

Political news

By Charles Nodder, the NGO's Political Consultant

Battling for bird licences

NATURAL ENGLAND'S (NE'S) RECENT announcement that two species of gulls are to be dropped from the English General Licences triggered an angry response from the NGO, who dubbed the move 'unjustified and foolish'. In letters to the head of Natural England, its relevant staff and their Defra overseers, the NGO called for the herring gull and the greater black-backed gull to be left on the General Licences after 1 January, so that gamekeepers and others can control them where needed without having to apply for individual licences in what the NGO described as a 'bureaucratic paper-chase'.

Lindsay Waddell, the NGO Chairman – who regularly needs to shoot gulls on the upland estate he gamekeepers – said: "It beggars belief that NE wants to introduce yet more paperwork and commit more staff at a time when the agency and the country are as good as bust. They admit they have no evidence that these gulls are suffering at the moment as a result of occasional necessary culling under the General Licences."

As well as writing to the top people involved, the NGO will be asking friends in Parliament to question the Minister in whose name the revised licences will be signed on 1 January. The NGO still hopes to turn this round. Our case was always a strong one and was put to NE way back in the spring. NE's move flies in the face of its own pledge to 'reduce unnecessary burdens on those we regulate'."

Members will need to watch the sporting press and the NGO website for emerging news on this issue. The forms for applying for individual licences, if still needed come 1 January, are on NE's website at www.naturalengland.org.uk. Click on the tab 'Our work' and then on 'Regulation and licensing'.

RAPTOR CONTROL LICENCES

NE's licensing people have confirmed to the NGO that there is no reason in law why individuals in England who need to manage problem birds of prey cannot apply to NE for individual licences to do so. Historically, of course, such applications have met with very little

success but comparable requests are now increasingly well-received elsewhere in the EU, while here there have been calls for common sense on the issue from the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Duke of Edinburgh and indeed our own Vice Chairman, Geoff Garrod, who commented recently in a week-long feature on BBC Radio 4's *Farming Today*.

The Wildlife and Countryside Act allows for licences to control any bird that has normal protection under the Act (including buzzards and sparrowhawks), or to disturb those on Schedule 1, such as goshawks, harriers and eagles. But before granting any such licence, NE, as the relevant authority, would have to be convinced that there was a clear need, a good reason to cull the bird(s) in question, no alternative and that culling would resolve the problem and not, for example, just lead to other predators moving in.

The NGO is aware of a number of well-supported applications being

prepared at this time, some to protect wild game, others released birds and one penned laying stock. It will be interesting, to say the least, to see if any of them actually get granted. Will the apparent 'new thinking' on the harm that predators can do extend to the UK's own sacred cows, the raptors?

An NGO-funded poll earlier this year found six out of 10 people thought birds of prey should be controlled if they were damaging wildlife and livelihoods.

WELSH REVIEW

Bird licensing is a devolved matter, with differences in Scotland, England and Wales. The Welsh General Licences are currently under review and a public consultation has been issued on the Welsh Assembly website. Like NE, the Assembly also wants to increase protection for gulls. The NGO is responding on behalf of its members.

In an unjustified and foolish move, herring gulls have been dropped from the General Licence.



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