

## REPORT 5: VERTEBRATE MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL – POLICY POSITION STATEMENT

### 1. Purpose of Report

To formulate a Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA) position statement on the control of vertebrates. This policy covers NNPA owned and managed land, but also on projects that NNPA may be involved with and will be supporting.

### 2. Recommendations

#### **The Authority is recommended to:**

- a. Adopt the position and allow control of the species mentioned below under the circumstances outlined in sections 5 - 7 of the report on NNPA land and support this control on other land in projects or activities that NNPA are involved in.
- b. Publicise this position statement on the NNPA website and use it to respond to enquiries as well as inform practical operations.
- c. Agree to add other vertebrate species to the list in future if they become problematic for native species survival or other reasons in line with National Park purposes.

### 3. Implications

#### **a. Financial – none anticipated**

#### **b. Equalities – none anticipated**

#### **c. Link to Business Plan**

This will contribute to the target: Maintain or increase the number and distribution of curlew.

Delivery of several targets in the Natural Environment vision, particularly:

10. Areas of new native woodland will be planted particularly in areas that expand and join up existing fragments, but not at the expense of other important habitats

49. Monitor change in rare and common species and a programme should be developed together with other agencies and organisations

54. Curlew will be widespread and remain in all the current areas so visitors are able to see a curlew in the spring and summer across the National Park.

55. Red squirrels are found across the National Park in broadleaved and conifer woodlands.

### 4. Background

a. A vertebrate is an animal with a backbone including mammals, fish and birds. Lethal control of these groups can be controversial, but does happen for a variety of reasons depending on whose land it is and who is carrying out the control. Northumberland National Park Authority has lethally controlled species on their land in the past for conservation reasons, but there has never been an overall policy or position statement. Recent events have culminated in the need for a position statement on this topic setting out the reason why control may take place and what alternatives should be considered.

b. Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) all birds are protected and it is a criminal offence to kill one unless a licence has been granted and the killing is in line with the conditions on that licence. In this way some birds have been able to be controlled under several 'General licences'; different licences for pest control and for

conservation reasons. In Feb 2019 there was a challenge to how these general licences were being granted by Natural England. In April 2019 Natural England withdrew the licences and then Defra reissued new versions in June 2019. Defra has issued several general licences of which GL26, GL34, GL36 are probably the most relevant in NNP <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/general-licences-for-wildlife-management> to:

- kill or take carrion crows to prevent serious damage to livestock (GL26)
  - kill or take wild birds to conserve wild birds and to conserve flora and fauna (GL34)
  - kill or take wild birds to prevent serious damage to livestock, foodstuffs for livestock, crops, vegetables, fruit, growing timber, fisheries or inland waters (GL36)
- c. Defra consulted on these general licences; the consultation closed on Dec 5<sup>th</sup> 2019. The six general licences (GL26, GL28, GL31, GL34, GL35 and GL36) licences ran until 29<sup>th</sup> Feb 2020 and were reissued on 12th February 2020 on a temporary basis and some updated in March 2020. These are likely to be reviewed and reissued again.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/general-licences-for-wildlife-management#history>

## **5. Vertebrate Control – NNPA Position**

- a. **Decline in waders.** The UK is the third most important country in the world for breeding Eurasian curlew, having nearly 25% of the global population. Breeding curlew have declined by 48% since 1995 in the UK. In 2008, curlews were listed as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Steep declines have been particularly evident in the UK. Between 1995 and 2012, the breeding populations declined by 61 per cent in Scotland and 30 per cent in England (BTO). NNP and the rest of the Northern Upland Chain Local Nature Partnership (NUCLNP) area is an important breeding location for curlews and other breeding waders in England. It is vitally important for the UK and global survival that these populations are maintained and where possible enhanced.
- b. Habitat improvement can help wader populations and the NNPA has always worked with landowners and managers to give advice and improve conditions for breeding curlew and other waders. This will always be where our efforts are targeted first.
- c. It is generally considered in natural ecosystems that predators do not control prey numbers, rather it is the other way round. When ecosystems have been disrupted or altered (as most in Britain have) generalist predators can in some instances impact on the population of rarer or declining species, particularly when apex predators (top of the food web) are missing. These generalist predators may not have been the cause for the original decline, but once populations have decreased they can impact further on survival rates. Some research (see Background papers) has indicated that predators of ground nesting birds such as curlews, lapwings and other waders do impact on breeding success by preying on eggs and chicks. The research evidence points to foxes and carrion crows being the main predators.

- d. Generalist predators may also be at higher population levels due to other environmental factors in the area such pheasant and partridge rearing (see Background papers).
- e. The NUCLNP board recently discussed the control of foxes and crows to aid wader conservation and agreed the following statement in September 2019:

**POSITION STATEMENT ON VERTEBRATE CONTROL FOR NUCLNP PROJECTS TO CONSERVE CURLEW AND OTHER BREEDING WADING BIRDS**

*The Northern Upland Chain Local Nature Partnership is committed to helping to maintain and increase curlew and other upland breeding wader populations and ranges.*

*We believe that good habitat management is key to the breeding success of these species, and will promote, research and advocate techniques that forward this aim in our own projects.*

*It is accepted that some evidence shows an adverse effect of some generalist predators e.g. fox & carrion crow on wader populations, particularly regarding egg and chick survival. Therefore, in some circumstances, predator control may be necessary. This control may be via non-lethal techniques such as scaring and anti-predator fencing but on other occasions legal lethal techniques may have to be employed at the appropriate geographical scale.*

*The results of all methods will be monitored, evaluated and re-assessed on a regular basis to determine the effect, and discontinued if no longer thought to be effective. Habitat improvements and non-lethal methods will always be key considerations for our own wader conservation projects.*

NNPA officers are on the LNP board, and helped develop the wording and have agreed in principle, but have indicated that the Authority as a whole have not yet agreed a stance. At the moment this control of carrion crows would be under a General licence (GL34) to control for conservation reasons. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wild-birds-licence-to-kill-or-take-for-conservation-purposes-gl34>

- f. **Foxes.** No licence is currently required to kill foxes. Foxes can be legally killed using traps, snares and by shooting, with some caveats. Hunting with dogs is not a legal method of control. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/foxes-moles-and-mink-how-to-protect-your-property-from-damage>
- g. **Stoats and weasels** – A general licence (GL38) was issued on 31st March 2020 to control stoats for the purposes of conservation of vulnerable wild birds <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/stoats-licence-to-trap-them-to-protect-wild-birds-gl38>. There is some published evidence for stoats preying black grouse, but none so far showing their effect on other species and none known for weasel. Lethal control of these species is therefore not advocated at the current time, but may be reviewed.
- h. **Deer.** Roe deer (a native species) can prevent tree and woodland establishment and regeneration, particularly when in high densities. Roe deer do not have any natural predators in Britain and the plantation forests such as Kielder in Northumberland do contain some high densities. Woodland creation will be important in preventing further climate change and mitigating the effects so it is possible that roe deer numbers may have to be controlled in future to assist in this. Fencing and tree tubes can be effective

in some cases but in larger schemes reducing deer numbers is more effective. Fallow deer are none native, but are present in a few places in the NNP and have been lethally controlled by landowners where numbers have risen particularly where they have escaped from deer parks to surrounding land. They are larger than roe deer and can reach over traditional tree tubes and can cause substantial damage to growing trees so lethal control could be permitted where they are causing damage if fencing and larger tubes are not practical.

- i. **Grey squirrels.** Northumberland is still home to native red squirrels and it is generally accepted that introduced grey squirrels compete for resources and carry disease which leads to extinction of red squirrels. The Red Squirrels North East (RSNE) project is monitoring numbers of red and grey squirrels across the north east and is controlling grey squirrels in areas surrounding red squirrel reserves. Currently RSNE rangers and local groups control grey squirrels in Hareshaw dene and in Ryeclose wood; these NNPA owned sites are in the North Tyne in the buffer of the Kielder reserve. This is carried out by trapping and shooting by trained individuals under an agreed methodology and the numbers are recorded.
- j. **Mink.** American mink are an introduced species that originated in fur farms. They have had an impact on native wildlife including water voles and water birds since some were released intentionally or escaped. Mink control currently takes place in many areas around the UK usually by trapping. There are very few records of water voles currently within the NNP boundaries, but there has been an introduction to the west in Kielder forest. Mink monitoring was undertaken here and some mink killed. In the future it may be conceivable that mink control to expand the population of water voles back into the National Park may be required as the 'Restoring Ratty' project is looking to expand east into the Park in the next few years.
- k. **Moles.** Moles are sometimes killed by land managers in the NNP to prevent contamination of hay crops with soil and to prevent damage to cutting machines arising from their molehills. On NNPA sites they have been killed in the past to aid grass cutting of sites, including safety cuts on verges around car parks. The current grass cutting contract contains wording that makes the contractors responsible for flattening molehills and it is anticipated that in most cases this can prevent any lethal control of the species in the future. It may be the case that where numbers and/or activity is high and the site needs cutting for safety reasons moles may need to be lethally controlled but this will be avoided whenever possible. Killing for aesthetic reasons of preventing mole hills on grassland should not be undertaken.
- l. **Rabbits.** Rabbits can cause damage to archaeological monuments and remains by burrowing. They have been controlled on Scheduled Monuments under the management of the NNPA to prevent damage, as part of a repair strategy agreed with Historic England and as a last resort. Non-lethal methods such as fencing around sites and netting under the turf have been used to discourage rabbit burrowing and should be used wherever possible. Only in exceptional circumstances where there is significant damage to assets and other methods have not been effective, is lethal rabbit control advocated.
- m. **Feral Goats.** There are three herds of feral goats in NNP, none on NNPA owned land. Numbers are monitored by the Northumberland goat partnership and an agreed number is maintained to ensure the herds are retained but not so large they cause substantial problems to habitats. Goats damage woodlands by browsing trees and shrubs, particularly newly planted areas. When numbers have risen in the past the goats have been rounded up and some rehomed to prevent lethal control.

Approximately 400 goats from the N Cheviot herd have been rehomed and used for conservation grazing elsewhere in Britain. It is recommended that NNPA staff work with the partnership to continue this approach with the addition of shooting individuals for welfare reasons only.

- n. **Other protected wildlife** – badgers, birds of prey and ravens are protected and lethal control of these any of these species is of course not advocated. Non-lethal methods such as fencing should be used if these species are affecting the conservation status of other species.

## 6. **Future additions**

- a. It is possible that other deer species, such as Muntjac, may become established and removing them may be necessary to protect trees and ground flora.
- b. Other species that impact negatively on species of conservation concern could become established and may be considered for lethal control if other methods are not suitable or effective.

## 7. **Methods**

- a. Where possible considering and using non-lethal methods will be the default position, but it is accepted in many cases this may not be practical.
- b. Methods employed should always be humane and to the most recent agreed legal protocols and best practice. Some species such as grey squirrels and American mink cannot be released once they are trapped (listed on Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as amended) and must be dispatched immediately.
- c. Methods should also be employed that aim not to catch non-target species and allow for them to be released unharmed.

## 8. **Conclusions**

As a general principle when controlling species to assist in the conservation of another species or habitat NNPA will try to use non-lethal methods as the first resort. When this is not possible or practical lethal control may have to take place.

It is recommended that the NNPA adopt the position statement of the NUCLNP and permit control of carrion crows and foxes for wader conservation on their own land. It is also recommended that landowners in the NNP involved in conservation projects can be given assistance or advice to carry out such control under best practice.

If the reissuing of the Defra licences changes the legality of controlling carrion crows (or other species) for conservation this change in legislation will be taken into account.

It is also recommended that grey squirrels, roe/fallow deer, mink, moles and rabbits can be lethally controlled on NNPA land when necessary using legal methods and best practice. In all these cases other non-lethal methods of control or limiting damage should be undertaken where possible first. Members are therefore recommended to agree the position set out in this report.

If in the future there is good evidence that species in addition to those listed above become a threat to other native species or habitats they may be lethally controlled for conservation purposes on NNPA land when other non-lethal methods are not practical.

Members will be aware that there is significant public interest and campaigning in respect of vertebrate control. Officers will have in place measures to effectively communicate the Authority's position and to react to any public enquiries.

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**Background papers available on request:**

- Changes in breeding success and abundance of ground-nesting moorland birds in relation to the experimental deployment of legal predator control. Kathy Fletcher Nicholas J. Aebischer David Baines Robin Foster Andrew N. Hoodless *Journal of Applied Ecology* Volume 47, Issue2 April 2010 Pages 263-272
- The influence of different aspects of grouse moorland management on non-target bird assemblages  
Nick A. Littlewood, Tom H. E. Mason, Martin Hughes, Rob Jaques, Mark J. Whittingham, Stephen G. Willis. *Ecology and Evolution*. 2019;9:11089–11101.
- A review of predation as a limiting factor for bird populations in mesopredator-rich landscapes: a case study of the UK. Staffan Roos, Jennifer Smart, David W. Gibbons and Jeremy D. Wilson. *Biol. Rev.* (2018), pp. 000–000.
- Associations between gamebird releases and generalist predators. Henrietta Pringle Mark Wilson John Calladine Gavin Siriwardena *J of Applied Ecology* Volume 56, Issue 8 August 2019 Pages 2102-2113

Abstract at <https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1365-2664.13451>