

Opinion

Upland PR and raptors

NGO media adviser, Alasdair Mitchell, gives a personal view of how the raptor issue is developing.

AS FAR AS THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF GAMEKEEPERS is concerned, media coverage of raptor persecution is the single biggest negative issue we face. Without the media hysteria that greets each and every raptor story, the public perception of gamekeepers would be positive – overwhelmingly so, perhaps.

True, there are some people who instinctively dislike the very notion of game shooting. And of course, there are always going to be image problems with predator control – particularly snaring. The public image of gamekeepers is always going to be under attack from certain parts of society. But all these other issues pale into insignificance compared with the problems we face in trying to balance raptor persecution stories.

To the public, raptors are special, rare, endangered species that deserve to be treated differently to any other animal. They have been told that the countryside is “wild”, and would look after itself according to a “balance of nature” if only we would let it.

We all know differently, of course. Of the 15 species of raptor native to the UK, the populations of 14 are either stable or increasing. Only one – the humble and very common kestrel – has shown any recent decline, and that has nothing to do with persecution. Virtually all UK raptors are now at or near their highest population ever recorded. Many of them – such as the merlin – actually benefit from the activities of gamekeepers.

But such is the power of the imagery and mythology attached to raptors, that most members of the public simply don't believe the truth even when they stumble upon it. They are predisposed to swallow the highly selective facts they are spoon-fed to the media, and journalists have become accustomed to regurgitating raptor propaganda without challenge or scruple.

So, life is unfair – what's new? We have to cope with it.

We all know that in certain situations, an over-abundance of raptors can cause real problems for game. Most of these

problems can be dealt with within the law, but that still leaves a very genuine problem in the uplands with hen harriers. Langholm proved once and for all that hen harriers don't subsist on cheese sandwiches.

We are today in a situation where the RSPB grudgingly acknowledges in private that moorland gamekeeping is good for a whole variety of birdlife, but refuses to trumpet this widely while hen harrier numbers remain static in the English uplands. In the meantime, they use the persecution issue to gain column inches and raise money, with the public image of the gamekeeping profession getting battered in the process.

But what has changed, very recently, is that the top echelons in the RSPB have been made aware that there is no real gain for raptors in blaming all gamekeepers for every bad thing that has ever happened. We made this pretty clear to them by responding vigorously to some of their media activities earlier this year (BASC, by contrast, were so wet you could shoot snipe off them).

And now, believe it or not (and you probably won't), there are signs of movement. Some recent RSPB press releases about raptor persecution have

been toned down, and the broad-brush condemnation of which we are all so heartily sick has been slightly more focused. This year, for the first time that I can recall, the official RSPB press release accompanying its annual *Birdcrime* report didn't actually mention the word “gamekeeper”. And the resulting coverage was largely limited to a few regional media, rather than being spattered across all the nationals, as always used to happen.

True, the media in some cases plugged the resulting gaps with its own anti-keeper material, and some individual RSPB zealots couldn't resist putting the boot in. But the key point is that the official RSPB spin machine now seems to be making an effort to try and be a little bit more careful.

This is a new direction, led from the top. In dealing with the RSPB at the highest levels, we are beginning to forge a new relationship, based on some very straight talking from both sides.

Only time will tell if this all leads anywhere, but even the merest signs of thaw in the cold war must be welcome to anybody who cares about the image of gamekeepers.

Grouse moors are where there is the biggest conflict between shooting interests and birds of prey.



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