



Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill

Brief prepared for the Environment Committee

By

**Lyall Plant
Chief Executive**

**Countryside Alliance Ireland
The Courtyard
Larchfield Estate
Lisburn
BT27 6XJ**

Tel: 028 9263 9911

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Introduction

Following the second reading of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill on Tuesday 12 January 2010, Countryside Alliance Ireland would like to address the concerns voiced by some of the members of the Environment Committee in relation to the following:

- The Irish Hare
- Curlew
- Snares

The aim of Countryside Alliance Ireland is to promote and support the livelihood of rural people and their communities. We campaign for the countryside, country sports and the rural way of life. We are an all-Ireland membership organisation with 10,000 individual members and over 25,000 affiliated members and we reflect the views and concerns of a broad range of rural people. Our interests and expertise are therefore directly relevant to the Bill.

The Irish Hare and the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill

Current status

The Irish hare has been subject to a Special Protection Order (SPO), renewed annually since January 2004. The reason given for the introduction of the SPO initially was to increase the hare numbers in line with the All-Ireland Species Action Plan.

Countryside Alliance Ireland have, in the past, called for practical methods for conservation of the Irish hare and indeed we have offered all Ministers' of the Environment on numerous occasions the help and support of our members to assist in the conservation and thereby increase the numbers of Irish hares in Northern Ireland. Our last such offer was tendered on the 12th August 2009.

Concern has been expressed within the Environment Committee that the Irish hare numbers are under threat from coursing. However, scientific evidence categorically suggests otherwise and we would like to dispel these concerns with the following substantiated data.

Threats/Causes of decline

The main threats to Irish hare numbers in Northern Ireland are:

- Farming practices - farm machinery and agricultural harvesting techniques. These may cause death or injury, especially to leverets.
- Loss of refuge areas - safe places for hares to lie up during the day and the homogenisation of the landscape.
- Predation – Predation affects the survival rates of leverets (*Dingerkus & Montgomery 2002*).
- Habitat fragmentation.
- Competition and potential hybridisation with the introduced European or 'Brown' hare.

Coursing and the Irish Hare

Various research projects suggest that coursing positively benefits the Irish hare and hare numbers.

Coursing clubs are scientifically recognised as an important local conservation force. They participate in important research, manage habitats sympathetically and control predation, helping to conserve Irish hares – which are unique to Ireland. Professor Ian Montgomery (who is Head of the School of Biology and Biochemistry in Queen's University Belfast and is regarded as the leading expert on Irish hare ecology throughout Ireland), is on record as saying that he believes that coursing and the various forms of hare hunting make a positive contribution to Irish hare conservation, through participation in important research, predator control and sympathetic habitat management.

Like Professor Montgomery, we also believe that sporting activities as practised by Ireland's field sports community are not only sustainable but actually make a positive contribution to the numbers of Irish hares.

Both Countryside Alliance Ireland and the Irish Coursing Club are fully operational throughout the entire island of Ireland, with members in literally every parish and townland. Our members are uniquely placed in delivering the type of conservation action required in ensuring that the numbers of Irish hares increase.

Formed in 1916, the Irish Coursing Club (ICC) organises and regulates the sport of coursing throughout Ireland. Under the guidance of the ICC, its clubs participate in research, manage habitats and promote conservation initiatives aimed at Irish hares.

The most accurate population data are available for the Republic of Ireland and suggest that in light of recent estimates (535,000 hares during 2007) (*Status of hares in Ireland - Hare Survey of Ireland*

2006/07) that mortality during coursing removes $\leq 0.1\%$ of the total adult population annually. Such calculations included the records of 81 clubs. (*Factors associated with hare mortality during coursing* N Reid, RA McDonald and WI Montgomery).

It must be recognised that prior to the Special Protection Order being implemented in Northern Ireland that only 2 clubs operated within this jurisdiction; consequently, it seems highly likely that their overall impact on the Northern Irish hare population would have been negligible.

A report commissioned by the Environment and Heritage Service and published in 2003 (*Jane Preston, Paulo Prodöhl, Alex Portig, Kate O'Neill & Ian Montgomery 2006. Survival and Dispersal of coursed Irish Hares in Northern Ireland. Environment and Heritage Service Research and Development Series. No. 06/10*) – was conducted with the assistance of the two coursing Clubs in Northern Ireland; Ballymena and Dungannon and states ‘it is clear that hares can survive the experience of being netted and coursed before release and can resume activity to survive in the wild’. It further states “there is no evidence that coursing at the current level affects population size or distribution of the Irish Hare in Northern Ireland”.

Variability is a key characteristic of hare populations throughout the world and it must be stressed that short-term changes in hare numbers from year to year should not be over-interpreted. Recent studies in Northern Ireland suggest short-term population fluctuations are the norm (*O'Mahony & Montgomery, 2001; Dingerkus & Montgomery, 2002; Preston et al. 2003; Tosh et al. 2004; Tosh et al. 2005; Hall-Aspland et al. 2006*).

Proposals to give full statutory protection to the Irish Hare

Despite the re-introduction of the SPO in 2009 our members continue to play a central role in delivering co-ordinated conservation action, which is supported and delivered by local communities in ensuring the increase in Irish hare numbers. However, to place the Irish hare on to Schedule 5 would diminish this enthusiasm to continue to protect the Irish hare from both predator control and from the invasive species; the ‘European’ or Brown hare.

We believe that the Irish hare enjoys substantial protection under present domestic legislation. It provides for a lengthy closed season during which it is unlawful to kill or take Irish hares by any means and protection is also afforded at night time and on Sundays and we wish to see this continue within the new legislation.

We believe that it would be a mistake to concentrate unduly on the status of the Irish hare on the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and the Wildlife Act 1976, as all available evidence points to the fact that current hunting practices make a positive contribution to the conservation of hares and any steps to remove it from the quarry list will remove the vested interest that many people have in the well-being of Irish hares.

Unsustainable taking of Irish hares for sporting purposes has been talked about. There is no reference to such a concern in any of the Irish hare reports nor is there any creditable, independent, scientific document that identifies any concerns regarding the sustainability of sporting activities.

Given the information we have provided in relation to current Irish hare populations and the overwhelming evidence that exists in relation to the positive contribution responsible field sports make to the management of the Irish hare population, we see no need for a change in status for the Irish hare.

The initial introduction of the SPO for Irish hares was, we believe, politically driven and had little to do with conservation. It was opposed by the leading authorities in Irish hare conservation in Northern Ireland, by the main political parties and was subject to unprecedented public opposition.

Countryside Alliance Ireland opposes any attempt to move the Irish hare on to schedule 5.

Supplementary information

DOE Press Release - 5 October 2007 - The Minister for the Environment acknowledged the benefits that coursing clubs make towards the conservation of the Irish Hare and stated "The protection measure for the Irish Hare is simply that it is not deliberately intended to ban hare coursing. The department and field sporting organisations wish to achieve the same goal of increased hare numbers. Indeed, Professor Montgomery, Head of the School of Biology and Biochemistry at Queen's University Belfast has previously stated that coursing clubs have made a positive contribution to conservation of Irish Hare, through active participation in research and other activities such as sympathetic habitat management."

The Curlew and the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill

Current status

Countryside Alliance Ireland is aware of the decline in Curlew numbers in NI. However, the loss of and damage to their habitat is the largest single factor in the population decline of our resident Curlew.

The total UK breeding population is estimated to be at least 99,500 breeding pairs, around 40 per cent of the European population. The Irish population has been estimated at 2,500 to 10,000 pairs with 1,750 pairs in Northern Ireland in 2000. This figure represents a decline of around 60 per cent from the previous estimate in 1987. Outside the breeding season, numbers of curlew in Ireland are swollen by the immigration of birds from Britain and Northern Europe. Wintering numbers vary, but in general a maximum of between 6,500 and 7,000 birds are present during the winter.

In winter, Curlews can be found in a variety of habitats, both coastal and inland, including mudflats, rocky shores, lake shores, and agricultural fields. The most important wintering sites in Northern Ireland are Lough Foyle and Strangford Lough.

Threats/Causes of decline

The decline of the curlew is linked to the loss of their wetland habitat mainly through agricultural intensification, including drainage of wetland areas and overgrazing by livestock. Within diminishing areas of suitable habitat, it is thought that curlews are now more vulnerable to predation and this is having a further impact on their population.

As a ground-nesting bird the nests and eggs of curlew are especially vulnerable to predators such as foxes and crows. The poor survival rate of young birds is known to be a key factor in the decline of curlew at Northern Ireland sites and a detailed research programme is being undertaken to establish the exact extent of the problem and provide solutions to it.

Agricultural change, including wide scale drainage and heavy grazing has had a negative impact on the curlew's breeding habitat. In Northern Ireland, the curlew is a legitimate quarry species during the open season, although it is thought that the numbers shot are very small 40 to 50 (BASC). It is fully protected elsewhere in the UK.

Proposals to give full statutory protection to the Curlew

We need to establish whether the decline is to the resident population or the over-wintering migratory population or both.

Therefore, in order to preserve the population, we believe that further scientific studies should be conducted to ascertain whether the decline in the resident Curlew population is due to shooting or the loss of habitat and or climate change.

If proven scientific evidence indicates that shooting is indeed the reason for the decline in our resident population then we would agree that Curlew should be removed from the quarry list, but only on the condition that their status is reviewed every five years and that additional habitat improvement initiatives are created for wading birds.

Snares and the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill

Current status

Snaring is subject to legal restrictions and when properly practised is an effective and humane form of pest and in particular, fox control. Fox control is necessary in order to ensure that damage to game, wildlife and livestock by fox predation is reduced to acceptable levels, particularly at vulnerable times of the year e.g. nesting and lambing time.

It is the responsibility of all those involved in fox control to ensure their methods are legal, humane and carried out with sensitivity and respect for other countryside users and wildlife.

Without snaring, fox and rabbit numbers will increase because other methods cannot make up the gap in control. Opponents of snaring claim it is an indiscriminate method of pest control that regularly catches non-target species. This is false. A well-designed snare, set correctly, is a highly effective and targeted method of restraining foxes and rabbits until they can be humanely dispatched.

The Environment Committee may wish to refer to legislation as it relates to snaring in Scotland; snares have to be free-running and must have a stop, so they cannot tighten beyond a prescribed width for restraint only. New snare designs are also being developed that will allow any non-target animals to break away.

It is estimated that snaring accounts for 30% of all foxes controlled by gamekeepers and shoot managers each year and on some land where it would be difficult to use other methods, this figure is as high as 75%.

If snaring is banned, we will face a huge battle to prevent increased fox predation of ground-nesting birds, leverets and restrict rabbit damage.

Countryside Alliance Ireland opposes any attempt to ban the use of legal snares in Northern Ireland.

Recommendation

Countryside Alliance Ireland would support the introduction of a licensing system for Northern Ireland.