

## PE2202: Stop the Guga Hunt

The petitioner is calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend Section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to remove the power to grant licences for taking Gannets on Sula Sgeir.

### What is the guga hunt?

A guga is the Gaelic name for a young [northern gannet](#) - a large seabird native to the coasts of the North Atlantic, and which breeds in a number of coastal colonies in Scotland.

The guga hunt is a tradition in the community of Ness in North Lewis, and is [thought to date back to at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century](#). Traditionally, a group of men from Ness travel annually, in August, to the remote, small uninhabited island of Sula Sgeir ('gannet rock'), around 65 km from the Butt of Lewis, where gannets breed. Young gannets are taken with a pole and noose, culled and salted and brought back to Lewis where they may be used or sold for human consumption.

### Licensing of the guga hunt by Nature Scot

The guga hunt can only take place legally under a special licence issued by NatureScot under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (WCA 1981), which also determines how many birds may be taken under licence.

Generally, it is an offence to (intentionally or recklessly) kill, injure or take any wild bird under section 1 of the WCA 1981. This protection dates back to [the Protection of Wild Birds Act 1954](#). An Order was introduced under this Act, the [Gannets on Sula Sgeir Order 1955](#), which allowed the guga hunt to continue. This exemption was subsequently included in the WCA 1981 (and the 1954 Act and 1955 Order repealed).

Section 16(2) of the WCA 1981 provides that section 1 does not apply to anything done for the purpose of providing food for human consumption in relation to a gannet on the island of Sula Sgeir, if it is done under and in accordance with the terms of a licence granted by the appropriate authority.

NatureScot [issued a statement on the guga hunt on 29 September 2025](#):

"We understand there are very strong feelings about the guga hunt, and that some people will disagree with it taking place. The cultural

significance of the hunt is recognised in law under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. This is why a licence exists for the activity. To be clear, our role is to implement legislation in a balanced and reasonable way. We must assess any application against the licensing tests set out under the legislation, and crucially whether the guga hunt can take place with the long-term Sula Sgeir gannet population remaining stable.

This is the first year we received a licence application from the Men of Ness since 2021. We carefully assessed the application and significantly reduced the number of birds that could be taken from 2,000 to 500 this year. This figure is based on scientific evidence which shows the Sula Sgeir gannet population will remain viable in the long-term with this limit. This is based on the most recent survey data collected from Sula Sgeir in 2024, post-bird flu.

We are also aware of the concerns about animal welfare and want to stress that it is a condition of our licence that birds should be killed humanely.

We have been informed that the guga hunt has taken place this year.”

As set out above, licence applications were not received by NatureScot in 2022, 2023 or 2024, as a result of concerns about the presence of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in seabird colonies in Scotland.

As set out in the NatureScot quote above, the licence issued this year was for a lower number of birds (500) than previous years (generally 2000).

NatureScot has also [published some further details about licences issued for the guga hunt between 2016 and 2025](#) on its website. NatureScot has also published a [redacted copy of the licence issued in 2025](#) which sets out details of the basis for the issuance of the licence which includes:

- Recognition that the collection of guga forms part of a traditional way of life which is culturally important to the community
- Reference to a [population viability analysis report](#) by NatureScot, which suggested that a harvest level of 500 guga annually would allow the breeding population to remain stable over a 25-year period.

### **North Rona and Sula Sgeir Special Protection Area (SPA)**

Sula Sgeir forms part of the [North Rona and Sula Sgeir Special Protection Area \(SPA\)](#) – a ‘European protected site’ which is designated to protect a number of seabirds, including the gannet. The [latest assessed condition of gannets within this SPA](#) found their status to be ‘favourable maintained’ (in 2023), which means that conservation objectives for gannets within this SPA were being met at the previous assessment, and are still being met.

[Conservation and management advice published by Nature Scot in December 2024](#) for the North Rona and Sula Sgeir SPA identifies the hunting of gannets as an activity “considered capable of affecting the protected features” of the site and identified that there is existing management in place to manage pressures associated with the guga hunt, stating the “annual guga hunt at Sula Sgeir is subject to limits under license (currently a 2000 chick limit, unless exceptional circumstances arise such as an avian flu outbreak)”.

However it also states that “Research is required on the potential impact of the annual guga hunt at Sula Sgeir on the gannet population and whether limits require review”.

NatureScot has advised SPICe that it recently awarded a contract for an updated population viability analysis of the Sula Sgeir gannet population. This work will produce population models over a 25-year period and include scenarios for differing levels of juvenile gannet harvest, periodic mortality events (such as HPAI), and consider cumulative effects from other anthropogenic pressures. It is anticipated that this work will be complete prior to the 2026 seabird breeding season and inform NatureScot’s licensing.

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10 December 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)

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