

Stacking the odds for ground-nesting birds

Management helps provide habitat for many species, says **Dr Adam Smith**



When you consider it, the ground-nesting birds that we love to see in our countryside really do have the odds stacked against them. Many of them have to survive a migration, and then they arrive into our patchy climate, and somewhat patchy habitat. Then, after they lay, their eggs and chicks are vulnerable to a whole range of predators – crows, foxes, stoats, weasels, and rats, to name just a few.

At this time of year, our hills, moorland, farmland and field margins should be alive with a host of different species. For example, waders such as golden plover, lapwing and curlew, passerines such as skylark and meadow pipit, red and black grouse, grey partridge and more.

Seeing and hearing these birds in the spring is all part of our rich rural tapestry. And we are increasingly being encouraged by everyone from government downwards to go out and enjoy the countryside. Many who do will be aware of the guidance to keep dogs on short leads and under close control at this time of the year, to protect ground-nesting birds. This is an important consideration – not just over the uplands, but also for those walking around field margins and grassy strips that are home to the birds, but which may also make convenient walkways or routes from one point to another.

Where farmers and landowners have specifically planted game crops and cover crops, created beetle banks or skylark plots in fields, and whether they are receiving grant funding under 'land management options' to do this, or not, they can perfectly legitimately put up polite signs advising walkers, mountain bikers or horse riders to consider taking an alternative route, or to stay on the path. Some explanation of why is also helpful, if not essential.

Disturbance can also make controlling predators more difficult, and more predation can have an important effect on nesting birds. A number of GWCT studies show that on farmland and moorland where there is active game keeping birds have much better results in terms of breeding success than where there is no or ineffective keeping. You would expect

managed grouse moors to show higher numbers of waders than those that are unmanaged, and this was indeed proved to be the case by The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust's nine year Upland Predation Experiment (UPE) at Otterburn in Northumberland. Here we established that effective predation control, as carried out on grouse moors through reduction of the number of carrion crows and foxes, significantly improved the breeding success of waders. For example, curlew were 3.4 times more likely to fledge young. That's an increase to 51 per cent producing chicks.

Grouse moor management has predator control at its heart and delivers major benefits for maintaining wader populations. This will become increasingly important as land use changes and there is more woodland cover in Scotland.

In 1995 and 1996 a survey was carried out by the RSPB, in collaboration with the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust and grouse moor owners, to conduct breeding bird counts in upland areas where grouse shooting was the dominant land use. 122 properties were visited across Scotland and north and north-east England. This study also showed that golden plover, curlew and lapwing were all much more abundant on grouse moors. Unsurprisingly, there were less crows and more red grouse on managed moors. However these birds are generally more common.

This is not just an upland effect. Research conducted at the GWCT's demonstration farm in Leicestershire showed how some species of birds nesting in hedgerows also bred better where crows were being controlled.

More information about the Game and Wildlife Trust Scottish Demonstration Farm at Auchnerran is available at <https://www.gwct.org.uk/auchnerran/>

● **Dr Adam Smith, Director, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, Scotland**



Love of wild places

Today is John Muir day and 102 years on from the Dunbar conservationist's death, his legacy is in good hands, both in the US and Scotland, writes **Chris Townsend**

Today is John Muir Day, a special day for lovers of nature and wild places. It's now 102 years since Muir died yet his legacy is more important than ever. From the rocky coast at Dunbar where he was born in 1838 and lived until he was eleven to the vast wilderness areas of the US where he spent much of his adult life, Muir was always in touch with the natural world.

In the US he's known as the 'father of National Parks' for his campaigns to protect Yosemite, King's Canyon and other spectacular areas of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. He also founded the Sierra Club, still the US's leading environmental organisation. Here in Scotland the John Muir Trust carries out similar work; we also have John Muir's Birthplace in Dunbar and the increasingly popular John Muir Way across the Central Belt.

Once little known in the country of his birth, Muir becomes more honoured and remembered with every year that passes. Muir was an explorer, mountaineer and naturalist as well as a campaigner. He lived the outdoor life, walking a thousand miles from Indianapolis to the Gulf of Mexico by the 'wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way': climbing many mountains in the High Sierra, often making the first recorded ascents; and showing with his detailed field studies that glaciers had carved the landscape of the Sierra Nevada.

However it's his articles and books that have the most significance, writings that led to the creation of Yosemite National Park in 1890 and which still inspire us today.

Appropriately enough, I first discov-

ered John Muir in the Sierra Nevada when I walked the Pacific Crest Trail many, many years ago when few knew about him in Scotland.

The Pacific Crest Trail runs through the Sierra Nevada and there I walked on the John Muir Trail in the John Muir Wilderness and wondered who this man was who'd given his name to such a beautiful and spectacular place.

Once I found out I began reading his words for myself, starting with *The Mountains of California*, and was impressed with his passionate devotion to wild places and his use of the power of words to praise and defend the places he loved.

Muir was not someone who thought wild places should be solely for the landscape and the plants and animals that lived there. He didn't want to exclude people. Indeed he thought such places were essential for humanity and he encouraged people to visit them.

His books are as much about inspiring people to go and see the wilds as they are about conserving them. He didn't see any conflict between these two, rather he thought it essential they went together.

Two key quotes reveal this. "Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike," he wrote in *The Yosemite*.

And in *Our National Parks*, which was written to encourage visitors, he said: "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and

irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life."

Today as our world shrinks under a burgeoning population and expanding industry, and nature comes under more and more pressure, Muir's words are as important as ever. We are part of nature, whether we realise it or not, and we need nature.

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whether by standing looking or by venturing deep into it, has a powerful and positive effect on our wellbeing.

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When they are asked, visitors to the Highlands generally say that the landscape is the main reason they are there. Nature is important to them even if they never venture far from roads and towns. The huge popularity of nature and

wildlife programmes on television further shows this. Muir would have understood.

This need for nature and wildness means that Muir's words in defence of them are still relevant and should be heeded. They always will be. As he said in a speech 'the battle we have fought, and are still fighting for the forests is a part of the eternal conflict between right and wrong, and

we cannot expect to see the end of it. ... So we must count on watching and striving for these trees, and should always be glad to find anything so surely good and noble to strive for.'

● **To mark John Muir Day this month, Scottish Natural Heritage and partners will be organising a series of events and activities around the John Muir Way from 16-24 April, which you can find about at http://www.visiteastlothian.org/john_muir_day.asp, while the John Muir Trust is offering half price membership to new recruits over the same period.**

Come the election, voices from the countryside need to be heard too

It's not all about land reform and farm payments, writes **Sarah-Jane Laing**

If politics is not your favourite pastime then the spring period is unlikely to be the most enjoyable time to be tuning into TV and radio and reading the first few pages of your newspaper.

A cacophony of voices is attempting to influence voters and politicians ahead of the Scottish parliamentary elections, with the subsequent EU referendum sure to dominate once Holyrood has been elected.

Among the campaign groups looking to make their views known are organisations representing businesses, often expressing how decisions at the ballot box will affect employment in years to come.

Yet whilst it is natural that the stances of the country's largest employers are more likely to dominate the news

pages come election time, the needs of small businesses – and especially those in rural areas – should not get lost in the noise of the political hullabaloo.

Rural news over the last year has been dominated by land reform and the government's failure to implement the new system of payments for farmers. Although these are unquestionably important issues, the headlines do not reflect many of the everyday concerns of our rural communities and businesses.

At a recent rural hustings jointly organised by Scottish Land & Estates and NFU Scotland and supported by a range of rural groups, it was infrastructure, skills and housing that was at the fore of the debate, along with opportunities for young people

more important than ever

there are insufficient opportunities to build a career on their home patch. The importance of stemming this flow of young people from our rural areas – and the help required from decision-makers in order to do that – cannot be underestimated.

Many rural businesses are small-scale enterprises. These small businesses are vital to the sustainability of rural communities. A business in a large city may employ 100 people but if it cannot survive, it is likely that the employees will be able to find another opportunity locally and the wider area will remain largely unaffected by its closure. This is not the case in rural areas.

Our rural businesses can often be low volume - but large impact. They may only employ a handful of peo-

ple but they will help drive economic activity in the area and often support other local businesses. For example, an estate which diversifies into tourism will in turn support local food suppliers, tradesmen and garages. Such businesses, and the communities they support, are not looking to the impending elections as a chance to demand handouts or special treatment. But what is needed is a commitment to introduce enhanced connectivity, whether that be electronically through rural broadband or physically through public transport, to allow existing and new rural enterprises to reach their full potential. More needs to be done to ensure that infrastructure is fit for the 21st century in our countryside, not only our urban locations.

Opportunities are being created for young people across rural areas, but this often takes place with one hand tied behind the back of businesses who want to do more. Scottish Land & Estates has been working with Rural Skills Scotland, Lantra and others to increase routes into further education and skills training for agricultural and land-based industries, including country sports, but widening access to such training needs to be more of a priority for government. It was clear from the hustings that there is a desire to retain young people in rural regions but this has to be converted into a tangible package of actions from the next Scottish Government. The availability of housing is a key part of that package, the Scottish Gov-

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↑ **A visitor peers through the window of the John Muir birthplace in Dunbar**



ernment has recently announced a Rural Housing Fund which will provide £25m over the next three years in order to increase the supply of affordable housing of all tenures in rural Scotland. Such support has to be welcomed but with the nation's 'housing crisis' even more acute in rural areas, the potential of private and community landowners to play a greater role in housing provision should be realised.

Sarah-Jane Laing is Director of Policy & Parliamentary Affairs at Scottish Land & Estates

