule 5 of that Act, unless that is licenced by NatureScot. NatureScot may still licence the lethal control of protected species under the WCA for a range of purposes, such as to prevent serious damage to livestock or crops, or to prevent damage to natural habitats, and may set a ‘close season’ during which lethal control may not take place.

Under [section 22 of the WCA 1981](#), Scottish Ministers have the power to, by regulations, add any animal to Schedule 5 of the Act (but must consult NatureScot before doing so). There is a [statutory review of Schedule 5](#) undertaken every five years by the UK Joint Nature Conservation Council (JNCC), the ‘Quinquennial’ review of species which aims to inform any decisions made regarding changes to Schedule 5. However, there is a precedent for species to be added to Schedule 5 outwith this process. [Mountain hare was added to Schedule 5 from 2021](#) in response largely to concerns around the conservation impact of levels of culling (although this was [done via primary legislation](#) rather than using delegated powers).

However, it should be noted that the Scottish Government has set out that it considers feral goats to be an invasive, non-native species, and has no intentions to give feral goats any form of protected species status. In response [to a Parliamentary Question on this issue on 5 March 2025](#), Acting Minister for Climate Action, Alasdair Allan MSP said

“The Scottish Government understands that feral goat populations may need to be managed as part of a sustainable grazing management plan. Sometimes feral goat numbers need to be reduced to prevent damage to sensitive habitats or forestry interests, in much the same way deer are required to be managed. As the landowners, it is for Oxygen Conservation Limited to consider how any reduction in the feral goat population should be achieved in practice. I understand that the

landowner is not calling for eradication of the feral goats but that all future herbivore management will be informed by monitoring the species.

The Scottish Government does not intend to provide feral goats with protected status. Feral goats are a non-native species and it is an offence to release any non-native species without a licence from NatureScot.”

Regarding animal welfare, there are no specific animal welfare standards or guidance for the control of feral goats. By comparison, animal welfare considerations are generally built into NatureScot’s functions in relation to deer management [via the Deer \(Scotland\) Act 1996](#), and there is [Wild Deer Best Practice Guidance on deer health and welfare](#).

**Alexa Morrison, Senior Researcher**

17 June 2025

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at [spice@parliament.scot](mailto:spice@parliament.scot)

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

Published by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), an office of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP