



## Sparrowhawks and Racing Pigeons

RSPB Scotland response to the licensed translocation of sparrowhawks

### Summary

The Scottish Government is in the process of considering whether to issue a licence to the Scottish Homing Union (SHU) for a trial project to translocate sparrowhawks (*Accipiter nisus*) at fifteen racing pigeon lofts in central Scotland, ostensibly to test whether this measure protects racing pigeons from predation. At this stage, the trial will be non-lethal, but it can be expected that calls for lethal control of sparrowhawks will follow. The legal advice we have received concludes that the trial itself may not be lawful and that, regardless of this, any resulting licensed removal or killing of sparrowhawks would not be legal. Our scientific assessment of the proposed methodology for this trial, and associated monitoring, shows that it is severely flawed in several respects, not least because it does not explore the fate of the sparrowhawks that will be removed.

Any change in the law to protect racing pigeons at the expense of protected birds of prey, such as sparrowhawks and peregrines, is resisted by RSPB Scotland (and large sections of the Scottish public, based on public comments in the press and elsewhere). Birds of prey are an important and natural part of Scotland's wildlife spectacle, which attracts many thousands of tourists each year and valuable income to many communities.

We firmly believe that a change in the law to permit the lethal control of sparrowhawks and other raptors, that sometimes take racing pigeons as prey, is not supported by the published scientific research. The latest Scottish research shows that sparrowhawks take less than 1% of released racing pigeons (*Columba livia*) annually and, although this predation may be very distressing when witnessed, it is a negligible threat to the interests of pigeon fanciers. The research shows that most racing pigeons that go missing are not killed by sparrowhawks and other birds of prey but stray off course or are lost to bad weather. In these circumstances, we believe proposals for translocation or lethal control cannot comply with the Scottish domestic legislation which the Scottish Parliament reinforced when passing the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004, or with the underpinning EU legislation.

This trial would proceed against the legal and conservation advice from Scottish Natural Heritage, the Scottish Government's advisors on nature conservation. We consider that this is a disproportionate response to this issue and it will not resolve the concerns of pigeon fanciers.

### Background

Some pigeon fanciers and their organisations have called for birds of prey, particularly peregrines and sparrowhawks, to be removed or killed to protect their interests. These calls continue despite the results of scientific studies, which clearly and consistently conclude that removal or lethal control is not justified.

RSPB Scotland remains vigorously opposed to the killing or removal of birds of prey. This position is based on the basic ecology of these species. They are highly sensitive to slight increases in mortality over and above their naturally low death rates. This is illustrated by the

former complete extermination of several species within Scotland and the removal of others from wide areas of the country where they would otherwise naturally occur. Although there has been substantial recovery by some species - including sparrowhawks - from this historical situation, they remain permanently vulnerable to local extinction. The most recent surveys of the UK sparrowhawk population show a slight overall decline (BTO Breeding Bird Survey, 1994-2006).

The deliberate illegal killing of many bird of prey species is still a widely recognised threat to their long-term conservation status. Last year, 2007, was one of the worst on record for this problem. To legalise the killing or removal of birds of prey by adding to this existing illegal threat would be highly irresponsible. Healthy raptor populations are in any case an indication of the health of the environment.

RSPB Scotland sympathises with those whose pigeons may have been affected by sparrowhawks, but feels that this interest should be safeguarded by ameliorative measures and should not come before the UK's international responsibility to protect our raptor populations. Pigeon owners must accept there are some natural risks in the environment into which they choose to deliberately release their birds.

The RSPB encourages racing pigeon organisations to fund research into the effectiveness of methods to deter birds of prey that do not involve killing or other forms of removal, as well as to learn more about the causes of large numbers of pigeons straying - the underlying factor in most pigeon losses. We have offered to advise on this research.

## Conclusions

- Sparrowhawk impacts on racing pigeons are extremely low when compared to other factors such as straying, bad weather, domestic cats and collisions (see overleaf).
- There is no scientific justification for suggesting that the killing or removal of sparrowhawks is an appropriate, proportionate response to this issue.

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**Registered Charity Scotland Number SC037654, England and Wales Number 207076 – March 2008**  
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