Recovering the Eurasian Curlew in the UK and Ireland: a reply

Smith (*Brit. Birds* 115: 53–54) seems to misunderstand the work of Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) and makes unsubstantiated allegations about GWCT and its members. As a research and education charity, GWCT aims to produce scientific evidence that leads to effective wildlife conservation policies and informs best practice, for the public good. We believe that the hallmark of good game management is a net conservation gain. We have published peer-reviewed science indicating both negative and positive effects of gamebird releasing (Sage *et al.* 2020), followed by principles of sustainable game management and best-practice guidelines to promote high standards within the shooting community (www.gwct.org.uk/media/1148874/principles.pdf; www.gwct.org.uk/media/208606/Sustainable-gamebird-releasing.pdf). By being part of a group, such as the UK and Ireland Curlew Action Group, we bring expertise on gamebird and predator management, which can help in formulating workable solutions to issues and increase buy-in from practitioners. To suggest that GWCT could veto RSPB on its own policy is insulting to both organisations.

I share Smith's concerns around the decline of the Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*, high predation rates of nests and chicks, and the current scale of the release of Common Pheasants *Phasianus colchicus* and Red-legged Partridges *Alectoris rufa*. So do many GWCT members, and Smith is wrong to generalise about their motivations. Many, but not all, GWCT members shoot and, while some run released-gamebird shoots, some are focused on the recovery of wild gamebirds and some maintain upland moors that are among the remaining strongholds for Curlews in Britain.

Smith is correct that we must address the causes of Curlew declines, but we must have conclusive evidence about those causes – and confidence about which measures are likely to be effective in what circumstances – if we are to convince policy-makers and practitioners to implement change at sufficient scale. Harris (2021) is the main source for Smith in his assessment of the relationship between Red Foxes *Vulpes vulpes* and gamebirds, but this source is not an unbiased scientific review of the literature, has not been peer-reviewed and does not prove cause and effect. It provides calculations about the relationships between releasing and Foxes that are based on misrepresenting key literature sources (bit.ly/link). We need good empirical data on the interaction between Foxes, gamebird releases, Fox control on shoots and predation of ground-nesting birds in different landscapes.

While it seems biologically plausible that gamebird releases support higher densities of generalist predators including Foxes, Carrion Crows *Corvus corone*, Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo* and Red Kites *Milvus milvus*, which could increase predation pressure on ground-nesting birds in spring, cessation or curtailment of releasing alone will not necessarily reduce predation rates sufficiently for sustainable levels of Curlew productivity. Britain is unique in releasing gamebirds in far higher numbers than elsewhere in Europe, but the breeding success of Curlews has been declining and is too low for population stability throughout Europe too (Roodbergen *et al.* 2012), suggesting that other factors are also important. In Ireland, Grant *et al.* (1999) recorded high predation rates of Curlew nests and chicks in the mid 1990s and, despite low gamebird abundance compared with England (Balmer *et al.* 2013), the Curlew is now also at risk of extinction there. Substantial changes in agricultural practices in Ireland have undoubtedly resulted in habitat loss and degradation (Environmental Pillar 2016; Gladkova 2020) but may also have created landscapes more suitable for generalist predators. Increasing chick survival will be essential for successful Curlew population recovery and this is likely to require a combination of improved chick-rearing habitat and food availability as well as fewer predators. In studies of Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* in England and Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa* in the Netherlands, predation by Foxes, raptors and corvids

was the main cause of chick death, but the interaction between food availability for chicks and predation was important in determining breeding success (Schekkerman *et al.* 2009; Hoodless & MacDonald 2014). Douglas *et al.* (2021) are correct to suggest that causes of Curlew declines are complex and not easily remedied.

Urgent action is needed to help Curlews, but we must be confident it will make a difference. We know enough to trial solutions and must invest in doing so. Where land managers have a choice about which practices to implement, we must engage them in discussion about issues and workable changes so that they are fully committed to implementing complete packages of measures over the long as well as the short term.

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Recovering the Eurasian Curlew in the UK and Ireland

It is encouraging to have a reply from the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) to correspondence on this issue (Andrew Hoodless British Birds 115.February 2022 108-109). However, if Hoodless and "many GWCT members" share my concerns about "the high predation rates of [Curlew] nests and chicks, and the current scale of the release of Common Pheasants *Phasianus colchicus* and Red-legged Partridges *Alectoris rufa*", why has GWCT not endorsed the RSPB's policy, "to see a significant reduction in the numbers of non-native pheasants and red-legged partridges, currently millions, released into the countryside each year as there is growing evidence of environmental harm", and implementation of a plan to reduce releases, with shooting organisations working with the public authorities and the RSPB, within 18 months (of November 2020). This policy followed an evidence review by the RSPB Centre for Conservation Science, which showed a clear trend of intensification of gamebird releases, and "growing evidence of negative ecological impacts, as well as unknown (but potentially significant) consequences on other biodiversity such as from increased generalist predator population effects". Presumably the reason is because not enough GWCT members, or Trustees, actually share Hoodless's concern, or care enough to do anything about it.. And if GWCT is not responsible for the UK and Ireland Curlew Action Group (CAG) not endorsing the RSPB's policy, then who is? If GWCT can break ranks, and express the views of a single CAG member, when are we going to hear from RSPB about the progress they have made in securing voluntary agreement to the proposed plan, or starting a campaign for regulation. They've only got 4 of the 18 months left.

BB readers need to look carefully at the GWCT website, and their Annual Reviews, and draw their own conclusions as to whether I've misrepresented the organisation and what it does and stands for. Much of the scientific work that GWCT does is undoubtedly of high standard, but I reiterate my previous comment on GWCT's stated aims: "We use science to promote game and wildlife management as an essential part of nature conservation." (i.e., we use science to prove what we already believe in, which is hardly the basis for objective scientific research). It is bizarre to promote "wildlife management" to mitigate the effect of the actions of many of the organisation's own members. And there is still no answer to the question of how many GWCT members and Trustees have a financial interest from their own shoots in maintaining an irresponsible level of gamebird release.

Hoodless makes a number of unsubstantiated derogatory comments about Prof Harris, which is surprising as a number of his papers are quoted as source material on GWCTs own website. However, he does not say that the conclusion I quoted verbatim ("the number of Foxes supported by predating and/or scavenging non-native gamebirds has increased 10-fold since the turn of the century") is incorrect. Indeed, there is ample justification for this conclusion on other parts of the GWCT website: the increase in the fox population index in England 1960 – 2009 has been about 350% (i.e. over the same period that the big increase in Pheasant releases occurred). With careful understatement, this website article comments that "The

widespread rearing and releasing of gamebirds has probably improved fox food supply in autumn and winter" (www.gwct.org.uk/research/long-term-monitoring/national-gamebag-census/mammal-bags-comprehensive-overviews/fox/). Unfortunately, unlike Harris's paper, GWCT has not quantified the benefit to foxes of gamebird release. It does, however make a parallel case for the impact of foxes on pheasants in the breeding season. The Annual Review for 2017 provides an overview of "Non-shooting losses of released Pheasants", and concludes that "the fox is the main predator of Pheasants in the UK".

Hoodless refers to GWCT's "The principles of sustainable game management", the first of which, "Biodiversity" states "All shoots . . . should strive to achieve a net biodiversity gain on their land" (my emphasis). The whole point about the pheasant release debate is that many of the pheasants don't stay on the land of the shoot that releases them, and the foxes that are sustained by the releases also disperse. The shoots thereby cause biodiversity loss across the whole landscape, not the relatively small part occupied by the shoots, and no amount of "biodiversity gain" on shoot land can compensate for the local extinction of "the most pressing bird conservation priority in the UK".

And I object to Hoodless adopting the cheap debating tactic of misrepresenting my views, and then disagreeing with his aunt sally. Curlew has been declining in the UK since the mid-1970s (bto.org/birdtrends/species.jsp?&s=curle), long before gamebird release became the major problem, driven largely by land drainage, the switch from hay to silage crops, and other aspects of grassland management. When the impact of predation as a result of gamebird release is halted, we will still need to reverse the impact of grassland mismanagement. However, achieving that will take many years, and before these habitat changes can have any effect, Curlew will have become extinct in the whole of the southern half of England as a result of predation. That's why we need to deal with excessive gamebird release first, and urgently. Yes, reducing all gamebird releases to the number actually shot now might not be enough to stop a further decline in Curlew numbers, but we need to try it, and then see if further measures are needed. We don't have many years left!!!

The SOS Save our Curlews campaign has carried out nest protection and radio-tracking chicks for three of the last four years, and got a similar result each time. In 2021, 21 chicks were tracked, one fledged and the other 20 were predated, and lived an average of only 5.65 days, rather than the 32-38 they need to fledge. We are going to carry out similar work in 2022, and we expect the same result. CAG chose not to respond to my follow-up letter in BB 115: 53-54 January 2022, which objected to a lack of action proposed in either CAG's original paper, or in their response to my first letter. It would be a disgrace if SOS reports on the results of project work in 2022, and we find that CAG has still done nothing more than say how difficult it all is. And it should be noted that Hoodless's letter too contains no proposed action to reduce predation levels.

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