

## Opinion

# Conservation needs predator control

The GWCT's Dr Stephen Tapper hopes for a shift in scientific thinking

2010 WILL BE A SIGNIFICANT YEAR FOR conservation. It is when most Biodiversity Action Plans will complete and by when we had hoped to see a significant improvement in the numbers of many species singled out for special conservation. Sadly, we suspect that many will not have improved by much. A recent Parliamentary report concluded that the Government was unlikely to halt biodiversity loss by 2010 and it needed a new approach to conservation. Many conservation groups will be disappointed and frustrated. Taxpayers will complain that a lot of money has gone into environmental schemes but with mixed results.

From my living room I can look out across meadows of the River Avon floodplain. Twenty years ago this land was farmed intensively and the fields were a dark uniform green; cut for silage and heavily stocked with cattle. Five years later the Government introduced an Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme for the valley aiming to bring back biodiversity, particularly waders like lapwing, which had nearly disappeared. Farmers were paid to reduce livestock, to forego the use of pesticides and fertiliser, and leave the grass un-mown until July. Now, as I look down the valley, the view is simply gorgeous. Last month the meadows were golden with buttercup, there were rushy patches, and a dozen young beef cattle grazed the far field. It could have been a Constable landscape. Judged on landscape alone this scheme is a success; but of the waders – the lapwing, snipe and redshank – there is little sign. Rabbits, roe deer, badgers and buzzards abound, but get the binoculars out and what you see most often are carrion crows. It is pretty clear what is going on. The wader numbers are not being limited by habitat but most probably by the ubiquitous crows.

Many conservationists plead that you cannot blame predation for the poor performance of the waders and there must be some other habitat feature missing – the crows have always been there. Is this really so? There is a good

historical bird atlas compiled by Simon Holloway that shows the breeding status of most of Britain's birds in every county in Victorian times. Look-up the status of the carrion crow in Hampshire and what do you find? Rare. Yes, truly, they were recorded as being rare and, incidentally, rare also was the magpie. Many forget that 100 years ago great swathes of the countryside were managed for game and this had a significant effect not just on pheasants, grouse and partridges but probably on other species that are vulnerable to predation too.

Some ecologists dismiss this as coincidence and anecdote and not good science – although, curiously, the same ecologists will accept the skimpiest of evidence if pesticides, pollution, or poor habitat are suspected. Even so it is necessary to get good experimental evidence before advocating radical and expensive management.

With this in mind at the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust we undertook an eight year experiment on four study areas at Otterburn in Northumberland. In any one year we employed gamekeepers to control predators using conventional methods on two of the areas while the other two were left unmanaged. Each year our scientists carried out wader and game surveys in spring and autumn on all four sites. The

differences in wader breeding success were substantial. Where the gamekeepers operated, 63% of the pairs of breeding waders were successful, without predator control only 16% of them bred successfully. It was also evident that this affected the breeding population the following year. Year-on-year wader numbers increased where predators were controlled, but they declined on areas where they were not.

To its credit in 2007 the RSPB published a useful paper, which concluded that some waders in some circumstances could be limited by predation and that predator control might be justified on occasions.

I believe we are at last beginning to see a shift in conservation thinking which will recognise that much of the predator control done by gamekeepers benefits a lot of wildlife as well as game. People are starting to appreciate firstly, that to get the best from stewardship, in terms of bird diversity, some judicious predator control could be beneficial and, secondly that in the uplands the big concentrations of waders breeding on the North Pennines, which Natural England is keen to protect, owe their existence – not to any fancy measures of habitat condition – but to the 150 or so grouse moor gamekeepers who kill foxes and crows that trespass onto the windswept hills.

In Hampshire in Victorian times, carrion crows were rare, as were magpies.



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