

How to protect wildlife in our National Parks?

Description

After the dire debate in the UK parliament about the public petition to ban driven grouse shooting which took place on 31 October <http://markavery.info/2016/11/02/debate-thoughts/>, the debate in the Scottish Parliament on 10th November on the Species Champions initiative (on Scottish Parliament TV ([see here](#))) offered some hope for those who are concerned about nature conservation in our national parks. Under this initiative, from Scottish Environment LINK, MSPs agree to become species champions and speak up for them. They have made some good choices.

Mairi Evans, MSP for Angus North and Mearns, whose constituency covers the South East corner of the Cairngorms National Park has become champion for the Hen Harrier. Here at last is an MSP for a rural constituency who does not appear to be under the control of local landowners: the estates along Glen Esk, which is her area, provide the location for a long list of unsolved wildlife crimes. She was brave enough to say that in the north east of Scotland the numbers of hen harrier have reduced from 28 pairs in 1990 to just one. Her solution to this though is to advocate the SNP Party Line which is there need to be tough new penalties and more resources devoted to preventing wildlife crime. I have to say I find it hard to see this happening, given the poor record of the police in prosecuting wildlife crime added to which are the current cuts in police budgets. I believe that rather than responding to wildlife crime we need to prevent it, which was of course what the petition to ban driven grouse shooting in the UK parliament is all about. The important thing though is Mairi Evans is prepared to speak up for Hen Harriers and I hope this will lead her into considering what the Cairngorms National Park could do to prevent raptor and other persecution.

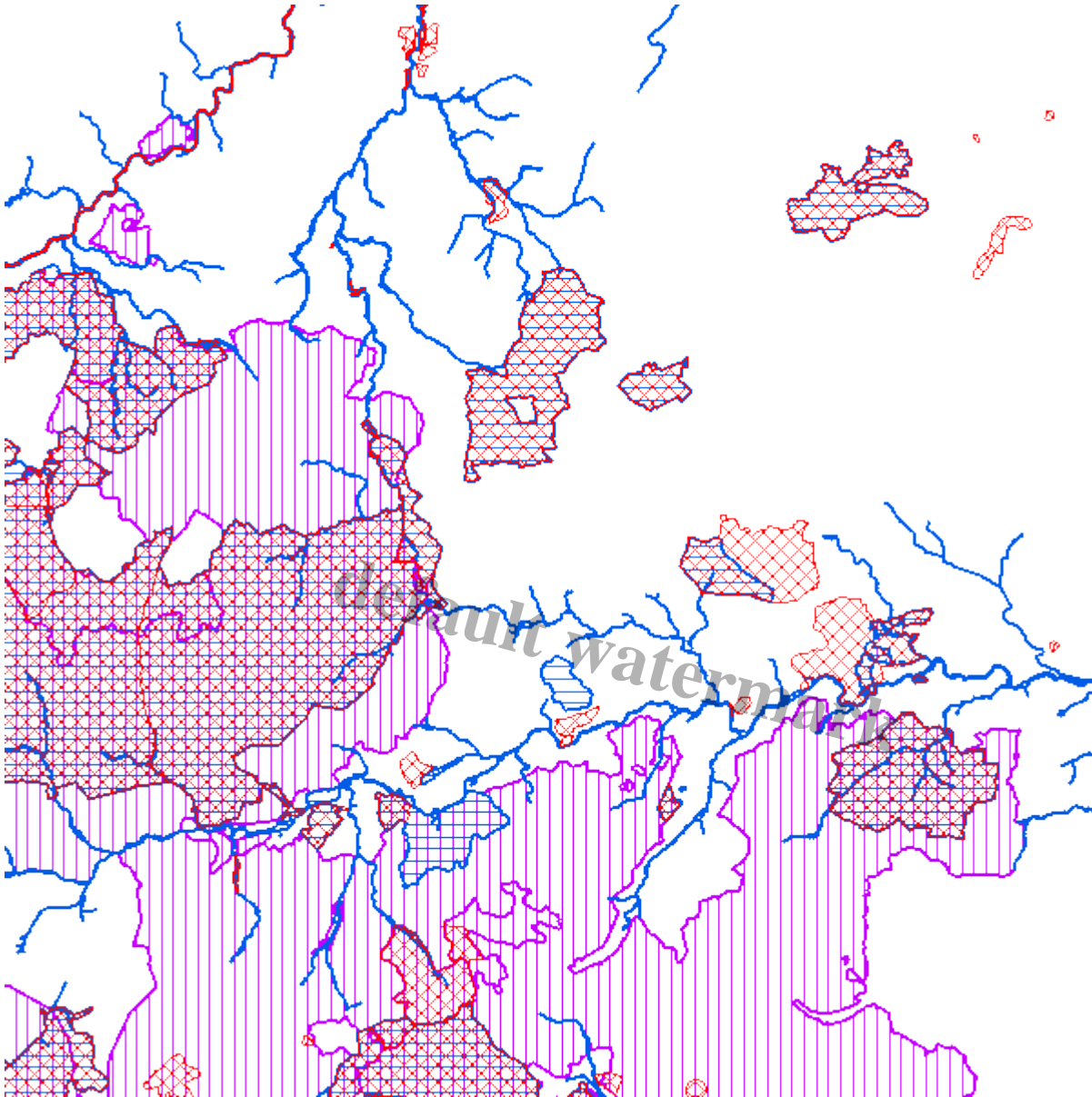
Alison Johnstone, list MSP for Lothian, had adopted the brown hare but spent almost as much time talking about the mountain hare. She explained that estates "cull" mountain hare in a belief, for which there is no evidence, that the ticks they carry affect red grouse numbers and called for an end of "the persecution of one species in favour of another". That phrase is spot on. Our National Parks which have a duty to conserve nature, should be leading on this. Alison Johnstone went one step further and called on the Environment Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, to issue a Nature Conservation Order putting a moratorium on hare culling for the next three years.

Now I appreciate Alison Johnstone was limited by the terms of the debate and could only speak for one species, but any solution to wildlife persecution in our National Parks has to look beyond any single species. This is illustrated by the press release the RSPB issued a day after the debate on their latest eagle survey which had this to say about north east Scotland:

Less than one third of the traditional "home ranges" in this area were occupied by a pair of eagles and no eagles were recorded at all in over 30% of them, despite the fact that these should be very productive landscapes for these birds. Many of the vacant territories in this area are on ground managed intensively for driven grouse shooting and in recent years, four eagles fitted with satellite tags have been found illegally killed in the central and eastern Highlands (4).

So while I support Alison Johnstone's intention, and also those of the RSPB who want to license grouse shooting estates, I think they are too narrow. Our National Park should protect all native species from persecution and I am not sure Nature Conservation Orders can do this.

The first problem is that that Nature Conservation Orders are designed to protect Sites of Special Scientific Interest and European protected sites. They may be used on land adjoining these protected areas or on land which Scottish Ministers think are of special interest because of their natural features. While Scottish Ministers perhaps should be saying the whole of the Cairngorms National Park is important for its natural features, I suspect the civil servants will advise them this would be fraught with difficulty. Part of the reason for this is the lack of designation areas in the eastern half of the National Park (vertical lines Special Protection Area Birds, red crossed hatching SSSIs).



The landowners on the grouse moors have made very sure that their land is not designated or if it is the designated area is as small and limited as possible. In the white area in the map is the Ladder Hills SSSI: hen harrier were one of the reasons why this site was protected in the first place but have now been removed as a qualifying interest because they are no longer found there. The Management Statement for that SSSI notes mountain hares are shot for sport. Not a word about protecting them. The only mention of mountain hares in the Morven SSSI management statement is to say that they graze on the protected vegetation (though it does say sheep are the main problem). The trouble with our system of protected sites is they are all about protecting specific species and habitats which have to meet certain criteria and because of this its likely that any Nature Conservation Order would have to meet those criteria too. A recipe for long wrangling and legal disputes.

Related to this they have usually been used to protect habitats not species. The only example of a Nature Conservation Order that I can find that protects species is one that was issued to prevent wildfowling at Loch of Strathbeg. This does not mean they shouldn't be used to protect species of course but I suspect that unless the species is the primary reason for the protected site, it might legally be hard to justify use of a Nature Conservation Order.

While I believe therefore that we should make far more use of Nature Conservation Orders their numbers have dropped so there are now just a handful in the whole of Scotland I believe a much simpler solution for our National Parks would be for Scottish Ministers to tell the National Park that they should control hunting through the use of byelaws ([see here](#)) and use this to protect all native species in our National Parks. I hope that Mairi Evans, Alison Johnstone and all the other MSPs who spoke so eloquently for our wildlife will start to ask our National Parks to develop mechanisms that ensure no native species is persecuted in favour of another.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. grouse moors
4. Scottish Government
5. wildlife persecution

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