

RPUK: A Viewpoint

Scottish Gamekeeper is delighted to publish this long but important viewpoint article by guest writer Helen Ferguson regarding a media source which has played a prominent and political role in the stereotyping of gamekeepers and the shooting community in society.

A story of a Blog site and (some of) those on the receiving end of it.

Raptor Persecution UK



This rather lengthy article focusses on the content and wider impact of the Raptor Persecution UK Blog (RPUK), of which Ruth Tingay, academic and conservationist is apparently the author/editor. Following the introduction, specific themes emerge and each will be discussed in turn:

1. The Bile
2. Partnership Working
3. Politics, Networks and Campaigns
4. Authority
5. Claims to Knowledge

Raptor persecution is a blight on the shooting industry and for which there is absolutely no excuse. It is totally unnecessary, illegal and serves to undermine the credibility and the valuable work undertaken by gamekeepers, shoot managers and landowners. Moreover, it provides ammunition for the anti-shooting lobby to pursue their objectives which include further legislation that would ultimately result in the end of game shooting per se, the consequences of which would be catastrophic to both the rural environment and economy. Meanwhile, the anti-shooting and raptor lobby demonstrate their prowess at garnering resource and support through media campaigns, networking and fundraising thus creating a considerable platform from which to challenge the game shooting industry.

The slightest whiff of an 'incident', a sat

tag that has failed to ping, a missing raptor, sparks the raptor police into action. Accusations and allegations fly regardless of tangible evidence and a witch hunt ensues. Yarns are spun by the social media circus,

thanks to the investigatory prowess of journalist Matt Cross (a regular contributor to this magazine) it soon became evident there was no 'slaughter' - it was rifle target shooting practice using metal targets.



When Ian Thomson, Head of Investigations at RSPB Scotland insinuated on social media that mountain hare culls may be taking place 'on an Inverness-shire grouse moor', connected groups piled in with allegations of 'slaughter'. It was an organised practice at metal targets by champion target shooters.

frequently orchestrated via the Raptor Persecution UK blog (RPUK) with supporters demanding the Scottish Government pay heed and take action; these shooting estates must be responsible, the gamekeepers or as RPUK refers, 'the armed criminals', must be the culprits and it is time for reform.

A prime example of this behaviour was in August 2020, when Ian Thomson, RSPB wildlife investigator, insinuated that hare culling may have started. The resulting bigoted rhetoric on the RPUK blog and twitter accounts of its followers, revealed their prejudice; the 'slaughter' had begun and Alison Johnstone Green MSP was complicit in demanding action. However,

Created in 2010, at the time of writing, (RPUK) blog boasted 6,319,216 hits. With articles from guest writers and funded by cosmetics firm Lush among other contributors, the blog provides daily running commentary of their interpretation of raptor persecution in the UK. Not for the faint-hearted, the blog is punctuated by graphic photographs of illegally killed raptors and other birds and mammals. It makes dismal viewing.

Not wishing to detract from the issue of illegal persecution, on closer inspection however, there is much repetition. Rolling webpages of repeated dialogue and duplicated photographs result in a blog of unnecessary proportion; the photograph of Chris Packham holding

a hen harrier appears regularly, an out-stretched eagle photographed in 2007 makes a regular appearance and a badly shot buzzard is also highlighted frequently. These photographs and others equally distressing are utilised again and again to maximise and it could be argued, sensationalise their message that raptors are routinely killed, usually in relation to grouse moors and the practice is endemic. Boiling over with emotive rhetoric, the blog does a marvellous job of stereotyping those involved in the shooting industry as criminals. Frequently, as a result of purely speculative allegations, discredited identities, estates and professions emerge.

The Bile

The RPUK blog enjoys a high profile and has become a reference point for many: politicians, the media, raptor workers, third sector environmental charities including the forum, Scottish Environment Link, and indeed animal rights extremists.

However, this blog relates to more than raptor persecution, it is the systemic condemnation of all matters pertaining to game shooting. Whether it is land-ownership patterns, land-management practices such as muirburn, predator control or the use of medicated grit and the release of gamebirds, land-owners, gamekeepers or shoot managers, what permeates throughout is the vehement condemnation and prejudice against the shooting industry in all its forms. It is also personal, vindictive and punctuated by pejoratives. The SGA, frequently referred to as 'morons', 'luddites', 'meatheads' and 'dinosaurs' are constantly ridiculed while the chairman, Alex Hogg, is subjected to a hateful onslaught, whether directly or through parody.

There is much written within social psychology about groups and group behaviour; opposing groups share common practice and beliefs and can be identified through their cultural accoutrements. Within the shooting community, the wearing of tweed is fundamental; it provides both warmth and camouflage against the colours of the countryside. It also provides a sense of identity; RPUK frequently mention 'the men in tweed' highlighting the difference to their own group and with reference to the SGA Website: 'It is like a tweed clad version of the ministry of misinformation' (RPUK Oct 2010). Such stereotypes serve to influence the perception that those who wear tweed are somehow less competent and worthy, furthermore, when an opposing group

attempts to devalue and reduce the worth of a competitor through the use of negative ascription, these ascriptions can be harmful:

'At an extreme level, the attempt to reduce an outgroup's competitiveness may lead to dehumanisation ... and devaluation of the very lives of outgroup members' (Pratto & Glasford, 2008).

Satirically parodied as 'Albert Hogburn, Head of Policy and Advice at the Modern Poisoners' Society' (SGA), Alex Hogg is slurred with inflammatory, derogatory commentary:



A helpful stereotype?

Dr Ruth Tingay, who describes herself as the author of the RPUK blog, satirised SGA Chairman Alex Hogg as 'Albert Hogburn of the Modern Poisoners Society'.

RPUK blog: 11.2.2012

Wee Rabbie Squint Eye. It's no laughing matter. Wait 'til it's one of your kiddies and then you'll be sorry Albert Hogburn head of policy and advice at the Modern Poisoners' Society said: "... Our biodiversity is suffering from the infestation of vermin and our children are at risk of having their eyes pecked out. Only last week my son Wee Rabbie was helping me lay out some baits when he got ambushed by 19 of these vile, winged varmints. They scooped out his left eye with their beaks and now he gets called."

RPUK blog: 6.4.2012

'Albert Hogburn of the Modern Poisoners Society said: "We've said all along that these eagles are a danger to society, and now we've been proved right. Nobody listened to us but I bet they will now. You can't teach an eagle new tricks, or table manners, which is why we like to teach them another kind of lesson. Let them eat our poisoned bait, that'll learn 'em'."

RPUK blog: 20.7.13

Albert Hogburn of the Modern Poisoners Society said: "Aye, I watched the video last night. Did you see that bird in the tweed hot pants with the fantastic tits? Oh.... it's not that video you're talking about? Er, sorry got to go, I've left some milk on the boil... Er, #TeamPoison all the way, lads".

RPUK blog: 12.2012

'Albert Hogburn, Director of the Twat Unit in the Modern Poisoners' Soc said: "First it was the west coast, now it's the east coast, what next, are we going to

see eagles in Southern Scotland, too? It's outrageous! We're going to be the laughing stock of Europe if we're not careful and what would that do to our fragile economy? But don't you worry. Obviously we'll continue to use poison out in the countryside, because that's our bread and butter, but we've got to have a different strategy for use in urban areas. I've had my twats working 24/7 on a new trap design....'

Other industry organisations and individuals are not exempt from the insults. Kim Jong-il, North Korean

leader and dictator who died in 2011 and synonymous with ideology and censorship, provides the parody for Tim Baynes, director of Moorland at Scottish Land and Estates. Tim Baynes is frequently discredited throughout the RPUK blog by the use of the nickname Kim. Tim, concerned with the contents of the blog and the impact to relationships within PAW Scotland (Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime), wrote to the Environment Minister at the time, however, the critique of his letter by RPUK is dismissive and illustrates their underlying contempt:

RPUK: 20.4.2013 *'The rest of Kim's letter contains the usual misleading guff, such as inferring that we should all measure the extent of persecution by the number of successful convictions (yes, that old chestnut again) and how there is 'a very strong set of disincentives to breaking the law' - clearly not strong enough! But we can't be arsed to go through each statement and counter it...'*

Based in England, The Moorland Association and GWCT are also belittled following a BBC Look North broadcast which highlighted a successful breeding season for hen harriers in Northumberland. Rather than welcome this breeding success, instead there are more insults from RPUK:

'What, no lame-brained tra-la-la-ing from Amanda Anderson (Moorland Association) about the number of hen harriers that have popped in through her

kitchen window for a coffee and a chat? And no Andrew Gilruth, the GWCT's very own Stepford Wife, droning on about whatever it is he's been told to repeat that day? No, not a word from any of the great pretenders'. RPUK 8.8.18

RPUK rhetoric is both deliberately vilifying and disingenuous; the anagrams which appear regularly convey this effectively:

Anagrams:

- Scottish Land and Estates: *dated tactless shits*, anon
- Countryside Alliance: *leery lunatics on acid*
- Moorland Association: *A sad moron's coalition*
- Gift of Grouse: *to fog figures*

Furthermore, there is absolutely no doubt about the obsessive tendencies of RPUK when someone goes to such lengths as to write a Christmas carol:

RPUK: 21.12.11:

'Here's a Christmas sing-a-long for all our readers (to the tune of Maria Carey's xmas hit, 'All I want for Christmas') -

'I don't want a lot for Xmas

There is just one thing I need

Permission to kill native raptors

Give it to the men in tweed

We just want a licence to cull

Use a stick to crush their skulls

Oh make my wish come true

Baby all I want for Xmas is to kill a few....

(repeat ad nauseum until all raptors are dead)'

Another Christmas gift, *'The perfect gift for the gamekeeper in your life'* was the photograph of empty glass jars, implying storage for poison. (RPUK, 24.12.13)

It could be argued that the RPUK blog reflects the passion of those that campaign against raptor persecution. According to Rip et al (2011), passion can be considered as harmonious which promotes peaceful activism, or obsessive, that which engenders hatred and aggressive extremes. Whilst RPUK may deny their blog is non-aggressive, nonetheless if language causes harm, it can be classified as violence (Litman-Navarro, 2017).

'It may lead people on both sides of the intergroup divide to bolster their worldview (ideology) and have a decreasing tolerance for people and ideas that challenge them, thereby fuelling the cycle of intergroup violence, intolerance and misunderstanding and rendering conflict resolution more difficult' (Rip et al, 2011)

The mistrust between the shooting and the anti-shooting lobby has

certainly hit an all-time high, but this has not just happened suddenly, it has been a gradual process which has witnessed a considerable escalation since Chris Packham, Ruth Tingay and Mark Avery entered the fray. The derision and vilification have exploded into contested social media output with constant alleged criminality and the recognition of such demanded by the anti-shooting lobby of senior politicians.



Partnership Working

Hodgson et al (2018) maintain that conservation conflict is sustained through discourse and whilst they make some reference to the reports contained within the RPUK blog, what they do not reflect on is the persistent inflammatory labelling and commentary that permeates throughout and the resulting consequences. Whilst there can be differences of opinion, partnership working is rendered impossible when insults prevail and there is lack of willingness to engage; it would certainly appear that RPUK is hostile to that notion. Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime (PAW Scotland) they consider 'ineffective' and 'run by fools' (May 2010). Frequent protests that 'SGA should be booted off PAW' (Feb 2014) are commonplace:

'Why are these organisations still allowed to sit at the table as 'partners' in tackling raptor persecution crimes? We'd get a lot further, a lot faster, if the authorities treated these organisations with the disdain they deserve and booted them off these pantomime partnerships' (RPUK 27.10.16)

Finding PAW Scotland to be a hostile terrain, the SGA decided to withdraw from the meetings although retain membership, the response was predictable:

'We've long argued that this particular partnership is nothing more than a sham, used by certain organisations

to proclaim to the outside world that progress is being made when actually all that is happening is obfuscation and denial'. Perhaps now with the SGA gone the remaining active participants of PAW can get on with making some real headway at these meetings.'

RPUK 21.5.17

Organised by PAW Scotland, The Heads up for Harriers project which aims to promote the recovery of the species was also met with derision and

brings politicians into the equation:

'In our opinion this is a total greenwashing propaganda exercise. We expect nothing else from the driven grouse shooting industry but for SNH to be heralding it as anything but a sham is an embarrassment'.

'Unfortunately, Hen Harrier Species Champion Mairi Gougeon MSP appears to have had the wool pulled over her eyes' (RPUK, Dec 2017).

Furthermore, despite being considered 'a conservationist' (The Peregrine Fund, 2020), Ruth Tingay denies the benefits of conservation initiatives that highlight concern and promote action to protect and nurture various threatened species. Rather, these initiatives are misrepresented and ridiculed:

'In an amusingly familiar article in the Scotsman ... we learn that the SGA has declared 2014 as the Year of the Wader and will use this banner as a way of repeatedly asking the government to kill some predators, although they haven't actually specified which predators they want killed. Any will do, right?'

In honour of this initiative, we've declared 2014 as the Year of the Wanker, and we'll use this banner as a way of repeatedly asking the government to get rid of some wankers. We might specify which wankers should be removed or we might just generalise in the hope of netting one or two in a broad trawl' (RPUK December 2013).

The Gift of Grouse campaign