

Battle for the uplands

The cessation of grouse-moor management will end a way of life – and perhaps call time for a number of our iconic species, too

WRITTEN BY IAN COGHILL



Why is the black grouse doing so badly on the Lake Vyrnwy reserve that the RSPB has managed for decades with millions of public money?



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here is a battle raging for the future of our uplands. On the one hand you have the people who own large parts of them, who live and work there and have created what seems to them, and to the millions who visit the moors every year, to be rare and wonderful landscapes. On the other, there is an alliance of NGOs, activists, civil servants and politicians who have theories about everything and experience of little but who are united in the view that they can change these benighted wastelands into a new Eden if only the stupid locals would get out of the way.

The common ground, which existed a few years ago, has almost gone. Where grouse moors are concerned, it has more or less disappeared completely. This is an unmitigated

tragedy. We sit on the brink of a catastrophe and the end of a way of life and a system of land management that has existed for the general good for centuries, and yet those who seek to drive change seem prepared to go to any lengths to avoid and demonise the people who own and work the land.

The uplands have always been a special case. Perhaps, because they look wild and uncultivated, they are seen and treated differently from the rest of rural Britain. Perhaps, because they are sparsely populated, with people who, in the main, are more given to thinking than shouting, they are treated as though they have no communities. Whatever the reason, the effects are clear and getting clearer. Governments and, to an even greater extent, government agencies, encouraged by NGOs and special interest groups, are intent on taking charge

Above: despite millions in funding, bird life has continued to decline on the RSPB-managed Vyrnwy moorlands. Above, right: a BTO survey demonstrates that species such as merlins do better on Peak District moors managed for grouse

and sweeping away the old ways to force the recalcitrant inhabitants to conform to a new dogma or, if they can't, get out.

A key player in this battle is the RSPB, one of the richest and most powerful organisations in the worldwide conservation industry. It is telling anyone who will listen that the way in which grouse moors are run is a disaster and that they, the RSPB, know a better way. I was present when the charity's head of global conservation launched its 'Rethinking Grouse Moor Management' document in Parliament last year. I was struck by the assured way in which someone who has never been shooting and has not the least interest in it, could tell those who have how they should do it. That this would be akin to me telling the Liverpool first team how to win more games clearly bothered him not a jot.

“ We sit on the brink of a catastrophe and the end of a way of life ”



The debate on how our heather moorlands should be managed is bedevilled by theory but not in the usual way. The critics of grouse-moor management are strangely content that their plans have the appearance of being largely theoretical. Do this and we think this will happen. Give us this money and we will do this and see what happens in 20 years.

The reason for this is not hard to find. There is absolutely no need to theorise or speculate. The national decline of heather moorland in the past 70 years means that virtually every alternative use and management system already exists, hidden in plain sight. The current list of potential options can be experienced and evaluated. We can see what happens when grouse shooting ends and the keepers are made redundant.

We can start with using the moors to plant trees, once again a fashionable activity, especially with virtue-signalling politicians. The Southern Cheviots, the subject of a huge afforestation programme, provide a perfect example. The hills were drained, because trees won't grow in a bog, and millions of

non-native conifers were planted. As they grew, the trees continued the process of drying the peat, sucking the precious moisture up with their roots. When the forest canopy closed, the sunlight, that the peat-forming mosses need to function, disappeared and the process of carbon capture that had operated for millennia ended, probably forever.

This was not the only impact. For a few years there was a boost in numbers of some species; short-eared owls and hen harriers prospered briefly, thanks to a temporary increase in vole numbers, and black grouse often do well in young plantations, but these few good things came to an abrupt end when, after 15 years or so, the forest canopy closed. This saw the finale of the extinction of an entire ecosystem that, having survived since time out of mind, was expunged in a decade and a half. The losses were almost too great to comprehend: 1,750 pairs of curlew; 1,200 pairs of golden plover; 200 pairs of dunlin; 25 pairs of merlin; 11,600 pairs of red grouse; all the larks, meadow pipits, ring ouzels, and on and on. But they were only

the obvious ones. Along with them went the rare and rich mix of vegetation and the invertebrate communities that relied on the heather-dominated moorland with its multiplicity of micro habitats, interlinked, always subtly changing, always different but always the same.

Next, the Peak District, singled out for criticism by the chairman of the RSPB as an area where the continuation of grouse shooting was, "one of the main reasons for the decline of wildlife in the Uplands". This statement has since been shown to be wrong, by a survey conducted by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). This makes it clear that many of the relevant species are doing better on the grouse moors of the Peak District than elsewhere.

The curlew is an interesting and important example, a species in steep and worrying decline. There are probably less than 250 pairs attempting to breed in the south of England, the last remnants of a population measured in thousands a few decades ago. The species became extinct as a breeding →

bird on Dartmoor, where the RSPB chairman lives, only this year.

Happily, the Peak District has a different story to tell. In 1990, the BTO count gave an estimated breeding population of 382 pairs; by 2018, this had risen to an estimated 1,346, an increase of 350%. Extinction on the moorlands where the RSPB chairman lives, hundreds of miles from a grouse moor, contrasts starkly with a 350% increase where he claims the grouse moors are, 'one of the main reasons for the decline of wildlife in the Uplands'.

Other species increasing in the Peak District, according to the BTO survey, include lapwing, golden plover, snipe, ravens, buzzards, peregrines and kestrels. Add to this the fact that the Peak District contains nationally important populations of short-eared owls and merlins, 1% to 2% of the nation's ring ouzels and, for the past two summers, breeding hen harriers, and you may see why some of those responsible for this success

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are concerned that the chairman's remarks may be more to do with a personal animosity towards shooting than science or reality.

This is especially the case when one considers that not everywhere in the area has been as successful as the reviled grouse moors. The Peak District National Parks Authority (PDNPA) acquired the Warslow Moors Estate in 1986; prior to that, the estate had included a successful grouse shoot and was renowned for its large populations of breeding waders. In 1985, before Warslow was acquired by the PDNPA, the North Staffs Moorland pair count was: snipe 654, curlew 421, lapwing 306, golden plover 12. By 2005, with the keepers redundant and the grouse-moor management finished, they were snipe 25, curlew 26, lapwing 24 and golden plover two. In 2017, faced with the risk of local extinction of these species, predator control was restarted, albeit in a limited way. Thirty years too late but let us hope it works.

Finally, Lake Vyrnwy, the RSPB flagship Welsh reserve. This has been under the management of RSPB on behalf of its owners, Severn Trent Water, for decades. The estate is huge and was, prior to RSPB taking control, one of the largest grouse moors in Wales. Not only has RSPB had the time and opportunity to demonstrate how an ex-grouse moor should be run, it has had



the resources. During its tenure, it has had millions of pounds from the Welsh Government, from Europe and through grant regimes, such as the plastic bag levy and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), not to mention core funding of more than £120m a year.

The RSPB is strangely opaque when it comes to the evaluation of the success of its reserve management in its public pronouncements but occasionally the veil will slip. In the important case of the success, or otherwise, of its stewardship of the Vyrnwy moors, such a slip has occurred with its application for £3,299,900 to the HLF. This contains the following clear and unequivocal statement: "Without the serious interventions RSPB is proposing in this bid, in the next few years curlew, black grouse and merlin will cease to appear as a breeding species in this area of Wales. It is likely that the same fate would fall red grouse and hen harrier within the next decade."

The application goes on to make clear that the £3,299,900 is not all that RSPB deems necessary to stop these species becoming extinct on its watch. This vast sum is intended to trigger matched funding from Welsh Government, Severn Trent Water, United Utilities, Powys County Council and Visit Wales.

Just to be clear, RSPB has had control of this huge grouse moor for decades, during

**Top: planting conifers on moorland can dry the land and block light, destroying ecosystems beneath
Above: snipe, too, are increasing in the Peak District**

which time it has received millions of pounds from the Welsh Government and grant-giving bodies to facilitate its conservation work. At the end of that time the RSPB is clear that the land it controls is in a parlous state and that the bird assemblages it set out to protect are on the verge of extinction and will disappear unless its palpable failure is reinforced by eye-watering amounts of public money and, even then, it is giving no guarantees.

It is surely beyond parody that those responsible for this catastrophe presume to lecture others on how to manage their land. The RSPB's head of global conservation, who launched 'Rethinking Grouse Moor Management', knew perfectly well as he addressed the politicians and civil servants that the grouse moor he managed was an example of abject failure. It apparently bothered him not at all, that in that room were people who can see more curlew from their kitchen window than are on the whole of the vast expanse of Vyrnwy.

Some may think this is shameful. I think it is both typical and sad. ■

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