

Mountains hares and the Cairngorms National Park Authority

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LOCAL NEWS

Estates tackling hare-y problem

By GAVIN MUSGROVE

GAMEKEEPERS from the strath are working with scientists to develop the best way to count mountain hares and help safeguard the species.

Managing mountain hare numbers to prevent disease, damage to trees and habitats and to control rising tick numbers has become a controversial issue in the Cairngorms National Park.

Culls of hares - also known as blue hares - have come in for heavy criticisms from conservationists in particular after reports of hundreds of them being shot in March last year alleged on an estate by Corgaff.

The incident sparked calls for greater monitoring of the way the species is managed and their numbers.

Now gamekeepers on Glenloch, Glenlivet and Dorback estates are assisting scientists from the James Hutton Institute on the project to help guide future management.

Also involved in the scheme are Scottish Natural Heritage and Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust.

The three year project aims to assess the most reliable method to monitor population numbers so hares can be managed sustainably.

Mountain hare are notoriously problematic to count and daylight-only surveys often offer a limited indication of actual numbers on the ground.

The estates have been helping project scientists identify and use areas of their heather moorland to enable meaningful data to be collected.

They have also agreed to halt population



PORTRAIT OF A BLUE HARE: culls have led to controversy.

Picture: Scott Newey

management around the study area while surveyors count the same ground both in daytime and at night using thermal cameras, and count dung deposited by hares whilst also trapping hares to be marked and recaptured.

John Conaghan is gamekeeper at Glenloch which has not held hare shoots for six years.

He said: "It's been important for us to work on this project and hopefully it will help inform the public and practitioners on population management.

"As gamekeepers, our aim is to maintain a healthy and sustainable population of many different species.

"If we have an overpopulation of one, like the mountain hare, it can be detrimental.

"Management of mountain hares is

necessary, not only for the benefit of other flora and fauna within the moorland habitat but also for the general health of the species itself.

"Hopefully this project will provide more scientific backing to help land managers direct future management."

Ten estates in total including others in Perthshire, Deeside and Donside.

Mountain hares can be shot for sport and they are also culled as part of the management of grouse moors.

They carry sheep ticks which can infect the game birds with a disease called the louping ill virus.

Scotland has almost all of the British mountain hare population.

They are Britain's only native hare and may have been here since the Ice Age.

A further insight into the failure of the Cairngorms National Park to protect native wildlife was revealed in the article above which appeared in the Strathy last week. There may also be a link between the CNPA's approach to mountain hares and its apparent attempt to silence Councillor Bill Lobban last week ([see here](#)).

While I welcome the fact that the estates involved in the mountain hare counting project have agreed to stop culling mountain hares – (and if Glenloch's claim is true it appears they stopped culling mountain hares while poisoning of buzzards was still happening on their land ([see here](#))) – there is another agenda here which is illustrated by some of the quotes from the piece:

- Glenloch is claiming that overpopulation of mountain hares can be detrimental while at the same time claiming mountain hares are “notoriously difficult” to count, which is why this project is needed. How, one might ask, does any keeper know there is an “overpopulation” of mountain hares if they do not know numbers?
- What is an “overpopulation” of mountain hares – who sets the criteria for this? – and what is the impact of hare numbers on flora and fauna? It is generally accepted that without human intervention, mountain hare numbers rise and fall naturally. If its impact of mountain hares on flora, from so many nibbling mouths, which estates are concerned about, well.....how does this compare to the impact of the muirburn conducted by these same estates on vegetation? We know the main alleged impact on fauna which concerns estates is that Mountain Hares carry the tick which can infect Red Grouse with the louping ill virus and this is what has led to the mountain hares culls. But how will counting mountain hares tell us anything about the levels of transmission of ticks between one species and another? There appears very little rationale to the counting project unless its purpose is to kick any action to protect mountain hares in the National Park into the long grass for a three further years.
- The claim that culling hares is necessary for the “general health of the species itself” seems based in eugenics. While genetic manipulation and selection by humans has been integral to the development of farm crops and animals, applying such thinking to what should be wild is a different matter. Why not let nature sort this out? The claim is complete nonsense anyway. All the photos that have appeared on Raptor Persecution Scotland ([see here](#)) show there is indiscriminate culling of mountain hares. If natural ecosystems were functioning in the Cairngorms no culling would be necessary anyway as there would be eagles and other predators which would live off the mountain hares and control their numbers. The populations of predators would then fluctuate along with the population of their food source. The fact that the impact of predators, or rather their absence, appears to have no role in this study tells you its not about tackling the real issue, wildlife persecution.

While the CNPA has no direct role in the study, to design a study which is to take place in the National Park without considering how it meets the overriding national conservation objectives of the National Park appears to me just wrong, a mis-use of public resources. The CNPA too has claimed it cannot take any action to protect mountain hares until this study is completed. Whatever happened to the precautionary principle, which says you protect nature until you know its safe not to, or the conservation objectives of the National Park?

Our public authorities and research institutions are studying all the wrong things in our National Parks. They should not be funding studies whose main purpose can be to serve the interests of the shooting lobby. What we need from the CNPA is a proper assessment of the wildlife deficit in the Cairngorms – just how many stoats, weasels, hen harriers, golden eagle etc are missing from the the eastern Cairngorms and what is the potential for species like the beaver – and then fund research into alternatives to the current model of sporting estate.

Species champions, in Highland Council and in the National Park

A few years ago Highland Council decided to support its Councillors becoming species champions:

The elected members will be invited to become a species champion. This follows on from the successful initiative that Scottish Environment Link undertook with MSPs. The choice of species will come from a list of over 70. The role of a species champion will be to take an interest in “their” species and act as an advocate for it, highlighting its importance and/ or the issues affecting it in relevant debates or other opportunities that arise.

There are currently at least 27 Species Champions in the Council including such species as harbour porpoise, red kite, strawberry spider. The three Highland Councillors who sit on the Cairngorms National Park Authority Board are all species champions, Dave Fallows for the Capercaillie, Gregor Rimell for the Northern Damsel fly and Bill Lobban..... for the mountain hare! Indeed, Councillor Lobban has spoken out for the Mountain Hare ([see here](#)) unlike the convenor of his planning committee ([see here](#)). Evidence I think that the attempt to silence Councillor Lobban last week on planning issues was part of an attempt to silence one of the few CNPA Board Members prepared to speak out for wildlife.

The ability of the three Highland Councillors to become advocates for wildlife on Highland Council is quite a contrast to what they are allowed to do as CNPA Board Members. When the Cairngorms Nature plan ([see here](#)) was being drawn up, it was suggested that Board Members could become species champions – what an opportunity one might have thought for the National Park? After all

according to the plan, the Cairngorms is home to 1/4 of all rare and endangered species in the UK. The CNPA rejected this proposal. This failure in leadership has had a huge impact. Contrast the attitudes of landowners and local communities in the West Highlands to species like the sea eagle, which they know are fantastic for tourism, and to how the Cairngorms National Park treats its wildlife. A little diversification of the tartan tourism on Deeside which is based on Balmorality to wildlife could do not harm.

What needs to happen

- In the forthcoming Partnership Plan the CNPA could show its commitment to wildlife by encouraging all its members to become species champions and allowing Highland Councillors to play this role both within their own Local Authority and the National Park. The first new species that should be championed is the beaver, with the Board Member advocating for it leading the re-introduction of this species into the National Park
- The forthcoming Partnership Plan needs to include a commitment to put wildlife in the National Park first and stop any species, including the mountain hare, being persecuted for the benefit of shooting interests. That entails developing measures to regulate shooting, trapping and the use of dogs to hunt wildlife in the National Park.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Tourism
4. wildlife persecution

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