

RAISING OUR GAME

THE 2014 GWCT MEMBERS' CONFERENCE

If you plan to make a New Year's resolution in 2015, it should be to join the GWCT. James Marchington explains why shooters should support this organisation

We all know that shooting has a great conservation story to tell, but too often we will trot that out without really asking what shooting actually does for conservation, or questioning what we could do differently or better on our own shoots to improve the richness and diversity of British wildlife.

Times change, and with them so do the needs of wildlife and the countryside where we are privileged to enjoy our sport. Plus, of course, ideas and attitudes change. No matter how much we might like to turn back the clock, you can no longer walk down the high street with a gun over your shoulder without causing a stir.

In the same way, game management methods must constantly evolve to take account of changes in the countryside as well as changes in

public attitudes and the latest thinking on the needs of the environment.

So we are fortunate to have the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, the charity that carries out rigorous and independent scientific research on the very questions that should concern us all – everything from unravelling the mysteries of woodcock migration, to the ways shoots can improve the fortunes of declining farmland birds.

I don't know why more shooters don't belong to the GWCT. Of course you should join a shooting organisation such as BASC, which will campaign for shooters' rights and provide the vital third party insurance that we all need. But it isn't an either-or. If you claim to care about the countryside and wildlife on your shoot, then for goodness' sake join GWCT as well. The modest

annual membership fee is a small price to pay for proper scientific research that can only strengthen shooting's place in the countryside.

The GWCT is pretty good at communicating what it's up to, and explaining the significance of its research. The website (gwct.org.uk) is a good place to start, but there are various blogs, Facebook profiles and the like, plus members receive the excellent *Gamewise* magazine.

If you're like me you'll prefer to hear it from the horse's mouth, and the best way to do that is by attending the annual members' conference. The latest one was at the end of October, held in the auspicious Royal Geographical Society, just a stone's throw from the Albert Hall in London.

The audience of 100 or so members heard a fascinating series of talks from the leading



'Research revealed that what people wanted from the uplands was a heathery hill with a loch at the bottom and a red deer stag on top'



One of the most familiar farmland species, yellowhammers are typically associated with hedgerows



Correct soil and nutrient management is important for crop establishment and production

GWCT members receive exclusive access to dozens of unique courses and events taking place throughout the year.

‘The GWCT researches everything from woodcock migration to the ways shoots can improve the fortunes of declining farmland birds’

experts in their field, giving a real insight into the place of shooting in the wider context of managing our farms and uplands for maximum environmental benefit.

Director of Policy, Alastair Leake, for example, gave an overview of the latest developments in environmental policy, and how that will affect farming on the very land that hosts so many game shoots. We heard how shoot management can benefit birds such as song thrush and yellowhammer, through predator control and winter feeding. And he explained the importance of protecting the tools of wildlife management



Flower-rich margins provide pollen and nectar for pollinating insects



Lapwings breed on arable land as well as wet grassland, but numbers have fallen dramatically in recent years

PICTURES: GWCT

– the right sort of insecticides, rodenticides, traps and snares, and lead ammunition.

Next up, the GWCT’s Director for Scotland, Adam Smith, provided a similar insight for the uplands. In the lowlands, he explained, the aim was ‘sustainable intensification’ – producing more food for our growing population, while delivering more farmland birds and cleaner water. This was what the GWCT’s Allerton Project was all about.

In contrast, what people wanted from the uplands was ‘sustainable de-intensification’. That involved a range of ‘ecosystem services’ from carbon storage in the form of peat, to clean water supplies and a range of opportunities for recreation, whether that be mountain biking, walking, hiking or birdwatching.

Scottish Government research, he said, had revealed that what people wanted from the uplands was “a heathery hill with a loch at the bottom and a red deer stag on top.” Shooting could help to provide all that, and we are making

tremendous progress in researching issues such as muirburn, parasite and predation control, and improving our management practices.

But in our rush to adapt to suit the demands of policymakers, we had to be careful not to shoot ourselves in both feet. There was a danger that well-intentioned legislation would undermine vital management tools, “turning our swords into blunt instruments” as he put it.

Turning our attention back to the lowlands, Alastair Leake returned to the podium in his role as head of the GWCT’s Allerton Project, a demonstration 2,000-acre farm that is run commercially but with input from GWCT scientists. Since 1992 Allerton has shown how wildlife conservation and shooting can go hand in glove with productive, profitable farming.

In a few simple charts, Alastair showed how across the UK songbird numbers have plummeted while wheat yields have risen. Yet at Allerton songbirds have bounced back to levels not seen





Research into issues such as muirburn is ongoing

‘We have to ensure that shooting evolves to remain relevant and necessary to the way we run the countryside for the benefit of humankind’

PICTURE: LAURIE CAMPBELL

since the 1960s and 70s, all without sacrificing wheat yields. It's thanks to a regime that most shooters would think of as good shoot management, including winter feeding and predator control. The evidence was as plain as the nose on your face, and fully backed up with more scientific research than you can shake a stick at. It's the sort of thing the RSPB is very good at denying as they wail about the loss of farmland birds and rattle their collecting tin.

It was good, therefore, to see two of the bird charity's top brass sitting in the front row. The RSPB's Head of Nature Policy, James Robinson, was there with Chief Executive, Mike Clarke who had come to address the conference on the subject of *The value of shooting to conservation*.

How sad that he must have had his fingers in his ears throughout the morning! He left the

audience all but speechless, with a remarkable outburst that can only be summarised as: shooting has absolutely no value to conservation, indeed you're part of the problem and you don't even understand what words like value and conservation mean these days. And off he flounced to prepare a scathing attack on shooting to accompany his bloated fundraising machine's latest Birdcrime report.

I, for one, was left wondering why we even bother to court the RSPB. Why demean ourselves by trying to work with these bigoted antis? What we should be doing is getting on with what we do best – running our shooting estates and grouse moors very well indeed, with no help from the right-on 'conservation' lobby who would dearly love to see all fieldsports consigned to the history books.

The danger, of course, is that these people are very good at lobbying, campaigning and whipping up the well-meaning but ill-informed public. We ignore them at our peril, otherwise we'll turn around one day and find our sport strangled to death by regulations sneaked in on the pretext of 'protecting' the environment.

Which brings me back to my earlier point. Join the GWCT. I don't care if you're already a member of BASC, CPSA, NGO, SGA, SACS and the Miley Cyrus Fan Club. You need to belong to the GWCT too, because what they do is different and just as vital – maybe more so. Because in the long term we have to ensure that shooting evolves to remain relevant and necessary to the way we run the countryside for the benefit of humankind. And we must get that message out to policymakers, legislators and the nature-loving public at large.

We must fund the kind of work the GWCT is doing, and we must constantly strive to raise our game, meeting the highest standards and delivering real benefits to the wider community. Anything less and we'll go extinct as surely as the dinosaurs, and what's more, we'll deserve it.

The full programme of the 2014 GWCT Members' Conference *Raising our Game in a Challenging World* is online at www.gwct.org.uk/events/members-conference where you can listen to sound recordings of all the presentations, and view the slides used by the speakers.

You can join the GWCT for just £5 a month at www.gwct.org.uk/join ■

As the countryside changes, so too does game management



PICTURE: GWCT