Birdcrime 2019

Exposing bird of prey persecution in the UK

Birdcrime is the UK's only report summarising known offences against birds of prey. This report covers confirmed incidents from 2019 as collated by the RSPB's Investigations Unit.

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Self-regulation has failed

Shot. Trapped. Poisoned. This is the sad fate of many birds of prey in the UK, particularly in upland areas. RSPB figures, population studies and the government's own research agree that the problem is more concentrated in areas where land is managed for driven grouse shooting.

Killing birds of prey is a criminal offence. Yet in 2019 there were **85 confirmed incidents*** of bird of prey persecution. You can read the breakdown of these figures in the **Appendices**. Victims included buzzards, red kites, peregrines, goshawks, hen harriers and many other protected species. These are only the incidents we know about: more birds will certainly have been killed and not found, or their deaths not reported.

> In 2019 there were 85 confirmed incidents of bird of prey persecution.

This is unacceptable. Now is the time for action.

For ten years, tackling raptor persecution has been a Wildlife Crime Priority in the UK. But since then little has changed, and hundreds of birds have paid the price. The shooting community has had decades to put their house in order, but self-regulation has failed. Where next?

This year, during COVID-19 lockdown, many of us turned to nature for solace. Yet others took it as an opportunity to ramp up their efforts to kill birds of prey without fear of being caught. The RSPB Investigations Team experienced its busiest ever spring, assisting numerous police investigations into bird of prey persecution, many of which were related to land used for shooting.

Facts are facts. Crime is crime. And we are calling time on criminals who wilfully destroy our national wildlife for their own gain.

What's more, public outrage is growing and the shooting industry risks its own future if these crimes continue.

As we look to a new decade, and rebuild our post-COVID-19 world, it's time for UK governments to wake up the public mood and implement urgent action to protect our birds of prey for generations to come. Nature needs us now more than ever.

Mark Thomas
RSPB Head of Investigations UK

*Note that data delays from various sources due to COVID-19 are likely to result in further incidents or details being added retrospectively.

Why are people killing birds of prey?

Birds of prey are protected by law under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Yet they continue to be targeted, often in connection with grouse moor management.

Driven grouse shooting involves red grouse being "driven" by beaters towards a line of waiting guns, concealed in grouse butts. In order to manage these estates to support the largest possible number of red grouse, some gamekeepers kill protected birds of prey – and other predators – on the basis that they may reduce the number of grouse available to be shot.

It is clear that the law provides little deterrent, and that the systematic eradication of predators has become commonplace on some moors.

Despite assurances from shooting organisations that they oppose raptor persecution, we have seen no evidence of meaningful attempts to remove this criminal activity from their industry. Instead, they routinely deny such crimes are even occurring.

2019 in numbers

In 2019, there were 85 confirmed raptor persecution incidents and one conviction, a Scottish gamekeeper.

Since 1990, two-thirds of those convicted of raptor persecution related offences have been **gamekeepers.**

BUZZARDS	RED KITES	PEREGRINES	SPARROWHAWKS	GOSHAWKS	BARN OWLS	HEN HARRIERS	GOLDEN EAGLE	MARSH HARRIER	MERLIN	KESTREL	TAWNY OWL
32	21	7	6	4	3	2	1	1	1	1	1

2019 case studies

Golden eagle trapped

This appalling photograph, taken by a member of the public on a grouse moor in the Cairngorms National Park in 2019, shows a young golden eagle flying with a metal spring trap attached to its leg. Head of Investigations Scotland Ian Thomson commented: "There is no way a bird of prey could become caught in a legally set trap. This is certainly a result of criminality."

Police Scotland appealed for information but no leads could be established. It's certain this bird won't have survived.

Keeper's "campaign of deliberate criminality"

Convictions for bird of prey persecution offences are rare, and jail sentences rarer still. In 30 years, **from 181 convictions,** only six people have received jail sentences, however five of these were suspended.

In 2019, Scottish Borders gamekeeper Allan Wilson pleaded guilty to a catalogue of crimes including shooting and trapping badgers, an otter, goshawks and buzzards, possessing a banned poison and installing 23 illegal snares on a Scottish shooting estate. He was sentenced to carry out 225 hours unpaid community work and given a Restriction of Liberty Order: a disappointingly lenient outcome.

A member of the Scottish Gamekeepers' Association, Wilson was fined previously, in a linked case, for mistreatment of an eagle owl.

Sheriff Peter Paterson commented that the catalogue of offences did merit a jail term, but he could not impose one due to guidelines against short sentences. Following the case, Sara Shaw, head of the Crown Office Wildlife and Environmental Crime Unit, commented that Wilson's actions amounted to a "campaign of deliberate criminality" and that he had shown "an utter disregard for wildlife laws".

Buzzard poisoned in raptor crime blackspot

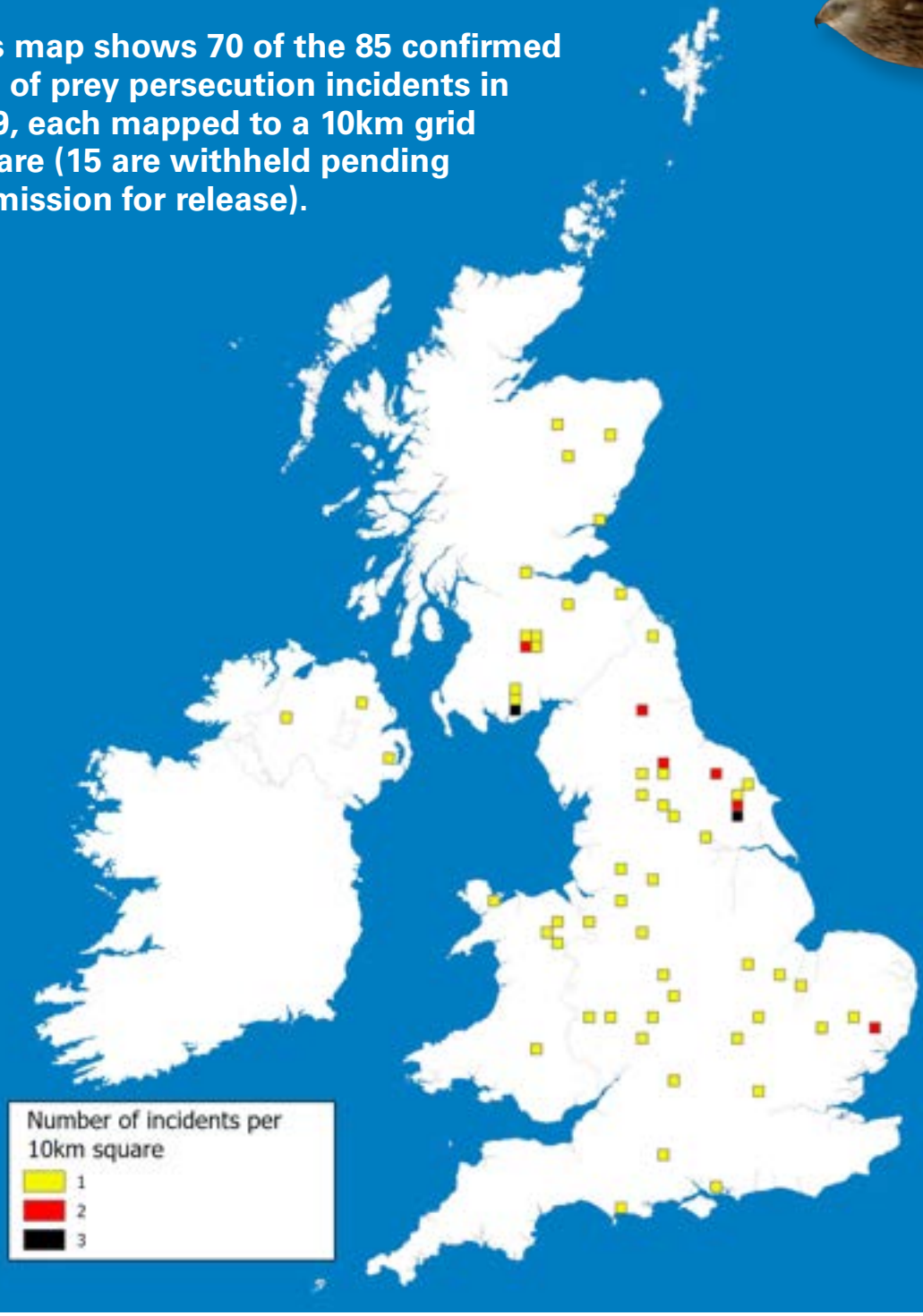
A buzzard was found freshly dead in April 2019 near Tintwistle, just north of Valehouse Reservoir, in the Peak District National Park. It was lying close to the remains of a red-legged partridge. A post-mortem and toxicology test showed that both the buzzard and partridge contained the pesticide Alphachloralose. Natural England concluded that "…abuse of chloralose, using a bird bait, has occurred at this location and at least one buzzard has been poisoned".

It is illegal to place a poisoned bait in the open. Alphachloralose, one of the most commonly-abused pesticides for illegally targeting birds of prey, is highly toxic, indiscriminate and dangerous to wildlife, people and pets.

Birds of prey should be abundant in the Peak District, yet scientific evidence shows that raptor populations are being suppressed on the grouse moors of the Dark Peak and that raptor persecution continues here unabated.

Raptor persecution blackspots 2019

This map shows 70 of the 85 confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents in 2019, each mapped to a 10km grid square (15 are withheld pending permission for release).



Our Raptor Persecution Map Hub contains data going back to 2007 and shows where the highest concentration of confirmed incidents occurs. Go online: **rspb.org.uk/raptormap**

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In 2019, 15 of the 85 incidents of bird of prey persecution were in North Yorkshire.

North Yorkshire

This year, once again, North Yorkshire emerges as the county with the highest number of confirmed raptor persecution incidents. Despite incredibly hard work by the North Yorkshire Police Rural Taskforce, this county remains a danger zone for birds of prey.

In 2019, a hen harrier was found shot dead on a grouse moor in Nidderdale. The bird, named **River,** had been fitted with a satellite tracking device by the RSPB and subsequently disappeared in suspicious circumstances. Following a search by North Yorkshire Police and the RSPB, River's body was later found. It contained two pieces of shot; further proof of the criminality continuing unchecked on these moors.

Also in 2019, a red kite was found poisoned just outside Pateley Bridge, Nidderdale. A buzzard was found shot on Bransdale Moor near Malton, another at Ryton and another at Thixendale.

Unfortunately, the situation has continued into 2020. During COVID-19 lockdown numerous crimes came to light including a shot buzzard, a poisoned red kite and a dog which died after consuming a poisoned bait all near the town of **Pateley Bridge. Four shot buzzards** were found hidden under rocks on a grouse moor in Bransdale, and North Yorkshire Police conducted raids on two grouse moors. In an interview with Channel 4, Inspector Matt Hagen, head of North Yorkshire's Rural Crime Team, stated:

"All the shooting investigations that we've got going on at the moment are involving gamekeepers on grouse moors" **Insp Matt Hagen**

The problem of raptor persecution was also highlighted in the Nidderdale AONB's **Birds of Prey in Nidderdale AONB Evidence Report,** published in September 2019.

Strathbraan and Strathdon

Raptor persecution cases in Scotland almost exclusively occur on land managed for gamebird shooting, and particularly driven grouse moors. Several areas of the Scottish uplands were highlighted in the Scottish Government-commissioned analyses of the fates of satellite-tagged golden eagles, as regions where clusters of suspicious disappearances had occurred.

The grouse moors of Strathbraan, Perthshire is one such area. In April 2019, two tagged eagles "Adam" and "Charlie" vanished in the same morning and a hen harrier, tagged as part of the RSPB's Hen Harrier LIFE project, was found dead in an illegally set spring trap. In previous years, there have been many other confirmed persecution incidents and suspicious disappearances of satellite-tagged raptors in this area. It came as little surprise when yet another tagged golden eagle, "Tom", vanished suddenly, inexplicably in Strathbraan in May 2020.

Satellite-tagged raptors have also disappeared with notable regularity on the grouse moors in the Strathdon area of Aberdeenshire, part of the Cairngorms National Park. A history of poisoning incidents culminated in the conviction of a local head gamekeeper in 2006, but still persecution and suspicious disappearances continued into the new decade, including the poisoning of a satellite-tagged golden eagle in 2011. In 2014, the first young white-tailed eagle to fledge from a nest in the east of Scotland in one hundred years was added to the list of tagged raptors which have disappeared after sending their final transmissions from this general area. In 2019 the hen harrier Marci vanished: her tag's last transmission put her just a few miles from where another harrier, Margot, had vanished the previous year. Lately, while the UK was under lockdown, a young white-tailed eagle was illegally poisoned on a Strathdon grouse moor. Also in spring 2020, further proof emerged of attempts to destroy and conceal evidence of raptor persecution with the discovery of the tag from an eagle which vanished in Strathbraan in 2016, found dumped in a river a few miles from the grouse moor where the bird was last recorded.

None of the 13 satellite-tagged birds that have disappeared in these two areas have been seen or heard from again.

This young white-tailed eagle was found poisoned on a Scottish grouse moor during COVID-19 lockdown in 2020

Save our skydancers

A government study published in 2019 revealed that, of 58 British hen harriers satellite tagged over 10 years:

"72% were either confirmed to have been illegally killed or disappeared suddenly with no evidence of a tag malfunction"

(Natural England, Nature Communications)

The single factor affecting hen harrier recovery is illegal killing. So much so that, between 2004-2016 their numbers dropped by 24% and in England they risk going extinct as a breeding species. There are currently around 575 pairs in the British Isles, yet estimates based on available food and habitat suggest there should be as many as 2,650 pairs. **(Read more)**

Heather moorland is a hen harrier's natural habitat, which sadly puts them in the firing line of those protecting red grouse stocks.

Satellite tagging, as part of the EU-funded Hen Harrier LIFE project, has given the RSPB an unprecedented insight into the lives and the threats faced by hen harriers in the UK.

Since 2018, 45 hen harriers are known to have been killed or gone missing in suspicious circumstances. Many of these incidents have been brought to light thanks to data from satellite tags. 2019 disappearances included Ada, who was last recorded over a grouse moor in the North Pennines Area Of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and Skylar, Marci, Rain, Romario, Thistle, who all gave their last positions over Scottish grouse moors.

Brood management

After no hen harriers bred in England at all in 2013, the RSPB called for a plan of action. In 2016 Defra launched a Hen Harrier Action Plan. One of those actions was a brood management scheme, involving taking hen harrier chicks from nests on grouse moors, rearing them in captivity, then releasing them into suitable habitat away from grouse moors. But hen harriers typically range over great distances, and don't know that grouse moors are out of bounds.

Hen harrier Thistle disappeared in 2019

The RSPB opposes current brood management plans and issued a legal challenge against it in March 2019. We believe the issue of persecution itself should be addressed head on, not sidestepped. Until this happens, hen harriers remain in danger. **More here about our legal challenge**.

Since brood management began in 2019, carried out by Natural England, all five of the chicks which were fitted with satellite tags as part of brood management have disappeared, four of them in suspicious circumstances.

Since 2018, 45 hen harriers are known to have been killed or disappeared in suspicious circumstances.

Raptor crime in lockdown

When the UK went into lockdown in spring 2020, the RSPB Investigations Team were inundated with reports of crimes against birds of prey. Most of these related to land used for game shooting in the uplands and lowlands.

In January 2020, **a joint 'zero tolerance' statement** was issued by BASC, the Countryside Alliance, Moorland Association, National Gamekeepers Organisation and CLA, condemning all forms of raptor persecution. Lockdown was the ultimate test of whether these organisations could turn these words into actions. Instead, crimes continued, and police investigations included a number of search warrants on grouse shooting estates. This was widely reported by national media, including Channel 4 news and Countryfile. However the overwhelming response from the shooting community was one of denial. Clearly they have no control over the criminality within their ranks.

The RSPB believes that some gamekeepers used lockdown as an opportunity to increase their efforts to kill birds of prey without fear of detection.

"Lockdown was the perfect opportunity for the shooting community to show that they were sincere about their zero-tolerance approach to raptor persecution and take action against the criminal activity which was being clearly identified on a number of grouse moors. Instead, they responded by trying to discredit RSPB data.

When four buzzards were found shot on Bransdale Moor, where was the outrage? The time has come for greater regulations to bring shooting estates in line with the law."

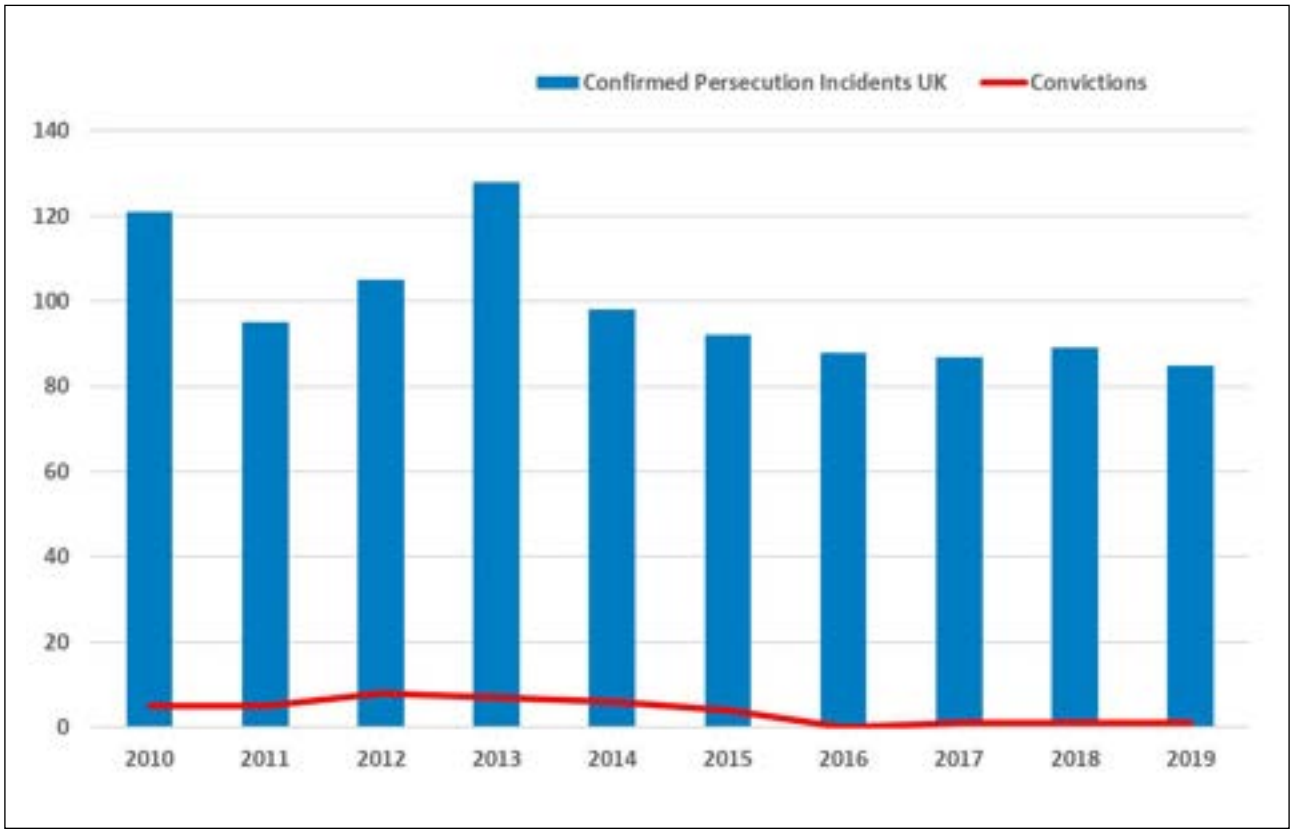
Mark Thomas
RSPB Head of Investigations UK

The law has failed our birds of prey

In 2009, raptor persecution became a UK National Wildlife Crime Priority. However, since then, there have been over 1000 confirmed incidents of raptor persecution in the UK. This is unacceptable.

Despite police-led awareness-raising initiatives and the hard work of many Wildlife Crime Officers to investigate and prosecute criminals targeting birds of prey, in ten years the situation has barely changed. Stronger regulation is needed to address the failings of the shooting community, which has proven incapable and unwilling to respect the law.

The graph below shows the number of confirmed raptor persecution incidents vs convictions between 2010-2019 (inclusive).



Pushing for change

The RSPB's Investigations Team is fighting hard to end raptor persecution, working with enforcement partners, decision makers and statutory agencies across all four UK countries.

You can read more about what the team has done in this blog: **https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/blog**

England

In England, where the largest percentage of confirmed, detected incidents took place in 2019, we are pushing for an independent review of grouse shooting, as has taken place in Scotland, and for grouse shoots to require a license to operate which could be removed if the law is broken. The RSPB also sits on the Raptor Persecution Priority Delivery Group, together with Government, land owners and game shooting groups, working to end raptor persecution.

Scotland

We await a Scottish Government response to the "Werrity" review of grouse moor management that was published in December 2019. Having examined how grouse moors can be managed sustainably and within the law, the review recommended the licensing of grouse moors if, after a probationary period, populations of raptors on and around grouse moors have not reached a favourable conservation status. We believe giving the industry a further five years to put their house in order, when they have singularly failed to do so over many decades, is not acceptable. Any further delays will simply increase the raptor body count. We need immediate regulation.

Wales

RSPB Cymru, the Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales and the four Welsh police forces issued a statement of intent in the fight against bird of prey persecution by initiating a new Raptor Officer. Niall Owen joined the RSPB's Investigations Unit early in 2020 in a post funded by the government, to undertake fieldwork, satellite tag hen harriers and support police investigations. Most recently, this involved **three red kites found dead in Powys,** at least one of which had been shot. We are grateful to the Welsh Government for their funding.

Northern Ireland

In November 2019, the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime Northern Ireland (PAW NI) launched "Hawk-Eyes": a new project involving the tracking and surveillance of red kites, buzzards and peregrine falcons in Northern Ireland. **"Hawk-Eyes"** is about raising awareness about the illegal activity affecting birds of prey, and to empower the public to detect and report crimes.

To monitor the birds, the project will attach small satellite tags to them, allowing their movements to be tracked and essential data to be gathered. Surveillance cameras are also being fitted at nests.

See: **wildlifecrimeni-hawkeyes.com**.

Public outrage is growing

The public is playing an increasingly powerful role in the push to end raptor persecution. To those who continue to speak out for birds of prey - thank you.

In 2019, Hen Harrier Day - an annual event - attracted more than 1,500 people to Carsington Water in Derbyshire to celebrate these iconic and much-persecuted birds. The event went ahead in an online format in August 2020, hosted by Chris Packham and Megan McCubbin, and featured a nine-hour programme of mini films, interviews and community engagement in which the RSPB featured strongly. Afterwards, **over 120,000** people emailed their MPs to "take urgent action now to protect the wildlife and habitats of our uplands, for nature and for people".

In 2019, for the first time the police-led raptor persecution awareness initiative **Operation Owl** went UK-wide. RSPB Investigations staff and police teamed up at several high-footfall locations, speaking to local people and businesses. Everyone was unanimous in their condemnation of those killing raptors for their own personal gain, at the expense of wildlife and those who wish to enjoy it.

The people have spoken: Hen Harrier Day 2019

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The public has, quite rightly, had enough of birds of prey being systematically and illegally slaughtered. Chris Packham

RSPB policy review

The RSPB is currently reviewing its policy on gamebird shooting and associated land management. This is due to growing public concern and mounting scientific evidence about the environmental impacts of the most intensive form of shooting especially **driven grouse moor management** and large-scale release of non-native game birds, primarily pheasants and red-legged partridges.

Supporters and staff have been consulted, and scientific reviews have taken place. The final phase involves reviewing the RSPB's existing policy on driven grouse shooting and developing a new position on gamebird releases.

We plan to announce the results of this review of our policy at our AGM on 10 October 2020.

What you can do

You play a vital role in the fight to end bird of prey persecution, from being our eyes and ears and reporting crimes to giving your anger a voice.

We believe that public pressure on the government is crucial in turning the tide for birds of prey and ending the culture of criminality in our uplands. A growing number of people are speaking out against this injustice, and the louder and stronger we are, the closer we come to securing a brighter future for birds of prey.

Report a crime

If you see suspicious activity, find evidence of illegal traps or find a dead or injured bird of prey in suspicious circumstances, please:

- Call the police on **101**.
- Email the RSPB Investigations Team at: **crime@rspb.org.uk** or fill in the **online form**.
- If you have information about someone killing raptors and want to remain anonymous, call the RSPB's confidential Raptor Crime Hotline on **0300 999 0101**.

Raise your voice

Join the conversation on Twitter **(follow @RSPBbirders)** or at Hen Harrier Day events. Let's make it known that we will not stand by while our wildlife is destroyed.

Become a Bird of Prey Defender

You can help the RSPB's Investigations Team fight for the future of birds like hen harriers by becoming a **Bird of Prey Defender** for just £3 a month, or through a one-off donation. This will help us continue our vital work, monitoring problem areas, installing covert cameras and gathering evidence of these crimes. Visit **rspb.org.uk/defend**
Thank you to those who have already contributed. Your support is vital and much appreciated.

Hen harrier by Mark Hamblin, red kite by Ed Marshall and peregrine falcon by Paul Sawer (all rspb-images.com)

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