

FRIENDS OF THE SCOTSMAN

Burst of birdsong shows how we need to be more in tune with nature

Last month, an article in the journal *Science* reported that nearly 3 billion birds have gone extinct in less than 50 years in the US and Canada. There are a few things that are remarkable about this research.

First is the number. That's not 1,000 or one million, but three billion. Put in perspective, that's 36 times the estimated number of bird species in the UK, 545 times the human population of Scotland and represents a 30 per cent decline for species overall.

Second, much of the loss is among common species – songbirds like swifts, sparrows, swallows, blackbirds and finches have experienced the most loss. This loss is not just in the US and Canada. More than 160 species are endangered in the UK, and 56 per cent of UK species are in decline.

Third, phrases like “gone extinct” and “experienced the most loss” are misleading. These losses are the direct result of human activity. No mysterious force is having an effect on our nature. This crisis is our fault.

Just as this crisis is our responsibility, so is the solution. We need to encourage people to lead greener and more sustainable lifestyles and actively promote green energy, cut emissions, and protect, restore and fund our natural areas. We know that when we work together, we can make change happen. Advocacy efforts unite people, demand acknowl-



Erica Mason urges people to join a movement to prevent the extinction of common birds

edgement and lead to action on the connected crises of biodiversity and climate. As part of Scottish Environment Link and Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, RSPB Scotland engages in coalition efforts like the recently-passed Climate Bill, which set net-zero emission targets by 2045 and committed to reduce greenhouse emissions by 75 per cent by 2030.

But the fight is far from over. Scotland still needs an environment bill that works to preserve nature through clearly-defined targets, creates an environmental watchdog and commits to match or exceed existing EU protections for thriving and vital natural sites in Scotland like Coul Links, near Dornoch in Sutherland. We also need to recognise the connection between farming, food and nature and work to ensure that industrial practices support, rather than threaten, biodiversity.

As Rachel Carson told us almost 60 years ago, the loudest alarm is the one which makes no sound: when the birds go silent, we have the most to fear. Can you remember the last time you woke up to birdsong that

wasn't part of a pre-programmed alarm? The absence of natural sound not only warns against what we are losing in the world; it also serves as a warning for what we are losing in ourselves.

In October last year, RSPB Scotland partnered with 10 NHS GP surgeries in Shetland to prescribe birdsong and walks in nature as part of the treatment for anxiety, heart disease, depression and obesity. As land artist Andy Goldsworthy said: “We ARE nature. Nature is not something separate from us. So when we say we have lost our connection to nature, we've lost our connection to ourselves.”

One of the biggest threats nature faces is our disconnection from it. In April, RSPB set out to reconnect people to nature, releasing a two-and-a-half minute single of birdsong called Let Nature Sing that reached number 18 on the UK singles charts. The track features the UK's most threatened species, including curlews, lapwings and swifts.

Now, we're continuing that campaign with a Let Nature Sing



↑ Lapwings are one of the UK's most threatened species and their song features

Sound Takeover on 17 October. More than 150 individual locations across Scotland, including the Enchanted Forest, Perthshire; Murrayfield; Kelvingrove Museum; Edinburgh Waverley station; Bon Accord and Union Square shopping centres in Aberdeen; V&A Dundee, and many tourist attractions like Edinburgh Castle,

Linlithgow Palace and the Glenceo Visitor Centre, will participate, playing birdsong to raise awareness of the crisis facing nature and highlighting what we lose when the birds go silent.

Individuals and groups can join the campaign by hosting a birdsong afternoon tea, involving a local business or downloading the RSPB Bird-

on an RSPB single designed to raise awareness of the crisis facing many different bird populations across the country

song Radio app, where you can hear the single from the UK charts.

RSPB wants to tell a new story about nature's recovery – about a future where nature is strong and resilient, regaining its foothold and thriving. United, we can transform our way of living and shift to nature-friendly farming, green transport and flour-

ishing woodlands, allowing nature to regenerate. By speaking out about the need to save birdsong, you empower friends and neighbours to join our movement and demand action. You can let nature sing at www.rspb.org.uk/letnatureasing

Erica Mason, policy and campaigns officer, RSPB Scotland.



Biodiversity on heather moors benefits from balancing birds of prey and grouse

Adam Smith reports on a long-term management study

The Langholm Moor Demonstration Project published its final report this month. It highlights the successes and challenges facing managing moorland for game and wildlife conservation. The project was set up in 2008 to test whether a ‘win-win’ could be achieved, where breeding raptors and heather moorland co-existed and benefited from the investment provided by driven grouse shooting.

This final report concludes more than 25 years study at Langholm. The Joint Raptor Study from 1992–1997 had shown how predation by raptors could prevent the recovery of a red grouse population. By the early 2000s, with no grouse to shoot, the gamekeepers were withdrawn and

many aspects of the moor went into decline – valuable habitats shrank in area, the mountain hare population vanished, and the numbers of wading birds and hen harriers had collapsed along with the grouse.

The challenge for the partners in this final project, Buccleuch, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, Natural England, RSPB Scotland, and Scottish Natural Heritage, was to establish whether the moor could be recovered both as a national and local asset, support grouse populations for driven grouse, support birds of prey, and deliver other, wider biodiversity.

Different approaches to management were explored that might benefit not just Langholm but other Scottish moorlands. In GWCT's view, parts of the project have



↑ The moor at Langholm was the site of a long-term management study

certainly been successful – decades of heather loss have been addressed and overgrazed moorland has been recovered. Fox, stoat and crow control helped ground-nesting birds, especially waders, recover their populations despite declines elsewhere. The project has told us more about the economics of maintaining heather moorland, which has long been viewed as a national asset for Scotland.

But, the gamekeeping management that had promoted this reversal of fortune could not be afforded in the longer term. The grouse did not survive long enough to generate enough of an economic return through driven shooting to offset some of the management costs. The project allowed the partners and the

wider public to gain profound, practical insight into what it takes to sustain our moorlands. In order to reach a balance that works for everyone, which this project has not succeeded in doing, the overriding message is that our current policy framework must help managers adapt to the new higher levels of predation in our hills, and it must do this if we want to keep our heather-clad moors.

The GWCT's work over 25 years shows that there is not a binary choice of red grouse or birds of prey, but that both need to be in balance if we value our Scottish moorlands and their ecosystems.

A loss of grouse shooting jeopardises habitats and biodiversity, the very things that many birds of prey, along with many other species, benefit

from. Curtailed grouse shooting will only drive a decline in our moorlands' ability to respond to climate change and continue its resistance to loss of biodiversity. Adapting grouse moor management must now be the watchword.

The final report on the Langholm Project can be downloaded at www.langholmproject.com.

Adam Smith, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust.



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