

Public Petition Committee
Thursday 10 September 2026
2nd Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

PE2202: Stop the Guga Hunt

Introduction

Petitioner Rachel Bigsby

Petition Summary 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.

Website <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2202>

1. This is a continued petition that was published on 3 November 2025.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**. Details of action taken by the previous committee are set out on the website highlighted above.
3. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 110,792 signatures have been received on this petition.
4. The Committee sought the views of the Scottish Government on all petitions carried over from Session 6 to inform its consideration. This response is included at **Annexe B**, along with a responses from the petitioner and NatureScot.
5. NatureScot's response to the Committee outlines the reasoning for the decision it took on 3 August 2026 not to grant a licence to the Men of Ness for a Guga Hunt in 2026. The response states that:

“We used the latest information available and commissioned an updated population model to help predict the effect of the guga hunt on the gannet population. As a result, we concluded that an adverse impact is possible both at the applicant's requested application limit of 2,000 juvenile gannets, and at a reduced limit of 500. Our Board refused the 2026 licence on this basis”.

6. The Petitioner also made reference to the NatureScot decision, and argues that the Committee should keep PE2202 open and recommend that the Scottish Government consider the legislative amendment requested by the petition, so that “the Gannets of Sula Sgeir are afforded lasting protection rather than protection determined one licence application at a time”.
7. In its [Legacy Report](#), the Session 6 Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee invited the new committee to consider the issues raised in the petition and recommended that any work to explore the issues raised in the petition further should consider a range of views, ensuring that the voices of islanders are heard.

Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
September 2026

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2202: Stop the Guga Hunt

Petitioner

Rachel Bigsby

Date Published

3 November 2025

Petition summary

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.

Previous action

I have had a long thread of emails with NatureScot, asking them to revoke the 2025 licenses. I have also raised significant awareness on social media. I have written with no avail to Gillian Martin MSP, and I also started a petition to the UK Parliament, which was subsequently rejected due to it being a devolved issue and the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament.

Background information

I have devoted my life to Scotland's seabirds; photographing for National Geographic as avian influenza devastated colonies, winning Wildlife Photographer of the Year (Natural Artistry) and Bird Photographer of the Year (Portfolio). I have spent years volunteering on seabird islands across Scotland, including with the Scottish Seabird Centre, working hands-on to protect these birds I love so dearly. The annual Guga Hunt is no longer tradition — it is blood sport. This abhorrent cruelty dates back centuries, when island communities relied on seabirds for food, but today it is not a necessity. Despite catastrophic losses from avian influenza and unimaginable daily threats, the hunt continues.

After surviving a winter at sea, Gannets return to our shores to raise one precious chick with a lifelong partner. After months of devotion, that chick is snatched, clubbed, and strangled in its prime.

I beg the Scottish Government: end this cruelty, protect Gannets, and let them recover.

Annexe B: Written Submissions

Scottish Government written submission, 20 July 2026

PE2202/K: Stop the Guga Hunt

Thank you for your email of 29 June seeking an update on the Scottish Government's position on Petition PE2202 – Stop the Guga Hunt, which is currently being considered by the Public Petitions Committee.

As we set out in our previous written submission to the Committee on 1 December 2025, the taking of gannets for the purpose of food for human consumption is specifically provided for in section 16(2) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 ("the 1981 Act"). This activity can only be done under licence, and in accordance with the terms of a licence issued by NatureScot, who are responsible for licensing functions from the Scottish Government as part of the implementation of the Wildlife & Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011.

I understand that the Men of Ness have now submitted their application to NatureScot to take gannet chicks on Sula Sgeir this year. NatureScot, as the licensing authority, is currently considering their application and the decision to grant a licence is a matter for them.

In issuing a licence, NatureScot gives consideration as to whether the hunt is sustainable, and by that, the focus of the consideration is whether the activity would have an adverse effect on the conservation status of the species concerned, namely gannets. NatureScot will thoroughly assess the application, taking into account the latest survey data and population analysis.

The Scottish Government would like to reiterate the point made in its previous correspondence to the Committee that NatureScot keep licensing matters under continual review and if there was any change in the circumstances of this traditional activity, they would be prepared to reconsider the issue of a licence under section 16(2) or the terms of any such licence. On this basis, the Scottish Government does not intend to amend Section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to remove the power to grant licences for taking gannets on Sula Sgeir.

I hope this is helpful and clarifies the Scottish Government's latest position on Petition PE2202.

**Nature Division
Environment and Forestry Directorate**

NatureScot written submission, 6 August 2026

PE2202/L: Stop the Guga Hunt

I am writing to update you on the outcome of the licence application from the Men of Ness for a guga hunt in 2026, which relates to Petition PE2202: Stop the Guga Hunt.

Included below is background information on the licence application and our Board's decision not to grant the licence. Our website has been updated with a [Q&A](#) section to help answer any queries that members may have.

Background

NatureScot received a licence application from the Men of Ness for a 2026 guga hunt. After assessing the application against the relevant legal frameworks and using the most recent scientific evidence, our Board's decision was to refuse a licence.

We used the latest information available and commissioned an updated population model to help predict the effect of the guga hunt on the gannet population. As a result, we concluded that an adverse impact is possible both at the applicant's requested application limit of 2,000 juvenile gannets, and at a reduced limit of 500. Our Board refused the 2026 licence on this basis.

This decision does not preclude the Men of Ness applying for and obtaining a licence in future years. The hunt is recognised in law under the Wildlife and Countryside Act and NatureScot has a duty to consider any licence application based upon the best available science.

Here is a [link](#) to the paper considered by our board.

We recognise the significant interest in this petition and can answer any follow up questions you have on the licence application and our Board's subsequent decision.

Robbie Kernahan
Director of Green Economy
NatureScot

Petitioner written submission, 2 September 2026

PE2202/M: Stop the Guga Hunt

Since the Committee last considered PE2202, there have been developments which I believe strengthen the case for the action PE2202 requests: amending section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to remove the power to license the taking of Gannets on Sula Sgeir.

1. NatureScot has refused the 2026 licence

On 3 August, NatureScot formally refused the application to take up to 2,000 Gannets. NatureScot commissioned an updated population model capable of considering HPAI alongside other quantifiable mortality and pressures, and from that model, they concluded that an adverse impact on the population was possible both at the requested take of 2,000 and at a reduced take of 500. NatureScot confirmed that HPAI caused an estimated 23–41% decline at Sula Sgeir, while Scotland's Gannet population declined by approximately 22%. Critically, NatureScot states that we will not understand the consequences of mortality during the HPAI outbreak until the 2027 breeding season. The scientific uncertainty I asked Scottish Parliament to consider when lodging PE2202 is therefore no longer hypothetical, but now central to NatureScot's own decision-making. Had the evidence base remained as it stood in 2025, NatureScot's previous assessment supported a licensed take of 500 birds. The updated evidence has changed that conclusion and demonstrates precisely why the precautionary principle matters.

2. Scotland's seabird crisis

On 13 August, NatureScot published its latest Scottish Biodiversity Indicator for Seabirds. It reports that Scotland's seabird numbers are half their 1980s levels, with almost all assessed species declining and breeding success decreasing. NatureScot identified climate change, food shortages, invasive species, human pressures, extreme weather and disease including HPAI among the threats, and states that Scotland's conservation response must include "maximising seabird survival." Against this background, I ask whether enabling the killing of Gannets for human consumption remains compatible with Scotland's wider objective of maximising seabird survival?

3. New independent animal-welfare evidence

Since the Committee's consideration, the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission has reviewed the hunt. Its June 2026 advice identifies welfare costs associated with capturing wild birds using noose poles and the difficulty of achieving effective stunning through blunt-force trauma. SAWC's conclusion is that they are "unaware of a humane method of dispatching Guga that is feasible under the conditions prevailing on Sula Sgeir". SAWC also identifies fear and stress caused by human presence, disruption of feeding, nest abandonment, starvation of unfledged chicks and welfare impacts upon parent birds whose offspring are removed.

4. Wider impacts on protected seabirds

Information disclosed during the past year demonstrates that the consequences of the hunt extend beyond harvested Gannets. NatureScot's own assessments acknowledge disturbance to Red-listed European Storm-petrels and Leach's Storm-petrels. Human activity and equipment can obstruct access to nest sites; disturbance can cause stress to adults and chicks, reduce provisioning, lead to nest abandonment and ultimately cause chick mortality. NatureScot's own assessment acknowledged that even with mitigation measures, disturbance would still be expected because of the sensitivity and breeding distribution of these species.

5. Newly emerged video evidence

[Newly emerged video footage from 2021](#) shows members of the hunting party participating in a sack race through the Gannet colony. Three men participate while at least one other films the activity. Flightless young Gannets flee from their path. The video was subsequently removed from its original online location on YouTube. NatureScot's licence conditions expressly require due care to avoid unnecessary disturbance to the colony. Recreationally playing in an occupied breeding colony cannot reasonably be characterised as necessary to harvesting Gannets. This evidence also strengthens my longstanding concern about reliance on licence-holder compliance where no independent observer is present on Sula Sgeir.

6. The 2026 refusal does not resolve PE2202

NatureScot itself states that its 2026 decision does not prevent the Men of Ness obtaining a licence in future years. NatureScot states: "An end to the guga hunt would require a change to legislation and is a matter for the Scottish Government

and Parliament.” That is precisely what PE2202 asks Parliament to do. The refusal of one licence therefore does not make this petition redundant. It demonstrates why the petition remains necessary. More than 106,000 people have signed PE2202. The campaign has generated extraordinary public engagement in Scotland and internationally and has brought scientific, regulatory and welfare scrutiny to an activity which previously received comparatively little public examination.

Conclusion

I did not lodge PE2202 to erase island history or diminish the importance seabirds once held to communities whose survival depended upon them. I lodged it because circumstances have changed. Scotland’s seabirds are declining. HPAI has transformed the outlook for Gannets. Independent welfare experts cannot identify a humane killing method under the conditions of the hunt. Other protected seabirds may be disturbed. And NatureScot’s newest science has now resulted in refusal of the 2026 licence. If the evidence is now sufficient to prevent the hunt in 2026, I respectfully ask Parliament why Scotland should retain a law specifically designed to enable it again in the future?