

which promotes grouse shooting and highlights the wider industry involvement from estates, keepers and their families to restaurants and other related business, is predictably ostracised and renamed 'The Gift of Rogues' with 'idiots' at the helm. (RPUK 2018). RPUK, ignoring the indirect benefits of grouse shooting to red-listed waders and other nesting birds or to the wider rural economy, seek to undermine the industry claiming red grouse to be toxic, diseased and unsustainably harvested. Highlighting grouse as a sustainable food source brought criticism of both SNH and Dr. Aileen McLeod, the then Environment Secretary who attended the Highland show in 2015. Dr. McLeod was seen in attendance at the food tent for Scotland's Natural larder, a joint initiative from SNH with BASC and others to promote game and fish as a natural and valuable food source. ***'What on earth is SNH playing at? Why is this statutory conservation agency actively promoting an industry with such shocking ecological credentials and claiming that eating this product (red grouse) is good for us and good for the environment?'***

What RPUK considered was even more unacceptable was Dr. McLeod attending the SGA tent at the Game Fair at Scone:

'A few days ago we had Scottish Natural Heritage, the Government's statutory nature conservation body, promoting Scotland's dead wildlife pantry and the grouse shooting industry, claiming that red grouse are 'healthy', natural' and harvested 'sustainably' when actually they're anything but ... And now we have Scotland's Environment Minister, Dr Aileen McLeod, praising "the significant and valuable contribution" of the Scottish Gamekeepers' Association as she presented the SGA's Young Gamekeeper of the Year Award 2015 at the Scottish Game Fair yesterday..... We've been waiting for Dr McLeod to



show her hand... It looks like she just has.' (RPUK July 2015)

Whilst it is recognised and respected that game-shooting is not for everyone, it is apparent that RPUK, despite their claims to be conservationists, do not wish to acknowledge grouse moors are a haven for many rare and endangered moorland species, both flora and fauna and ignore the considerable benefits to the fragile rural economy. Furthermore, they resent and frustrate any attempts at partnership working and condemn politicians who actively engage with the shooting industry.

Politics, Networks and Campaigns

Ruth Tingay has many connections and considerable campaign experience. A director of Wild Justice, Ruth, together with Chris Packham and Mark Avery campaign to ban driven grouse shooting and attempt to thwart the issue of general licences, they have also just won a judicial review into game bird release. RPUK is a member of the REVIVE coalition which campaigns for grouse moor reform and REVIVE is a supporter of Scottish Environment Link (Scotlink) with which Ruth Tingay is also associated. The Scotlink Forum of which there are 38 members and numerous supporters includes the Scottish Raptor Study Group, Onekind, Friends of the Earth, RSPB and The Scottish Wildlife Trust and are currently promoting an active campaign which claims 'To fight for Scotland's Nature'.

The RPUK blog with assimilation to Green party ideology and close links to the Scottish Greens, provides a conduit for this extensive network offering copious information regarding political allegiances, lobbying contacts, petitions and fund-raising requests to support various campaigns such as fighting badger culls and more recently, contributing towards a Wild Justice fund for forensic investigation into raptor crimes.

Aware of the political interest in the blog, the editor frequently challenges politicians to demonstrate their solidarity and respond to her demands for action and further legislation. RPUK are politically savvy and aim to optimise the political scene to advantage: ***'For those of us interested in rural policy decisions in Scotland, and particularly those related to dealing with illegal raptor persecution, it's well worth taking a moment to consider the political divisions within the SNP because those divisions will undoubtedly make Roseanna***

Cunningham's endeavours all the more difficult, and we should all bear that in mind when voicing our criticism. That's not to say we shouldn't continue to criticise; on the contrary, the Government should expect to be held to account and public pressure over the last few years has brought things a very long way, but we need to make sure our criticism is aimed at the right target.' RPUK June 2017

Woe betide anyone who does not conform, successive environment ministers have frequently been made to feel the wrath, accompanied by threats:

Roseanna Cunningham is 'thick': ***'Roseanna Cunningham (Scottish Environment Minister) and SNH – you should be ashamed of yourselves – we expected better from you. Ministers claim that the new licensing scheme will help to prevent illegal raptor persecution. Just how thick are you?'*** (RPUK, May 2010)

Paul Wheelhouse is threatened: ***'According to the BBC article, Environment Minister Paul Wheelhouse has given his strongest indication yet that the introduction of new measures to tackle illegal raptor persecution is imminent. To be brutally frank, he's going to find himself at the centre of a fucking shit-storm if he doesn't.'*** (RPUK, Jun 2013)

Paul Wheelhouse Environment Minister speaking at SNP party conference about raptor persecution: "I hope offenders heed the warning, stop spoiling what is a strong industry in the rural economy for Scotland, and make no mistake, as I say, we will not hesitate to act if they do not listen to what we are saying".

RPUK: ***'Now we just need to keep holding the Minister's feet to the fire to ensure that these threats amount to more than just rhetoric.'*** (RPUK Nov 14) Dr. Aileen McLeod will be rewarded if she behaves:

We keep being told that 'we need more time to assess the impact of the new measures'. Why do we? Isn't it bleedin' obvious that raptor persecution is continuing despite all the so-called partnership-working, new measures and deterrents? The Minister may well be irritated that her inbox gets bombarded after each raptor crime but she can expect more of the same each and every time we hear of yet another crime. And there will be more, mark our words. She should also know that if and when she decides to make a stand with something forceful and tangible, she'll be deluged with emails of appreciation and support (RPUK 21.9.15).



Scottish ministers are not the only ones who come under attack; Jim Shannon, DUP, after expressing concern at the rise in the numbers of birds of prey, was heavily criticised and referred to as a 'dim-witted dinosaur' and making a fool of himself (RPUK 2017).

In contrast, the hen harrier species champion, Mairi Gougeon was met with favour when appointed to her new role as Minister for Rural Affairs and Natural Environment.

'Well done, Mairi, we look forward to seeing you continue to speak up for raptors and other protected species...' (RPUK Jun 2018).

Species Champion is a Scotlink initiative, 'Species Champion asks Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) to lend political support to the protection of Scotland's threatened wildlife by becoming 'Species Champions.' Excluding owls, raptor species champions in the current Scottish Parliament are as follows:

- Andy Wightman Green MSP: Golden Eagle
- Mike Ruskell Green MSP: White Tailed Sea Eagle
- Donald Cameron Conservative MSP: Merlin
- Bill Kidd SNP MSP: Red Kite
- Bob Dorris SNP MSP: Peregrine
- John Mason SNP: MSP: Kestrel
- Mairi Gougeon SNP MSP: Hen Harrier

It could be argued that raptor species are disproportionately distributed in favour of the Scottish Greens. Is this a deliberate ploy by Scotlink, an organisation that receives funding from SNH and the Scottish Government and with which Ruth Tingay of RPUK is associated?

The Scottish Greens are certainly met with favour:

With reference to Andy Wightman *'We don't just admire him, we're in awe of him'*(April 2017)

With reference to Mark Ruskell: *'Kudos to the Scottish Greens and especially to Mark Ruskell MSP who has maintained the pressure on this particular issue for all these years.'* 13.8.19

This favour of the ingroup is in complete contrast to the condemnation of the 'men in tweed' and their alliances.

When Scottish Ministers Nicola Sturgeon, Roseanna Cunningham and Mairi Gougeon rightly remain silent over an investigation or incident, there is a peculiar mixture of flattery and condemnation not to mention antagonism:

16.7.19 Regarding a hen harrier found in a trap:

'It is utterly baffling why these three intelligent, thoughtful, decent and normally dynamic people have refused to comment on such barbarity. It's not because they're on holiday (they're all still tweeting about other stuff) and it can't possibly be because they don't know what's been going on.....This silence is what we've come to expect from Westminster politicians, not those in Holyrood. What can they possibly gain by remaining silent? If anything, their refusal to comment must actually be pretty damaging - it looks like they just don't care and to be honest, I'm tired of making excuses for them.'

When an eagle was observed

flying in the Cairngorms National Park with a supposed trap attached to its leg, again the commentary was a confusing mix of apology, flattery and accusation:

I'm sorry, Nicola Sturgeon, Roseanna Cunningham and Mairi Gougeon, as much as I admire you as strong, intelligent female politicians, I am no longer prepared to make excuses for you. It is your collective failure to act decisively that has led to these continuing atrocities (RPUK 13 Aug 2019)

The Conservatives, however, do not find favour; in 2018, the Angus Glens Moorland Group were awarded winners of the Conservation and Environment category at the Scottish Rural Awards ceremony, their local MSP, Liam Kerr submitted a motion to the Scottish Parliament, seeking congratulation and recognition.

The response: *'So far, 13 April Fool MSPs have signed it. Strangely they're all Conservatives.'*

The award and the Angus Glens Moorland Group were also ridiculed, referred to as 'Winners of complete bollocks award' with associated photos of pigs testicles. (RPUK April 2018)

Political alliances are much in evidence on the RPUK blog, the networks that exist and their campaigns. The ingroup endorsements are apparent, however that may also be deliberate; it could be argued they serve to reinforce the ideology of group dominance and strengthen the perceived 'correctness' of their own worldview (Esses et al, 2010).

Authority

Politicians are not the only ones held to account, the police and the judiciary are also challenged. If the sentences given out for raptor crime are deemed insufficient, there is much irritation. Similarly, if cases are dropped through lack of evidence or permissible evidence, that too is met with ire and scorn.

The police are frequently belittled and referred to as PC Plod with cartoon figure (RPUK Oct 2010). Their press releases are considered 'idiotic' (Nov 2014) and the calibre of their evidence is also questioned. Similarly, in 2010, RPUK upset that a sentence was too lenient, parody Sherriff Drummond with Sherriff Woody of Toy story, again with cartoon.

