

ONCE IN A LIFETIME

RESTORING WILDLIFE IN THE UK INVOLVES CHANGING THE WAY WE VIEW NATURE, SAYS RSPB CONSERVATION DIRECTOR MARTIN HARPER – AND BREXIT PROVIDES US WITH AN HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY, HE TELLS JAMES FAIR.



The UK has more than 50 per cent of the world's population of northern gannets, with some 300,000 pairs during the breeding season.

The RSPB must change society's values and the way in which people interact with wildlife in order to reverse the declines in UK biodiversity seen over the past 40 or 50 years.

That's the view of director of conservation Martin Harper, who was speaking to *BBC Wildlife* about the society's plans to engineer a transformation in the fortunes of Britain's birds, bats and butterflies over the next one and a half decades.

The RSPB has set itself the ambitious target of quadrupling the amount of land that is well managed for nature in the UK by 2030, increasing from an

estimated 1.2m hectares to nearly 5m hectares.

That will require both improving the habitat of many of our areas in the UK that are protected as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) or under EU legislation (though that may be lost) but also enhancing the quality of our farmed landscape for wildlife.

"At the heart of how we make things better is our belief that part of our role as a charity is to change societal values," Harper said. "Indeed, that's where our charity's origins lie, in changing the way in which humans related to wild birds and the use of feathers in the hat trade."

But Harper warned that it wouldn't happen overnight, and

that some of this engagement would involve difficult issues such as changing our attitude – as a society – to predators and birds of prey especially.

LAND PURCHASES

As part of the RSPB's plans for reversing biodiversity loss, it wants to double its own land-holdings to about 300,000 ha. It currently owns 210 reserves across the UK, and Harper said adding to larger ones such as Forsinard in northern

Scotland's Flow Country – a flat peatland landscape of international significance and a breeding ground for threatened waders such as golden plovers and raptors



THE AREA OF THE UK THAT THE RSPB WANTS TO BE WELL-MANAGED FOR NATURE BY 2030.

such as hen harriers – would be the RSPB's primary strategy.

"We have about 30,000ha there, which is a massive area but, at the same time, the extent of the flows – which is in a degraded state because of historic tree-planting – is enormous," he said. "Our ambition is to restore the flows to their natural state."

BETTER FARMING

But as Harper acknowledged, buying land to improve it and protect wildlife can only achieve a limited amount – even should the RSPB succeed in its aim of doubling its assets, that will give it control of 1.2 per cent of the surface area of the UK.

PRIORITY SPECIES

SEABIRDS

KITTIWAKE

Kittiwakes are the world's most abundant species of gull, but numbers have dropped by 70 per cent since the mid-1980s.

Kittiwakes are surface-feeders of mainly sand eels, and they are affected more than some other seabirds by changes in prey distribution, which may be a result of climate change.



A more important ambition is to look at how some of the other 98.8 per cent can be made better for wildlife. Since 75 per cent of Britain is farmed, then tackling the biodiversity declines in our farmed landscape will be key.

"Given that we have decided to leave the EU and will regain control of agricultural policy, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make land-use policy across the UK work better for wildlife, provided that we bank existing levels of legal protection for those other areas," Harper said.

BREXIT BONUS

In the months before the EU referendum, the RSPB warned of the dangers of Brexit, pointing out that protection afforded by the Birds and Habitats Directives, and other environmental legislation governing standards of air and water quality, had helped maintain wildlife populations as they crashed elsewhere. But there is still much uncertainty about what will happen to these laws when we leave Europe and whether the British Government would decide to introduce domestic laws to maintain the status quo.

PART OF OUR ROLE AS A CHARITY IS TO CHANGE SOCIETAL VALUES - THAT'S WHERE OUR ORIGINS LIE."

Martin Harper RSPB's conservation director



Gannets: Dan Kitwood/Getty; Kittiwake: Duncan Usher/Minden/Getty; Martin: Grahame Madge/RSPB

PRIORITY SPECIES

MIGRANTS

TURTLE DOVE

The turtle dove is the UK's fastest declining bird, with numbers crashing by 93 per cent in the past 20 years.

Though hunting pressure on its migration route and changes to its overwintering habitat in West Africa may have an impact, the biggest factor may be a shortage of seeds when they arrive here in the spring.



Restoring habitats such as the peatlands of northern Scotland is one aim of the RSPB over the next 10–15 years.



Turtle dove: Neil Bowman/FLPA; forstrand; Eleanor Bantall/rspb-images.com; curlew: Ann & Steve Toon/roberttharding/Getty

Likewise, the way in which we farm could be significantly changed because the £3bn worth of subsidies currently distributed under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is up for grabs. “That money can be made to work much harder,” Harper said. “Farmers shouldn’t get money for nothing.” This would involve building on the environmental stewardship schemes that pay farmers – under CAP – to restore hedgerows or put in wildflower strips. But, as many commentators have said, farmers could also be paid to manage their land for much broader social benefits such as reducing flooding downstream or storing carbon as a way to offset climate change – so-called carbon sequestration.

These sorts of public gains can – theoretically – be achieved with relative ease, Harper said, because the benefits are so clearcut, but it is much harder where some of society’s activities are in direct conflict with wildlife.

UPLAND ISSUES

That’s the case with grouse-shooting where the desire of some to build a sizeable surplus of game birds conflicts with the ecology of birds of prey such as hen harriers and golden eagles which predate them. The result can be – in parts of both England and Scotland – illegal persecution of birds protected by law.

But this situation can be resolved, Harper said, as long as society has a shared objective

150,000ha

THE AREA OF LAND OWNED BY THE RSPB – EQUAL TO FOUR ISLE OF WIGHTS.

300,000ha

THE AREA OF LAND IT WANTS TO HAVE BY 2030 – EQUAL TO TWO ISLE OF SKYES.

of restoring raptor populations, and collaboration is the key. “Where we – and the likes of [former RSPB conservation director] Mark Avery, The Wildlife Trusts, and many within the shooting community – align is in the desire to reform the current levels of intensity of driven grouse-shooting because of its adverse environmental consequences,” Harper said.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Much of what the RSPB wants to do and how it will achieve it will involve persuading the Government that its ideas are the right ones to implement.

From introducing a nature-friendly ‘Son of CAP’, to retaining current levels of protection for our most important wildlife sites, it will be the politician in charge at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) – currently Andrea Leadsom – who makes key decisions. “You

don’t effect change unless you engage with the parliamentary process,” Harper said.

But in the six years since the Conservatives took power – initially as part of a coalition but on their own since 2015 – there has been a very high turnover of incumbents at Defra. “We have had four secretaries of state in six years,” Harper said. “I think it’s very hard to have an impact in an 18-month period. Irrespective of the party or the individual, I wish they had more time to get on top of the brief and develop their own ideas. They also need to be held to account for their actions – my worry is that many are not around to pick up the pieces when things go wrong.” 🐾

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What should the RSPB be doing to conserve our wildlife? Is it right for it to seek to persuade governments to improve its policies for nature and to aim to change society’s attitude towards wildlife? Send your thoughts to wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk

PRIORITY SPECIES

UPLAND BIRDS

CURLEW

Nearly 70,000 pairs of curlews breed in the UK, and double that overwinter here, but breeding bird numbers fell by 46 per cent between 1994 and 2010.

Reasons for the decline include: an increase in predator numbers such as foxes and stoats, changes in farming practices, loss of breeding habitat and the impact of climate change.

