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Dear Andrew,

Thank you for your letter of 5 August. I enjoyed my visit to the Game Fair, and was happy to lend my support to the Wildlife Estates initiative. I also found it useful and interesting to talk to so many people connected with the sport shooting industry.

I am in absolutely no doubt that sport shooting, and driven grouse shooting in particular, contributes significantly to the economy of rural Scotland, in terms of income and employment generated and in the maintenance of heather moorland. There is equally no doubt that well-managed moorland is a valuable resource for biodiversity and that in addition to providing habitat for many rare species it also is a major attraction for tourists from around the world and for visitors from within Scotland.

I think it is clear that the Scottish Government's support for this industry goes beyond words. We have, for example, fought hard over the last four years or so to retain the use of snares. We understand from the land management sector that this form of predator control is vital to the maintenance of viable grouse shooting businesses and this was one of the key reasons for our support. We have also invested heavily, through SNH, in terms of resources and effort, in the Langholm Moor project, which, as you know, aims to find ways in which grouse moors can maintain viable shooting businesses alongside hen harrier populations.

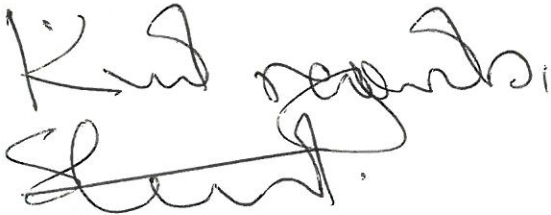
Turning to the issue of vicarious liability, I am afraid I do not agree that this poses a threat to the public benefits that well-managed moorlands deliver. The introduction of vicarious liability in this area is a response to a long-standing and continuing problem and reflects the wishes of a clear majority in Parliament. However, any grouse moor manager or owner who takes their staff and land management duties seriously and can show, if required, that they have carried out due diligence in this respect, as required by the law, will not have any reason to be concerned.

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I hope that we are beginning to see a significant reduction in crimes involving birds of prey. Any reduction in the numbers of birds that are found poisoned will be very welcome. We are however clear that the number of birds analysed by SASA is not the complete picture, and we will continue to be guided by the scientific advice from SNH on the overall population levels and distributions of birds of prey.

I would be very happy to discuss these issues with you, either in the context of PAW Scotland or if you wish, in a separate meeting. It remains our clear policy to support the Scottish game shooting industry and to recognise the benefits it provides, and also to work with representatives from that industry to drive out those elements who continue to pursue unlawful practices. We would like to see a Scottish shooting industry with a world-wide reputation for the quality of the sport and the surroundings as well as excellent land management practices supporting a diverse range of species including birds of prey.



**STEWART STEVENSON**