

These are general comments from the Scottish Crofting Federation on the current situation with regard to agricultural and environmental damage being caused by geese and in response to the letter from NatureScot dated 27 May 2022 to Members of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee.

### **Goose Management Projects**

In August 2021 NatureScot announced they would cease funding Local Goose Management Groups who facilitate control of resident greylag geese in the former Adaptive Management Pilot areas of Tiree & Coll, Uist, Lewis & Harris, and Orkney. Of major concern was the impact on biodiversity if the Groups lacked the financial capacity to control resident greylag goose population numbers.

Following representation from the Scottish Crofting Federation and others, Mairi McAllan, Environment Minister, agreed to provide Scottish Government funding of £50,000 for the current and next year to the areas mentioned above.

This intervention is appreciated however, although the headline figure of £50,000 per year seems a great deal, when the amount is broken down to, for example, £6,000 for Uist, it will barely keep numbers of geese static let alone reduce to a sustainable population.

### **Impacts on biodiversity**

While it is correct for NatureScot to say cropping is critical to the management of this very special habitat and high densities of geese can have an impact on it, the population of resident greylag geese has increased significantly since the adaptive pilot programmes came to an end some years ago. For example, in Uist during the Pilot numbers were reduced briefly to the upper range of the target of from between 3800 and 4200 birds. The count carried out in September 2021 recorded around 8000 greylag geese.

The adaptive management scheme on Uist at one time had a budget of £40,000 per year. This was reduced on a diminishing scale to £5,000 per year, then it was cut to zero. Crofters have agreed they can live with about 2500 birds with rises to above that on an occasional basis.

### **Machair cropping on Uist**

Winter feed is widely cultivated on the machairs and crops grown have traditionally been a mix of small black oats, bere barley and rye suitable for the low nutrient sandy soils and is unique to these islands. These very old varieties are not commercially available on the mainland and the islands have always had to be self-reliant for seed.

Continuation of machair cropping as a viable activity is highly important for the wider biodiversity that makes the machair such a complex and unique ecosystem. Widespread use by crofters of seaweed as fertiliser and soil binder encourages productivity of machair plants which support a wide range of insects and pollinators such as many species of beetles and bumblebees.

### **Damage caused by geese**

Damage caused by geese includes them grazing grass, especially new grass meant for livestock; eating silage spread on the ground and in feed rings; soiling grassland and arable ground in some cases poisoning land intended for cultivation; eating newly sown cereal shoots; and, eating and destroying standing crops making harvesting of indigenous seed considerably less productive or entirely impossible. Anecdotal data from 2019 showed that four machairs had ceased to produce seed because of geese.

Greylag geese are the crofters' common enemy and, it has to be realised, the enemy of the environment.

### **Scottish Government funding**

The Uist Local Goose Management Group pays £8 per evidenced greylag goose shot and the £6,000 funding for this and next year will account for 750 birds each year. Storás Uibhist, the community landowner of South Uist and parts of Benbecula shoots around 1500 geese per year between their bounty scheme and those shot by their keepers. They allocate £10,000 per year agreed by their Board on a year-to-year basis.

Natural recruitment of young geese entering the population including mortality is about 30% in terms of population. So, doing some quick maths, 8000 less 2250 shot equals 5750 plus 2400 equals 8150.

The Chief Executive of Storás Uibhist provided the following statement:

*As you will be aware, the numbers of geese, in particular greylags, are having an increasingly significant impact on crofting activities across the South Uist Estate.*

*Stòras Uibhist have committed significant staff time and resource to address the problem and in addition, we are actively supporting townships efforts with financial support for shooting and scaring. However, a community-owned estate like ours cannot realistically address the problem on our own. Currently we are spending many thousands of pounds each year to simply stand still, not improve the problem.*

*It is becoming increasingly apparent that the goose population represents a genuinely existential threat to our crofting community. Whilst the £6,000 of support for goose management from NatureScot is welcome, it represents only a drop in the ocean and we would call on the government to urgently review the problem and dramatically increase funding so a permanent solution, rather than simply a sticking plaster one, can be found to this problem.*

The Scottish Government funding allocated to the other former adaptive management pilot areas may prove to be more effective. However, in any case, funding is for this and next year – what happens after then?

### **What should be the next steps?**

Clearly, more needs to be done, particularly in terms of significantly reducing population size. Novel methods such as corralling being trialled in Orkney could be developed for use in other areas, although it is recognised there are certain sensitivities to be overcome.

Continuation of funding sufficient to allow this to happen, and funding on a realistic and permanent basis rather than piecemeal year to year.

Serious recognition from Government and NatureScot that it is crofters who maintain the fragile environment through traditional machair cropping presently being endangered by ever-increasing numbers of greylag geese.

The soon to begin five-yearly review into goose management in Scotland will examine what has and has not been successful and will make recommendations for the future. However, by the time the review gathers evidence and reports to Ministers, the former adaptive management pilot areas will be left in limbo as the second year of funding pays for the Spring 2023 cull which is fast approaching.

If funding for controlling geese were to stop, as was the case until concerted lobbying from local goose management groups and the Crofting Federation, it would have profound impact. This would not only be in terms of degradation of the unique environment created and maintained by machair cropping, but also on the economic and mental wellbeing of individual crofters.

*As a Uist crofter recently said “NatureScot needs to make their mind up about what they want; crofters, cattle and the environmental benefits they bring; or geese.”*