

Curlews in Galloway

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This was all said on a wing and a prayer, so apologies if it misses anything out –

My name is Patrick and I was brought up in a farming family in Galloway, focused on a 1600Ac hill farm producing blackface and scotch mule lambs. I trained as a gamekeeper, but went into farming because from my perspective, farmers are the people who will really deliver change for conservation.

Wife and I started a herd of pedigree galloway cattle to enable us to improve curlew habitats and conditions. Traditional habitat management is crucial for success.

Curlews have undergone shocking declines in Galloway over the last few years – from my own observations this is linked to breeding failure.

2010- 2018

- 111 nesting attempts observed
- 12 nests survived long enough to hatch
- 1 chick survived long enough to fledge

On the main (upland) hill -

- 2010 - 7 breeding pairs
- 2018 - 1 breeding pair
- Zero fledged

Rather than dwell on tales of decline, I wanted to quickly discuss two factors which are relevant to the day's discussion

1) why is it hard to get farmers engaged in curlew conservation?

- This is a busy time cutting silage.
- Curlews are loved, but they are not financially relevant.
- It is not clear how payments for “ecosystem services” will include curlews/biodiversity.
- Many young farmers do not know what curlews are and do not show interest.
- Older farmers view the declines as unavoidable/inevitable.
- Poor understanding of how farming practices impact on curlews
- General belief that curlews are declining as a result of predation, and this cannot be changed.

2) What is it like to undertake predator control?

- We increasingly agree that predator control is part of the answer to curlew declines, but we do not have people in place to deliver that work.
- Predator control is hard, boring, stressful and grim. How can we encourage people to undertake it?
- Farmers are extremely reluctant to get involved in killing foxes and crows – we have all been under pressure to stay away from predators for the last 20yrs – how do we begin to turn this around and get farmers involved again?
- I have been arrested by the police for undertaking legal predator control (wrongfully!) My traps have been smashed, verbal abuse from members of the public, long hours, difficult work – predator control is a poison chalice – why would anyone take the risk of ending up in a police cell?
- Badgers are an unspoken problem. They eat many curlew eggs, but they also smash traps designed for foxes and crows and make predator control much harder.

We have spent the last 20yrs making predator control extremely difficult. If we decide that we need to control fox and crow numbers, how do we make it accessible again?

Curlews may be doomed in Galloway – it might be too late.