

As Draconian new land laws loom...

Grouse moor isn't just for the lairds, it's our livelihood



CARRIENNE CONAGHAN: The community wants to play a part in addressing wildlife crime

WERE now less than four weeks from the Glorious Twelfth, the start of the grouse shooting season in Scotland. Visitors from across the UK, Europe and further afield will visit some of Scotland's most remote areas to enjoy a world-class country pursuit situated on some of the country's most beautiful heather-clad hills.

Yet this Glorious Twelfth arrives with fresh worries about the future - and the jobs of those who rely on grouse shooting.

At the end of May, Environment Secretary Roseanna Cunningham announced an independently-led group to examine sustainable grouse moor management.

This group would also advise on the option of a licensing scheme for grouse shooting businesses.

Those in country sports welcome an independent examination of the issues. For too long, the sector has been hounded by an ongoing social media frenzy, from activists who object to the very existence of grouse moors, whether their opposition is based on a dislike of shooting or of the 'toffs' who they believe are the only ones to participate.

Yet, for someone such as myself who lives in Speyside, and whose family's livelihood is dependent on moorland management, it is a worry where this review will lead to.

The review follows concerns over crimes against birds of prey - but arrives at a time when such incidents have been in decline and tough legislation has had a positive effect.

EVERYONE knows raptor persecution is unacceptable and it's regrettable that a few still engage in this kind of activity. However, there should be some recognition of the real extent of the problem and the fact great strides have been made in recent years. The Partnership Against Wildlife Crime Scotland (PAWS) has brought gamekeepers, landowners, conservationists together with police and government to tackle wildlife crime, yet distrust has been more and more evident between the different interest groups.

Where a bird of prey may have gone missing, often the first place a gamekeeper or landowner learns about it is from a press release that names an estate under suspicion rather than asking that estate if they can offer any help in a search.

My husband is a gamekeeper and I know from him, and his colleagues,

COMMENT

By **CARRIENNE CONAGHAN**

COORDINATOR, SPEYSIDE MOORLAND GROUP

that it is their desire to manage moorland for the interests of all species, whether it be grouse, ground-nesting birds, mountain hares or birds of prey.

But for many keepers and their families, it feels as if this is yet another assault on a rural lifeline for many communities. There needs to be a recognition that grouse shooting is an important land use in remote parts of Scotland - and is vital for rural investment, jobs, tourism and crucially, wildlife and habitat conservation.

THERE is an assumption that the income generated by grouse shooting all goes into the pocket of a laird, but ask hoteliers, shops and garages who rely on much of their income from local estates and they'll soon tell you differently.

A licensing scheme is one option that has been pursued by anti-shooting activists and will now be considered by the government's group. However, for the vast majority of estates who have done nothing wrong and are resolute in their fight against wildlife crime, they would be penalised by strict new controls.

More worryingly, it also brings the potential of gamekeepers losing their homes and livelihoods if a licence to operate was withdrawn.

I coordinate a regional moorland group, a collection of estates around the Speyside region. We wrote to the Cabinet Secretary to express our anxiety and worry about what the review and potential licensing scheme would mean for our jobs and for our rural communities. More than 400 keepers and their families put their names to it, all of whom condemn wildlife crime but are rightly fearful for their families' jobs. Yes, we're worried and all we want is a fair shake. The shooting community wants to play its part in contributing to address wildlife crime. Together, the sector is examining fresh ways to stamp out crime against birds of prey and there is clear backing for tougher penalties against those found guilty.

Our families' livelihoods depend on it.

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Keepers want to manage moorland for all species

