

## A PRICKLY ISSUE – RSPB CONservation hooliganism at work.

*Source:* <http://sci.tech–archive.net/Archive/sci.agriculture.poultry/2004–08/0234.html>

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Interesting post at Scotland oNLINE

[http://www.scotlandonline.com/outdoors/columista.cfm?feature\\_cat\\_id=27&selectedfeature\\_id=2899](http://www.scotlandonline.com/outdoors/columista.cfm?feature_cat_id=27&selectedfeature_id=2899)

### A PRICKLY ISSUE

The booming hedgehog population in the Outer Hebrides is to be culled to protect birds on the islands but Dave Hewitt questions the policy and urges the prickly creatures to fly, fly away.

One of the curious aspects of writing about hills and suchlike over a number of years is how certain incidents and controversies, although seeming significant for the writer/observer at the time, can end up not being written about at all.

In my own case I've never produced more than a few incidental words about the most dramatic/traumatic incident of my hill career: hurtling 200m down a rather steep slope on Braeriach 20 years ago this coming summer. I was, as you might imagine, a tad lucky to survive relatively unscathed (apart from a dagger-like puncture just above the waist, deep enough that I could see something of my guts if I cared to look). But I've never really written about this – perhaps because, even two decades on, the psychological wound remains raw. One day though.

Similarly I'll one day have a go at recounting the angers and emotions arising from an encounter on the Ochils in May 2001, just as the foot and mouth mayhem was starting to calm down. I was accosted by, growled at and generally cursed by the local hill shepherd, a man for whom I had (and still have) the utmost respect and no little liking, but who that day was of the opinion that I "of all people" should not have been anywhere near what he saw as his hill. This despite the local council having given the taxpaying public the nod to return to the tops – and, unless I'm much mistaken, I do get to vote for/against the council, whereas shepherds, farmers and landowners tend not to be subject to the public mandate.

Again, this was a raw incident, one which troubled me greatly (and which still does, not least because I've yet to bump into the shepherd again). It troubled me on a wider–rights versus personal–hassle basis, and again I've not yet felt able to tackle the subject in print – mainly because the case doesn't feel closed, and won't do until I manage to make my peace with the man in question.

The time has come, however, to mention a third incident that I've been avoiding. In the spring of 2000 (on 18 April 2000, to be precise), I was in the awkward–of–access southern tip of the Hebrides: the islands of Mingulay, Pabbay, Sandray and Berneray aka Barra Head. I was there on a newspaper commission for The Scotsman, this being in the time before Scotland On Line took me under its benign wing. The assignment was to team up with a group of Marilynbagging hill runners who were keen (well, gagging, to tell the truth) to visit and bag the high–points of the five uninhabited Marilyn–height Barra Head islands. (As it was we reached the four already mentioned but missed out on Muldoanich.)

It was in almost all respects a great trip. The weather was near perfect – I sat on deck throughout the five–hour CalMac sailings from Oban to Castlebay and back, and it was just as good during the three days between. The various Barra Marylins were picked off, then came the big day down south, for which the runners had chartered a boat from a local hotelier–cum–ferryman. Trouble was, the hoped for smallish boat was unavailable so we ended up with a hefty inter–island ferry. This was ideal in terms of cutting through some potentially very choppy waters (and it cut down journey times as well), but it cost a good deal more to hire. So we arranged to take a few paying passengers, and this was the origin of the incident I now feel the need to recount.

The passengers were birders, a mix of RSPB staff and members, and by and large their heavily binocularled party and our edgy–anxious running group didn't intermingle much. That was fine, though – they generally seemed an OK bunch, were able to share the cost, and had no problem with our one stricture – that their birdwatching/beachwandering activities had to be entirely scheduled around our running/bagging agenda. If we said Right, we're leaving Island A to zip off to Island B, they had to jump aboard sharpish, time and tide being precious. And jump aboard they did, no problem.

There was however one incident, or rather a series of versions of the same incident, which marred the day for me and which has stayed with me over the subsequent two–and–a–half years. On the initial chug south out of Castlebay (we were going to Mingulay first, around an hour away), I was sitting with some of the RSPBers – staff as far as I recall. One locally–senior staffer was present, along with several twentysomething blokes in her employ.

We must have been about halfway between Castlebay and Mingulay when one of the RSPBers first made a joke along the lines of: Oh, and if anyone sees a hedgehog on any of these islands, don't forget to stamp on it. Over the next while, this joke was repeated in various forms by various of the birders, each version involving the words hedgehog and stamp. They all evidently thought this was hilarious, and the whole routine had the air of not being a new idea, rather an ongoing in-joke. It was almost as though stamp on a hedgehog was being used as a slogan-cum-catechism by the conservationists.

This, as far as I can recall, was the first time I'd become aware of the wader/hedgehog problem on the Uists and adjoining islands, and it left me feeling both puzzled and ill at ease. For the record, in case anyone has missed the story in recent news reports, there is a problem on the Outer Hebrides whereby four non-indigenous hedgehogs introduced into an islander's garden in the 1970s subsequently escaped and bred, such that the local wader population has seen a great many of its eggs munched by the rampaging hedgehogs. This in turn led to a recent Scottish Natural Heritage edict that while some of the hedgehogs are to be relocated to the mainland, 5000 are to be culled. Cue the predictable outcry from the hedgehog fans.

All this was new to me in April 2000 however, and the profile of the problem was at that stage very low. It didn't register enough for me to write anything about waders and hedgehogs for the paper – my eventual piece majored on islands and bagging and the general trip-of-a-lifetime feelgood factor. But I was unsettled by what seemed to be the cavalier – even callous – attitude of RSPB staff, and I feel even more unsettled by it – angered even – now that both the RSPB and SNH have spun their PR machines into operation to justify the culling of hedgehogs. There has been much talk of the need to do this for the general good of biodiversity, of how the best interests of the various species are being considered, of how there is no other sensible solution to the problem – and much use of the word "humane". All I can think of however is the glee with which the RSPB staffers on the boat chose to voice their own version of "humane killing".

Now don't get me wrong – I'm not for a moment advocating that even a single hedgehog be left on the Outer Isles. I totally agree that there is a problem here, that the hedgehogs ought never to have been introduced and that they have no place on the islands. Get them out of there, for sure. Let the waders breed in peace. But where I – and many others – disagree with the stated SNH policy is on how the hedgehogs ought to be dealt with. The party line is that it is inhumane/cruel/impractical to relocate hedgehogs – I heard an SNH spokesman say as much on Lesley Riddoch's Radio Scotland programme last week, and a similar stance has been taken elsewhere. I'm far from convinced by this. It could be true (although there seems to be a singular lack of hard evidence), but it appears not to have been

tested nor is it due to be tested – and the original Uist hedgehogs survived fine enough when they were transported there in the first place, fine enough to breed like mad.

The hedgehog protection societies argue that hedgehogs (which are much sought after by gardeners, due to their appetite for slugs and snails) have often been successfully relocated, without any major trauma, and there is material evidence for this in the form of hedgehogs placed in gardens and woods after spells in animal sanctuaries and hospitals. This evidence appears to be completely ignored/dismissed by SNH.

There is also an argument that to relocate hedgehogs is to upset the delicate eco-balance between species in other areas, and that there is a massive over-abundance of hedgehogs anyway. Again the evidence for this looks dubious, to my eyes at least. There are plenty of hedgehogs on the mainland, but not in overload proportions. Almost any gardener/garden-owner will say that (a) yes please, they would like a few more hedgehogs in their garden and (b) there don't seem to be as many around as there used to be. In my own case, as a garden-owner in Stirling (a pathetically small sample, I know), there seems to have been a slight decline in the local hedgehog population and any kind of influx would be welcome. Perhaps the experts know better, however. Perhaps.

What I don't understand here is why such an absolutist line is being taken by SNH, especially given that it's rapidly turning into a PR embarrassment for them. Surely a more sensible approach would be to attempt a partial relocation of, say, 500 hedgehogs and see how that goes. Study whether these hedgehogs survive the initial uplift and transfer, then assess whether they fit in with the pre-existing local population (and other species) in their new neighbourhood.

The machinery for this seems to be all there – the hedgehog societies have expressed themselves more than willing to put people, time and money into "salvage". And, from what I understand of the culling process, SNH staff have to catch the hedgehogs anyway, so the most fiddly aspect of all this needs to happen regardless of whether the hedgehogs die or are moved to hedgerows new.

So what's actually happening? It's hard to tell, amid all the jargon and the pleased-with-itself eco-babble of the mainstream conservation organisations (who have learned much about evasion and accountability-avoidance from the politicians in recent years), but there has surely been some heavy behind-the-scenes lobbying of SNH by the RSPB.

My partner Tessa and I holidayed on South Uist in summer 2001 and the island had signs aplenty outlining the hedgehog/wader problem and requesting that any hedgehog sightings be reported to SNH. No indication was given of what would then happen to any "grassed" hedgehog, and so, when we came across one snuffling around near our

B&B, we found ourselves discussing what best to do. Had the signs said that the hedgehog would be relocated then we would have happily reported its presence. We were fearful however that the RSPB enthusiasm for stamping (or some other "humane" method) would come into the equation at some stage, so we let the hedgehog go on its way. If it then proceeded to eat a few waders' eggs, then that wasn't good, but we reckoned the blame lay with the agencies and authorities for being coy about their intentions.

As with so many things, power comes into play here. In terms of type of organisation, the RSPB and the British Hedgehog Preservation Society (BHPS) are basically the same: charitable bodies mainly concerned with protecting one type of creature. Single-interest lobby groups, if you like, although the RSPB tends to get a bit uppity if couched in such narrow terms. The difference comes in terms of weight of membership, amount of funds and lobbying pressure. The RSPB heavily outscores the BHPS in all these departments, and has (over a period of decades, fair play to it) captured and retained the ear of the government wildlife agencies, be it SNH or English Nature down south. I should add here that I'm a member of the RSPB – for now at least.

The BHPS is a much smaller and weaker lobby group, carrying much less clout. They've been losing out badly here, only latterly attempting – and largely failing – to make up lost ground. What is really needed is for some kind of RSPM – a Royal Society for the Protection of Mammals – to become active in the consultation by way of balancing the RSPB input. (It doesn't help matters that another of the hedgehog protection groupings has taken the Beatrix Potter route and included the word "Tiggywinkles" in its name. Bad move, as it reinforces the impression of their membership as well-meaning-but-clueless lovers of all things cute, as against the hard-nosed realism of the RSPB. It's been hard to find a report or a discussion on the Uist situation these past few weeks in which the pro-cull spokesperson hasn't made some sarcastic-dismissive reference to "the Tiggies". This doesn't feel like playing fair – and if the hedgehog people started sneering about "twitchers" then there would doubtless be something said.)

So this is in effect a plea for a more considered, less polarised policy to be put in place. It appears that there is a solution which might suit everyone – ship the hedgehogs out to the mainland woods and gardens. If this doesn't work, then nothing appears to have been lost. The islands will still have been cleared of hedgehogs (although in reality, whatever happens, this looks to be an extremely optimistic aim), and the hedgehogs will still die albeit in more ordinary and mundane ways. But it might work, in which case everyone ought to be happy – the islands are cleared and the gardens of middle England or wherever acquire a few extra slug-snafflers. It's surely got to be worth a go. What's the problem?

Two more thoughts in closing. One is that before I'm accused of po-facedness or hypocrisy, I should say that I'm not averse to jokes

being made re the hedgehog cull. This struck me last weekend while watching Have I Got News For You, when Ian Hislop asked how the hedgehogs were to be killed. "Lethal injection," replied the curiously nervous and unsure host Jeremy Clarkson, who failed to follow it up with any kind of witticism.

I found myself urging Paul Merton or someone to make the obvious follow-up gag about how maybe they should try the electric chair instead. No one did say this, and the subject petered out, but I wouldn't have been offended had the joke been made. Jokes are all about context and (that word again) power, and it's the job of media commentators to find entertaining/informative ways into dry subjects such as this. It's a different story however when the jokes are being made by the people on the ground who subsequent lobby for the policy in question. (And I bet, even now, that stamp-on-a-hedgehog jokes are still being made by RSPB staff. Discreetly out of earshot of the media, you'll understand.)

And finally, whatever does happen with the hedgehogs, I'll be taking a close interest when a pair of magpies eventually makes its way out to the Uists. As with many other gardens in west-central Scotland (they appear to have not yet fully invaded the east), we have become plagued by magpies. They harass and bully the smaller songbirds, which – as with the waders on the Uists – have been reduced in number. This problem came up in discussion with an RSPB staffer friend a couple of years ago, and he was implacable – the arrival/invasion of the magpies is a "natural" process, and must be allowed to take its course even if other birds suffer.

So no trapping or lethal injections (or electric chairs) for the magpies, which seem to enjoy the protection of the "conservationists" simply because (a) they're birds and (b) they can fly. Come the time they start trashing Hebridean waders' eggs however, these goalposts might be suddenly and conveniently moved. If only hedgehogs had wings...

Dave Hewitt  
26/12/2002

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Myths & Facts Online  
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| NO PLONKING ZONE |

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'You can't win 'em all.'

Lord Haw Haw.

Since I stopped donating money to CONservation hooligan charities

Like the RSPB, Woodland Trust and all the other fat cat charities

I am in the top 0.217% richest people in the world.

There are 5,986,950,449 people poorer than me

If you're really interested I am the 13,049,551

richest person in the world.

And I'm keeping the bloody lot.

So sue me.

<http://www.globalrichlist.com/>

Newsgroup etiquette

- 1) Tell everyone the Trolls don't bother you.
- 2) Say you've killfiled them, yet continue to respond.
- 3) Tell other people off who repsond despite doing so yourself.
- 4) Continually talk about Trolls while maintaining they're having no effect.
- 5) Publicly post killfile rules so the Trolls know how to avoid them.
- 6) Make lame legal threats and other barrel scraping manoeuvres when your abuse reports are ignored.
- 7) Eat vast quantities of pies.
- 8) Forget to brush your teeth for several decades.
- 9) Help a demon.local poster with their email while secretly reading it.
- 10) Pretend you're a hard bastard when in fact you're as bent as a roundabout.
- 11) Become the laughing stock of Usenet like Mabbet
- 12) Die of old age
- 13) Keep paying Dr Chartham his fees and hope one day you will have a penis the girls can see.

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"If you would'nt talk to them in a bar, don't \*uckin' vote for them"

sci.agriculture.poultry: A PRICKLY ISSUE – RSPB CONservation hooliganism at work.

"Australia was not \*discovered\* it was invaded"

The Big Yin.

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