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Recovering the Eurasian Curlew in the UK and Ireland

January 2022



‘Extremely disappointing’ is my only possible verdict on the response from the UK and Ireland Curlew Action Group (CAG) to my letter on the subject of gamebird release and predation of the Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* by Red Foxes *Vulpes vulpes* in Shropshire (*Brit. Birds* 114: 769–773).

The Shropshire ‘Save Our Curlews’ project has shown that the main predator of Curlew nests and chicks in Shropshire is the Fox (www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews), and Harris (2021) produces

clear evidence that the release of Common Pheasants *Phasianus colchicus* and other non-native gamebirds sustains the Fox population at much higher levels than it would be naturally. Douglas *et al.* (2021) make no reference in their response to the detailed content of Harris's report, a review of the scientific evidence of 'the animal welfare, public health, and environmental, ecological and conservation implications of rearing, releasing and shooting non-native gamebirds in Britain', which cites 308 references.

Key point 8 in Harris's summary states: 'A number of studies have shown that 40% of released Pheasants and Red-legged Partridges [*Alectoris rufa*] (and possibly more) are predated by Foxes, i.e. of the 35.8 million kg total biomass of surplus gamebirds released in Britain each year, around 14.3 million kg is predated by Foxes. Since an adult Fox requires 180 kg of meat to support itself for a year, data from the gamebird-shooting industry show that predation on Pheasants and Red-legged Partridges provides enough food to support 80,000 Foxes for a full year. The availability of carrion from gamebirds that die of other causes could support anything up to a further 120,000 Foxes for a year, although it is not possible to determine the proportion of the available gamebird carrion that is consumed by Foxes, how much is consumed by other scavengers, and how much decomposes. The number of Foxes supported by predating and/or scavenging non-native gamebirds has increased ten-fold since the turn of the century.'



44. Radio tag from Eurasian

Curlew *Numenius arquata* chick embedded in the scat of a Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*. The tag was still transmitting four weeks after the chick had disappeared at less than three days old.

CAG concedes that high predation pressure on Curlews from Foxes sustained by the release of Pheasants is 'entirely biologically plausible'. Can CAG come up with any other 'biologically plausible' explanations that could account for the high predation rates of Curlews seen in Shropshire, and elsewhere? The other possible contributory factors listed in the CAG response cannot get close to that level of impact, even acting together. The lack of gamebird release sites in some areas with high predation is irrelevant (or deliberately diversionary) – birds move away from release sites, and Pheasants, descended from past releases, now occur in all but three tetrads in Shropshire (with all empty tetrads being located in the town of Telford). Foxes

also disperse from their natal sites. Obviously, there are other factors at work, including population increases of less important predators, also driven by gamebird release, but any sensible action plan deals with the most serious threats first. If CAG really needs more evidence on this, when there is so much already published, why aren't they advocating the precautionary principle – halting gamebird release to stop the situation getting worse until evidence can be shown that this is unequivocally not the cause?

I agree that high predator densities is a symptom, not a cause; but it's a symptom of one specific unacceptable aspect of landscape mismanagement – the annual release of 60 million alien gamebirds. However, this leads to an extremely high level of predation on Curlews, which will result in their extinction before any other initiatives or habitat improvements have a chance to take effect, which is why it needs to be dealt with urgently, and first.

I am most alarmed by the apparent necessity for agreement from all CAG members before it is able to conduct any action. As one of the Group organisations exists to 'promote game and wildlife management' (www.gwct.org.uk/about/what-we-do), and nearly all of this partner's members have a large financial incentive to continue with the practices that are driving Curlews to extinction across a large part of the species' range, it seems to me that the Group is extremely unlikely to agree to do what is necessary. Effectively, it appears that the involvement of GWCT is vetoing RSPB from pursuing its own policy of limiting gamebird release ('The RSPB would also like 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'; www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/birdcrime-2020), and it means that the CAG can never be fit for

purpose.

I therefore suggest that the Curlew Action Group produces, as a matter of great urgency, an Action Plan to reduce large-scale predation of Curlew nests and chicks within five years. Every member of the Group should be required to submit proposals on what it can deliver to achieve this objective, to be included in the collective Action Plan. Actions to mitigate the other effects of gamebird release (e.g. 'control' of Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo*, Foxes, and other beneficiaries of the annual gamebird releases) should not be considered, as that really is a symptom and not a cause, and because the scientific evidence shows they are ineffective. Members of the Group who are unwilling to produce or act on proposals to help save Curlews from predation should be asked to resign from the Group. The Curlews demand it.

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References

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Harris, S. 2021. *A Review of the Animal Welfare, Public Health, and Environmental, Ecological and Conservation Implications of Rearing, Releasing and Shooting Non-native Gamebirds in Britain*. Report to the Labour Animal Welfare Society.

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2022 Vol.115: Pages 53–54

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