



The Moorland Association

Beccy Speight
Chief Executive
The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
The Lodge
Potton Road
Sandy SG19 2DL

8 August 2025

Dear Ms Speight,

RSPB campaign inciting assaults against gamekeepers

I am writing on behalf of the Chairman of the Moorland Association regarding your complaint to him about our comments to BBC News. They were in response to your press release criticising our sector. Our focus was on i) the reliability of your statements and ii) the real-world impact of your repeated verbal attacks on gamekeepers and their families.

Reliability first. There has long been scepticism about RSPB pronouncements with headlines including “RSPB ‘twisted data’ in campaign against grouse shooting”, “RSPB sidestepped law” and “RSPB ‘sits on crimes for publicity’”.^[1] Scientists, judges and the police have all expressed concern.

When the BBC asked us for our views on your press release, we pointed out that your data on bird crime is “unverified”.^[2]

I note that you did not respond to this in your letter. Would journalists be right to assume that there are no independent checks on the data in your so-called ‘Birdcrime Reports’? If these are merely a ragbag of missing bird reports from your activists then it begs the question about how many “crimes” are taking place.

Natural England points out that birds die for many reasons including “predation, starvation, and disease”.^[3] For hen harriers, goshawks are a major predator and juvenile mortality is 40%. If a dead bird had a satellite tag, it would only continue to work if it was facing sunlight. The media has also reported that some birds you claimed were illegally killed turned out to be alive.^[4]

Where there is foul play, official data suggests that your relentless desire to pin the blame on gamekeepers is wide of the mark. The BBC reported that “of only four people convicted for bird crime last year three were falconers and one was an egg collector and none were gamekeepers.”^[5] Furthermore, only 3% of bird crime prosecutions involve gamekeepers.^[6]

Aware of that, you suggest an alternative ‘proof point’ for your hypothesis that gamekeepers should be blamed when birds go missing. Your press release says it typically happens “on or near” grouse moors. The enormous flaw with this argument is that that is where the birds are. Repeated scientific studies have shown vast numbers of red-listed birds live on the million acres our members manage. The research says it is because our keepers are so good at protecting them from predators such as foxes and stoats.^[7]

Moorland Association members are proud to maintain over a million acres of open heather moorland across England and Wales - some of the rarest habitat on earth. Through a combination of innovation and research our members have proven they are best at protecting and maintaining it.



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Are there any scientific studies showing how many birds you have on your 220 reserves? Perhaps you could also let journalists know why you stopped publishing your own bird counts 14 years ago? You are Europe's biggest conservation charity with an income of £170 million secured from donors and taxpayers.[8] What are they getting in return?

And in this might journalists infer a possible motivation for the relentless animus your charity has towards our privately run nature reserves?

For animus it is. In accusing gamekeepers of "illegal killing", your latest press release used the word "crime" seven times and "suspicion" five. Since you took over, the RSPB has committed atrocious slander against all gamekeepers.[9]

Given your access to social and traditional media, your repeated smearing of gamekeepers through dozens of press releases has consequences.

A study by Professor Simon Denny found that there is a physical attack on a gamekeeper on average every 12 days.[10] We also receive regular reports of the children of gamekeepers being bullied at school because of their parent's profession.

Our industry is so concerned about the impact of the RSPB's campaign of vilification that we recently produced this compilation of interviews with gamekeepers:

<https://www.regionalmoorlandgroups.com/news/an-appeal-to-the-rspbs-trustees>

Speech that causes this degree of hatred is hate speech.

You suggested a meeting. If you agree to watch the video and to have gamekeepers attend, we would be willing to meet.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Gilruth

Chief Executive

Moorland Association

agilruth@moorlandassociation.org

CC

- 1) Secretary of State for the Home Department, The Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP
- 2) Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, The Rt Hon Steve Reed OBE MP
- 3) Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, The Rt Hon Lisa Nandy MP
- 4) Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, Baroness Hayman of Ullock
- 5) NPCC National Lead for Wildlife Crime and Rural Affairs, DCC Neil Harrison

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- 6) Chief Constable of Northumbria Police, Venessa Jardine
- 7) Chief Constable of Durham Constabulary, Rachel Bacon
- 8) Chief Constable of North Yorkshire Police, Tim Forber
- 9) Chief Constable of West Yorkshire Police, John Robins QPM DL
- 10) Chief Constable of South Yorkshire Police, Lauren Poultney
- 11) Chief Constable of Cumbria Constabulary, Rob Carden
- 12) Chief Constable of Lancashire Constabulary, Sasha Hatchett
- 13) Chief Constable of Derbyshire Constabulary, Rachel Swann
- 14) Interim Chair of the Charity Commission, Mark Simms, OBE
- 15) Chief Executive of the Charity Commission, David Holdsworth
- 16) Chief Executive of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority, David Butterworth
- 17) Chief Executive of the North York Moors National Park Authority, Tom Hind
- 18) Chief Executive of the Peak District National Park Authority, Phil Mulligan
- 19) Chief Executive of the Northumberland National Park Authority, Tony Gates
- 20) RSPB Chair, Andrew Cahn
- 21) RSPB Trustee, Judith Annett
- 22) RSPB Trustee, Patrick Butcher
- 23) RSPB Trustee, Ben Caldecott
- 24) RSPB Trustee, Robert Cubbage
- 25) RSPB Trustee, Susanna Dinnage
- 26) RSPB Trustee, Catherine Dugmore
- 27) RSPB Trustee, Kerry ten Kate
- 28) RSPB Trustee, Jim Lowther
- 29) RSPB Trustee, John Mason CBE
- 30) RSPB Trustee, Jane Reeves
- 31) RSPB Trustee, Prof William Sutherland

Sources

- [1] RSPB reliability: RSPB “twisted data”: <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/science/article/rspb-twisted-data-in-campaign-against-grouse-shooting-qwhl6wb83> RSPB “sidestepped law”: <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/law/article/rspb-sidestepped-law-says-judge-as-rare-bird-killing-case-collapses-zkmw2p0dv> RSPB “sits on crimes”: <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/crime/article/rspb-sits-on-crimes-for-publicity-zf2l6nf79>
- [2] BBC coverage of RSPB press release mentions “unverified” data concerns: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3vdgkll0ppo>
- [3] Natural England on causes of bird mortality: <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2024/01/30/losses-of-tagged-hen-harriers-higher-than-normal/>
- [4] RSPB embarrassed after rare bird found alive: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/04/rspb-embarrassed-rare-bird-suggested-had-illegally-dispatched/>
- [5] Official data shows no gamekeepers among those convicted of bird crime: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cz6gldye740o>

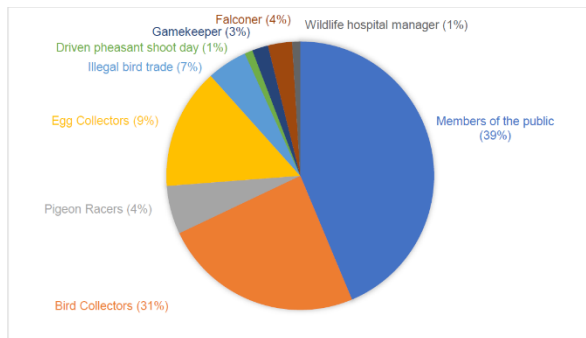
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The Moorland Association

[6] Prosecution data

Appendix 9: Number of individuals successfully prosecuted for wild bird crime in the UK (2016-2020). Source: RSPB Bird Crime Reports 2016-2020



- [7] Latest scientific research on grouse moor productivity: <https://www.moorlandassociation.org/post/curlew-four-times-as-likely-to-fledge-chicks-successfully-on-a-grouse-moor> and <https://www.gwct.org.uk/wildlife/research/birds/raptors/hen-harrier/how-does-grouse-moor-management-affect-the-abundance-and-breeding-success-of-red-grouse-and-hen-harriers/>
- [8] RSPB income £170m includes £16m from government <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/en/charity-search/-/charity-details/207076>
- [9] For instance, the RSPB's Mark Thomas, told the BBC Today Programme that gamekeepers were a “coordinated gang of armed criminals roaming the uplands”: <https://www.c4pmc.co.uk/post/actions-speak-louder-than-words-why-rspb-s-beccy-speight-s-words-ring-hollow>
- [10] Professor Simon Denny's report: See page 9: [https://f20ead8a-2979-4fd6-9990-9784b9a21c0c.usrfiles.com/ugd/f20ead_0fba2e82bc4e45dca6fa9199658fcced.pdf#page=\[3\]](https://f20ead8a-2979-4fd6-9990-9784b9a21c0c.usrfiles.com/ugd/f20ead_0fba2e82bc4e45dca6fa9199658fcced.pdf#page=[3])

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