

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on PE2119: Help protect the Black Grouse by reviewing how new forestry schemes are regulated and implemented

The petitioner is calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the operation of the Woodland Creation scheme and:

- make it mandatory that all new deer fencing is marked with wooden droppers where necessary as it is erected to help prevent bird strike
- require all work on these schemes to be stopped or paused by the end of March to protect ground nesting birds
- require NatureScot to carry out initial and annual Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) to consider what effects woodland creation is having on resident wildlife
- ensure any recipient of a forestry grant who then puts the forest up for sale must return the grant in full when sold.

Black Grouse in Scotland

A [2008 study published in the Journal of the British Trust for Ornithology](#) was the last UK-wide survey of black grouse. The study estimated that the UK population of Black Grouse was 5,100 males - the greatest proportion of which were in Scotland at 3,400. This Scottish-based population showed a significant decline of 29% since the prior study which was carried out in 1995-96.

In 2020, the [Avian Population Estimates Panel \(APEP\) published their most recent estimates for birds in the UK](#). They estimated that there were 4,850 male black grouse in the UK. However, there was no breakdown by each nation.

As these numbers suggest, the Black Grouse is a rare and endangered bird. In 2021, it remained on the [red list for birds of conservation concern](#). The list is compiled by a coalition of the UK's leading bird conservation and monitoring organisations.

There has been work within Scotland to increase numbers of Black Grouse. For example, at their site in Corrimony, [the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds \(RSPB\) reported an increase from 16 lekking \(breeding\) males in 1997 to 59 lekking males in 2018](#).

In 2024, a new [community-focused programme of black grouse surveys](#) was launched by Affric Highlands rewilding and RSPB Scotland in collaboration with

Forestry and Land Scotland and local landowners. Whilst the survey results are yet to be published in full, they have reported that between April and May 2024, 14 sites in the Beaulieu area were assessed. The 2024 survey recorded 405 lekking males, which was an increase compared to the 2007 survey where 250 lekking males were counted.

Threats to the Black Grouse in Scotland

[The handbook for species management in Scotland \(2007 – 2012\)](#) states that Black grouse are birds of transitional habitats, generally preferring the moorland/woodland edge in north Scotland and the moorland/farmland fringe in the south. Within these areas they are largely dependent on a mosaic of scrub and an understory of heather and blaeberry.

[Forestry Commission Scotland's Action for Black Grouse research note](#) found that there are many threats to black grouse including habitat loss and degradation, predation, weather and disease. As well as both overgrazing and undergrazing.

Another threat identified is deer and stock fences due to bird strike. Scottish charity [Trees for Life have identified that the black grouse fly at a low level when startled](#), meaning that they often do not see fences and collide with them.

Fencing and Black Grouse

Two quantified studies in the Scottish Highlands have been carried out on bird collision rates with fences. The study by Catt et al (1994) reported mean collision rates for capercaillie and black grouse of 0.4, whereas Baines and Summers (1997) found a 0.6 collision rate per kilometre, identifying such a rate as potentially damaging to the population.

A [2003 study published in Biological Conservation](#) found that from April 1995 to May 1997, significantly fewer birds collided with sections of deer fence marked with orange netting than the unmarked control sections. Collision rates in marked sections were 91% lower for black grouse.

In 2012, [the Forestry Commission commented on that study](#) suggesting that there were much more effective prevention methods to netting, including the attachment of sawn wooden droppers (posts) to fences at relatively close intervals. However, other materials, such as use of bamboo in fencing, scored lower than barrier netting. The study commented that bamboo canes only provide a limited visual area, only at around 25% of other materials. They suggest that bamboo should only be used as a last resort to mark fencing on extremely high-exposure sites.

Forestry disturbance and Black Grouse

[The Woodland Trust state that the breeding season for grouse usually takes place from early April to mid-May](#). Nests are built on the ground in May.

[Forest operations and birds in Scottish forests \(the law and good practice\)](#) states that operations or recreational activities should be avoided within 1km of known capercaillie or black grouse lek sites between 1 March and 15 May. [Nature Scot](#)

[have also published guidance](#) stating that nesting females need 100-150m buffer zone and have a medium likely sensitivity to disturbance.

Forestry Grant Scheme

The [Forestry Grant Scheme](#) (FGS), overseen by Scottish Forestry, offers financial support for the creation of new woodland and the sustainable management of existing woodland. Within the scheme, there are a range of support options covering planting, woodland protection, harvesting and more. As an example, under the FGS [Small Woodland Loan Scheme](#), there are [multiple documents outlining benefits, advice and guidance](#) in relation to planting on a variety of landscapes / habitats. Further information is available on the [Scottish Government Rural Payments and Services webpages](#).

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