



## 2020 – The Challenges We Met

*GCUSA Advisor and former GWCT Chairman Ian Cogbill explains the current political terrain.*

Never has the truth of the old Chinese curse, “May you live in interesting times”, been demonstrated with such force. The last twelve months has been “interesting” enough to last a lifetime.

The opponents to our approach to conservation have been very busy, and as I know that some of you are concerned about what is occurring, I thought it might be an opportune time to provide an update. In the unlikely event that any of you have a nervous disposition, let me say in advance that those of us who espouse common sense have prevailed in every battle, the ship is steady and on an even keel, and game shooting is alive and well and likely to remain so. The challenges that we have encountered most recently relate to 1) predator control, 2) the release of raised pheasants and partridges, and 3) rotational cool burning on heather moorland, issues which I will address in order.

### **Predator Control**

A U.K. “celebrity” named Chris Packham, who is very anti-shooting, founded a supposedly cloud-funded organisation called Wildjustice, with the intention of using the courts and a practice known as “Judicial Review” to pursue his organisation’s agenda. This process allows organisations or individuals to challenge in court any decision made by government in any of its forms. Annoyingly, a decision in the European Court limits in the case of environmental matters, liability for costs to a maximum of £10,000, so there is little financial risk in taking the court route, which costs everyone else involved huge sums of money.

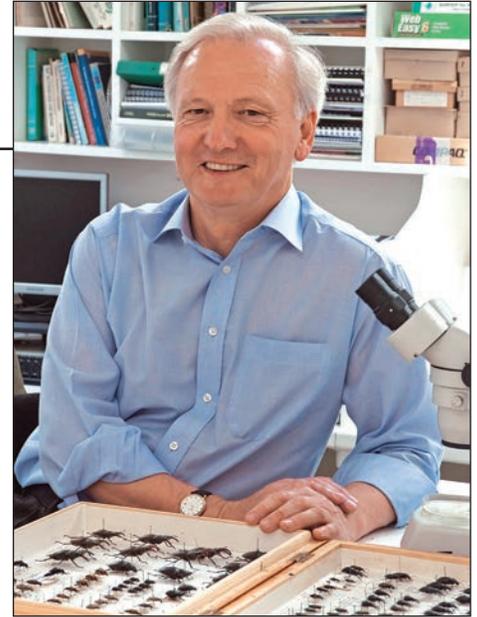
Wildjustice used this approach to challenge the issuance of what are known as General Licences, which permit and govern a) the control of common nuisance birds, such as pigeons, crows and magpies in England and Wales, and b) the

release of pheasants and partridges within 5 km of certain natural sites protected under a European designation. This involved the relevant government agencies in an enormous amount of cost and trouble.

Wildjustice lost or withdrew from all these cases prior to trial and it is fair to say that without GWCT and the research that GCUSA has helped to fund for the past 35 years, this would not have been the case. However, the entire process has made the state regulators ever more risk averse, which has resulted in making the lives of grouse moor keepers more complex and wearisome, with more paperwork and more restraints on predator control, though not enough to prevent them from producing healthy populations of grouse and other ground nesting birds. Evidence generated by GWCT was critical to keeping effective predator control as a tool in the shoot manager’s kit box.

### **Releasing Raised Birds**

The second challenge was based on the claim that European legislation required anyone releasing game within 5km of a locations designated under the EU Habitats Directive as either a Special Protection Area (SPA) or a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) to obtain prior consent from the state regulator, on the grounds that the released birds might damage the site, not withstanding that it is already necessary to have permission to release birds on such a site. Wildjustice withdrew the challenge before trial and had to pay their own costs. The only change that resulted is that consent will be needed within 500m of a SPA or SAC, something that is perfectly manageable, and more annoying than a real problem. Again, without GWCT science the outcome would have been far worse.



*Ian Cogbill, copyright Hugh Nutt*

### **Rotational Cool Burning of Heather**

Heather burning is the most recent and high stakes confrontation. The issues surrounding heather burning, though complex, provide insight into the world in which GWCT has to operate and the tactics used by ostensibly respectable organisations to get their way.

The wide-open and heather-clad landscape of our grouse moors is not entirely natural. It has been kept in a state similar to its present one by a combination of rotational burning, grazing and the various activities of commoners, which have persisted for centuries. This is not a primeval landscape, but it is an ancient one, and in the most profound sense, a cultural one. It has seen changes over the centuries, though it remains largely unchanged. The ancient Britons or the Celtic Tribes tried to farm it before the Romans came. The Saxons hunted on it and grazed their stock there. The great monastic houses that moved in after Norman Conquest, sent lay brothers from the abbey up on to the moors to tend the sheep whose fleeces enriched the church. All of the graziers, Saxon, Norman, Plantagenet, Tudor, up to the present, refreshed the pasture, and rejuvenated the

moor, by periodically burning the old vegetation. Ever since the land proved impossible to farm over two thousand years ago, these moors have been managed with fire.

It is important to bear in mind, that the fact that these habitats are not entirely as nature left them when the ice sheets rolled back, does not render them artificial and worthless. A grouse moor is no less natural than a hay meadow, a reed bed, or coppiced woodland. All these habitats are valuable and would disappear without management. It is, in part, the consequences of their history that makes the moors so beautiful and timeless. Centuries of management, coupled with the obstacles to cultivation of climate and soil, are the reasons they exist at all.

The tradition of burning has continued, but its nature has changed. Gone are the old shepherds' big, hot fires that cleared out half a parish. They have been replaced by lots of little 'cool burns', scattered seemingly haphazardly across the moor. They are set by keepers not only to renew the life of the moor, just as the shepherds intended, but also to create a mosaic of different aged plant communities, ideal for the reproductive needs of red grouse and many other species that thrive on the moor.

Until very recently everyone acknowledged this system as entirely beneficial. Both grouse moor managers and many conservation bodies who owned or managed moorland happily carried out what is called 'rotational burning', although some now find this difficult to recall. In fact, government grants were likely to be withheld if moorland wasn't burnt regularly enough. Even now, the moors of Exmoor, Dartmoor and the New Forest, where there are neither grouse nor grouse shooting, are rotationally burnt, appar-

ently without exciting any adverse comment.

Within the last few years all that has changed, at least as far as grouse moors are concerned. The concerns about global warming and the consequent changes to the world's climate have brought carbon issues up the agenda. This is especially important, as millions of tons of carbon are stored below the surface as peat, and everyone is in agreement that it would be a good idea to ensure it stays there.

However, grouse moor managers are now the target of criticism on the basis that their traditional methods of cool burning small pieces of the moor to maintain a mosaic sward of relatively short vegetation, is not the best way of sequestering the carbon. The science backing this criticism was at best equivocal, and quite possibly misleading. But this did not stop those opposed to grouse shooting from launching a massive campaign to get rotational burning banned. The GWCT, in partnership with other organisations, reviewed all the available science and produced a detailed synthesis of the available knowledge to inform the final ministerial decision.

One of the key issues is that of wildfire. Moorlands are naturally combustible landscapes. The vegetation is capable of recovering quickly from the small cool burns set by game keepers in the winter and early spring burning season, and, most importantly such burns ensure that the underlying peat does not catch fire. Wildfires are very different. They occur when the weather is hot and dry in late spring and summer and burn in a way that frequently sets the underlying peat on fire, launching thousands of tons of carbon into the atmosphere.

GWCT demonstrated that if releasing carbon is the issue (and it is), eliminating cool burns to obtain marginal increases in

sequestration greatly raises the risk of igniting vast stores of carbon. This position was assisted by the fact that organisations such as Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds (RSPB) and the National Trust, who had stopped rotational burning, suffered catastrophic wildfires in the dry springs of 2019 and 2020, when their moors burned for weeks, emitting hundreds of thousands of tons of carbon and losing peat depth that will take hundreds of years to replace.

GWCT was also able to show that sphagnum moss - a key element in peat formation - was more abundant on rotationally burnt ground than where no burning took place, and finally, that many rare birds, other than grouse, needed the vegetation mosaic created by keepers burns, if they were to breed successfully.

The Secretary of State has just announced that rotational burning will be banned on peat deeper than 40cm in certain areas designated as protected sites. But, crucially, there will be exceptions for wildfire mitigation, conservation, and where the ground is too steep, rocky or inaccessible to cut the vegetation. This is again a far, far better outcome than we could have ever hoped for without the hard work of GWCT and its partners.

To sum up, game shooting has been attacked on several fronts but is still standing and in good heart. There is no reason to fear that you will notice any particular difference when the pestilence is behind us and you are able to return to renew old friendships and enjoy the peerless sport the UK has to offer. In the meantime, as a supporter of the Game Conservancy, you should take pride in the contributions that have helped GWCT play its part in winning these battles to preserve the things we all love.

*Thank you, and Stay Safe. Ian Coghill*

