



GOOSE POPULATION MANAGEMENT IN LEWIS AND HARRIS

Report by Director of Development

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To consider options available to crofters to control geese causing damage to crops and grassland in Lewis and Harris.

COMPETENCE

- 1.1 There are no legal, financial or other constraints to the recommendations being implemented.

SUMMARY

- 2.1 The issue of increasing numbers of geese in Lewis and Harris has been raised at successive meetings of the Sustainable Development Committee over recent years. At the last meeting, Members asked whether data was available on numbers in Lewis and Harris and if not whether a count could be organised.
- 2.2 Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has attempted to set up a goose management group similar to that operating in Uist. A letter was sent out to all grazings clerks, land owners and the Scottish Crofting Foundation (SCF) and a meeting held in September 2003. Unfortunately, there was a very poor turnout and concern was expressed by some landowners about the impact on tourism. Without support from crofters, landowners and the SCF a management committee similar to that operating in Uist could not be established in Lewis and Harris.
- 2.3 The significant change in the pattern of land ownership in Lewis and Harris Since 2003 has created opportunities for crofters to work with community-owned estates to manage the goose population of the area effectively. It has also been established that there is demand for access to open-season shooting of geese from local groups. It is therefore proposed that setting up a Goose Management Group on Lewis and Harris should be revisited.
- 2.4 A Scottish Government review of the National Goose Policy is due early in 2010. The Comhairle may be able to respond to any consultation carried out as part of that review.
- 2.5 A possible longer term solution may be derogation from the ban on selling goose carcasses in the islands. This may provide a greater incentive to better utilise the effective management of the population through open season shooting. In addition the Comhairle signed an agreement with RSPB and SNH in January 2009 to work together to develop a strategy for goose population management in the Western Isles as detailed in the Appendix and a meeting will be held shortly to take this forward.
- 2.6 SNH will give a presentation on Goose management in Uist and options available to crofters and landowners in Lewis and Harris.

RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 **It is recommended that the Comhairle note the options open to crofters for controlling geese outlined in the report and in the presentation by Scottish Natural Heritage.**

Contact Officer: Murdo MacKay, Economic Development Officer (Land Resources)
Appendix: Forward Strategy to Manage the Goose Population of the Outer Hebrides

BACKGROUND

- 4.1 The Scottish Government have advised that: *“where geese are making use of agricultural land, initial responsibility rests with the farmer, who should take steps to minimise damage to crops and grass by scaring and, where appropriate and legally possible, shooting geese.”* They have also stated that *“farmers and crofters can reduce damage by Greylag geese by shooting during the open season and can obtain licences for the same purpose during the close season. We are not aware of the extent to which crofters in Lewis and Harris are scaring and/or shooting geese but this must be the first consideration.”*
- 4.2 In the open-season Greylag geese are a quarry species and can be shot legally (with the permission of the holder of any sporting rights that may exist) from 1 September through to 31 January (or to 20 February on the foreshore). In the first instance individual crofters who are experiencing problems should inform the landlord and seek permission to shoot. In most cases landlords are happy to accommodate this request on a crofter’s own croft. If the problem is on common grazing land then organised shoots can be arranged through the grazings committee, or the committee can authorise an individual to shoot in certain areas. However, the permission of the landlord would again be required.
- 4.3 Under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, it is illegal to sell wild goose meat - but it can be used for domestic consumption.
- 4.4 Although the number of guns retained by crofters has, in all probability, reduced over recent years as legislation on gun ownership has tightened, there are a significant number of guns held by crofters in all areas of Lewis and Harris. However, many crofters are not able to devote the time to this activity that may be required.
- 4.5 An alternative would be for townships, landowners, or indeed individual crofters, to ask others to carry out the shooting. There is interest in shooting from organised clubs - and an advert was placed in the local press in 2008 from a party interested in acquiring goose shooting in Lewis. However, the advert attracted only one response.
- 4.5 It is clear from current policy that crofters and farmers are required to take initial steps to protect crops and grass land. Given the comparatively low numbers of geese compared with Uist control measures are likely to be effective if shooting effort is maintained.
- 4.6 A review of national goose management policy is about to begin - which is expected to report through the National Goose Management Review Group (NGMRG) in June 2010. This will include a full review of legislative requirements and the effectiveness of current goose-management schemes. In light of recent changes in all of the goose populations that frequent Scotland, the review will also consider whether changes need to be made to the way goose populations are managed in Scotland.
- 4.7 In 2008, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) led a research project and commissioned the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust (WWT) to carry out some predictive population modelling of the native Greylag Goose population in North West Scotland. The study identified that shooting activity in the Uists aimed at 20–25% of population on an annual basis, would reduce the numbers over the next five to ten years significantly. Given the much smaller population in Lewis and Harris, a relatively small number of birds shot would have a significant impact on overall numbers.
- 4.8 The modelling also demonstrated that shooting was more effective than egg-oiling or pricking. In the Uists the annual bag needs to be maintained at about 1,200 birds to achieve a meaningful reduction in numbers. This level of shooting has been achieved in recent years.
- 4.9 Arising from this work, agreement has been reached with SNH and the RSPB for a forward strategy to manage the goose population of the Outer Hebrides. A copy of this agreement is appended.

FORWARD STRATEGY TO MANAGE THE GOOSE POPULATION OF THE OUTER HEBRIDES

An agreement between Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Scotland, hereinafter referred to as the Partner Agencies.

1. The Partner Agencies recognise that a serious problem exists with the detrimental impacts of Greylag Geese on crofting agriculture in the Outer Hebrides and agree to work together to reduce these impacts on arable crops and the internationally important machair habitat.
2. Partner Agencies agree that better targeted and resourced measures, with the aim of delivering good agricultural conditions, and sustainable goose populations, would be an integral part of the solution to this problem.
3. Partner Agencies will work together to develop a Forward Strategy for goose population management on the basis set out above. This strategy will seek to manage goose numbers in such a way as to ensure that the conservation status of the resident Greylag Geese is not protected at the expense of other important natural heritage interests, and of the agricultural activities that have created and are necessary to maintain not only the livelihoods of those managing the land but also those same natural heritage interests.
4. Given recent population trends, such management will include goose deterrent zones, refuge areas and lethal and non lethal measures. The aim will be to bring goose numbers into equilibrium with these other interests and thereafter to maintain the population at an agreed sustainable level.
5. This strategy will be implemented in tandem with the EU LIFE+ Conservation Management of the Machair Project - provided that the project receives funding support.

Signed:

Print Name:

Date:

On behalf of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Signed:

Print Name:

Date:

On behalf of Scottish Natural Heritage

Signed:

Print Name:

Date:

On behalf of RSPB Scotland