

# IN THE FIELD

SEPTEMBER 2021

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

## “POOR GROUSE”

It is easy to forget, looking out across miles of heather moorland in all its purple glory on a blistering late August day, that there was snow in November and December and the whole of May was an absolute stinker. Day after day of bitterly low temperatures and driving rain, with snow on high ground towards the end of the month. The worst possible combination for hen grouse about to lay, with heather in shocking condition just when they needed nourishment most. Nor did it improve in time to provide the nutritious shoots of new heather essential for the survival of young grouse chicks coming off insects, with mortality rates further exacerbated among already weakened birds by stress during the very hot dry weather in June and July.

This series of accumulative natural disasters has created a situation where the 2021 season looks to be the worst since the mid 90's, with very few moors having any surplus of grouse to shoot and although there may be some late broods, most moor owners are taking the view that what there is, needs to be conserved for future breeding stock. A bitter blow for overseas visitors who had last season disrupted due to Covid, to say nothing of the lost income to local economies, beaters and pickers-up, but to the whole moorland gamekeeping community, to miss the highlight of their working year.

It is sod's law that this should happen just as generations of moorland management through shooting and conservation is now recognised as vital to biodiversity and the landscape. For the second time in five years, a petition calling for a ban on driven grouse shooting has been rejected, on the grounds this would negatively impact conservation efforts, local economies and the social wellbeing of those who take part. Of the eleven MPs involved in the debate on the 21st of June, only two were in favour of a stopping driven grouse shooting and their reasons for wanting a ban were squashed by an overwhelming volume of evidence supporting the status quo.

One of those in support of grouse shooting was the SNP MP for Angus, David Doogan. Mr Doogan argued that grouse shooting should not be banned as it contributes to the local economy and although his comments refer to moors in his own constituency, they are applicable to all grouse moors: *“Reflecting on my own constituency, I know very keenly how important employment on the estates is for communities in the Angus Glens—for the schools, hotels, shops and the petrol station. The total absence in those communities of alternative employment means that the number of potential job losses is not as important as the effect of those job losses on those communities. We must not let anyone kid themselves that this is an issue of just one job here or another job there; it is about the living viability of very fragile, very rural communities and economies.”*



Sir (Walter) John Scott, Bt. MFH

Sir Johnny (as he is better known) is an author, natural historian, broadcaster, columnist, countryside campaigner, artisan snuff manufacturer and retired hill farmer.

He wrote and co-presented the BBC2 series *Clarissa and the Countryman* with Clarissa Dickson Wright. He writes for a variety of magazines and periodicals on field sports, food, farming, travel, history and rural affairs.

A lifetime devotee of the countryside and its sports, he is currently:

- Joint Master, The North Pennine Hunt
- Regional Director, Vote OK.
- President, The Gamekeepers Welfare Trust.
- President, The Tay Valley Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Newcastle Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Association of Working Lurchers / Longdogs.
- Centenary Patron and Honorary Life Member, British Association for Shooting and Conservation.
- Patron, The Sporting Lucas Terrier Association.
- Patron, The Wildlife Ark Trust.
- Patron, The National Organisation of Beaters and Pickers Up.
- Board member, The European Squirrel Initiative.

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Furthermore, a new report from the University of Northampton has concluded that there is no better alternative use of our uplands than integrated moorland management. The 242 page paper reviewed the evidence base of sustainable driven grouse shooting against the various alternative uses of moorland. Within this, it considered three major factors; economic, social and environmental. The report concluded that if the public and government value heather moorland landscapes, these moorlands need to be looked after. The study found that the current model of integrated management offers a sustainable approach to maintaining such landscapes and there was no evidence that other management regimes would deliver on such a scale.

Professor James Crabbe, an Emeritus Professor and Supernumerary Fellow at Oxford University, was the independent chair of the report and stressed the need for objectivity, saying; *"We have looked at all sides of an argument in an attempt to be as objective as possible and to remove any emotional and political elements which driven grouse shooting has in the past engendered. We feel that the report will be very important in making sure that negative environmental, economic and social impacts will not be used in this important part of our land and our heritage."* The Prof has got it in one. Game, set and match.

Scientific evidence and parliamentary support for the uplands aside, the industry is currently in an increasingly strong position. At the Game Fair on July 23rd. nine shooting organisations; BASC, the CLA, Scottish Land and Estates, British Game Alliance, Game Farmers Association, British Game Alliance, Moorland Association, Countryside Alliance and National Gamekeepers Association, with the GWCT acting as advisors - launched 'Aim to Sustain'. Formed to highlight the crucial role that sustainable game shooting plays in delivering biodiversity net gain through conserving, preserving and protecting cherished landscapes and their wildlife, these organisations seek to protect and promote sustainable shooting, biodiversity and the rural community.

Over the three days of the Game Fair, BASC welcomed 6 cross-party peers and 26 MP's including the Defra Minister, the Shadow Defra Minister and the Minister for Sport, Heritage and Tourism - the largest political engagement in the history of the Game fair - who came to be educated about the work the partnership have achieved in promoting sustainability, conservation and the sound management of the countryside.

That's the way to get things done.



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