

## Two England captains united against the RSPB

Ian Botham and Gerry Francis are tackling the charity head-on over the issue of predator birds versus grouse and racing pigeons

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Ruffled feathers: the hen harrier in action – it's the predation of pheasant and grouse that is causing such friction between the RSPB and You Forgot The Birds Photo: ALAMY

By Peter Stanford

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Charities can usually count on improving their fortunes by rubbing shoulders with celebrities, but the **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds** has this month been having the opposite experience. Though one of Britain's best-known and best-loved organisations, it has been hit for six by not one but two of our greatest national sporting icons.

The 126-year-old charity, with a million members and an annual income of £127 million, is currently being threatened with a libel action by the cricketing legend Sir Ian Botham, a keen grouse moor shooter. This self-proclaimed "country boy" claims one of the RSPB's officers accused him, on a BBC radio programme last week, of illegally killing birds of prey.

### • **RSPB accused of being 'obsessed' with birds of prey**

At the same time, another hallowed former England captain, footballer Gerry Francis, speaking as a long-time member of the 26,000-strong **Royal Pigeon Racing Association** (RPRA), has slammed the RSPB for allegedly promoting misguided policies on protecting birds of prey that are decimating Britain's pigeon lofts.



A pigeon loft (Andrew Crowley)

"There's a problem," says Sir Ian, "when you get two England captains robustly criticising you. How many captains, how many regulators, how many unhappy donors will it take before the RSPB's leadership wakes up? It has been trading on its royal name for too long. Now it's drifting towards disaster."

• **One big grouse: has the RSPB lost its true aims?**

Sir Ian is a leading supporter of **You Forgot The Birds**, a pressure group set up last summer to demand reform of what it regards as an RSPB that is out of touch with its members. It describes itself as "drawing together a network of people who are passionate about bird habitat". Other names backing it include Martyn Howat, former director of Uplands for Natural England, and Sir Johnny Scott, who presented BBC Two's *Clarissa and the Countryman* with **the late Clarissa Dickson Wright**.

When approached, the RSPB declined to discuss either Sir Ian's libel threat or its relationship with You Forgot The Birds. "Over the past few months," it said in a statement delivered by Gemma Hogg, its media relations manager, "You Forgot The Birds has made a number of accusations against the RSPB. YFTB stated in a press release last week that they are funded by the 'British grouse industry'. People will naturally draw their own conclusions. We are not prepared to make any further comment, or to respond publicly to provocation.

"Many people," it continued, "are appreciative of the work the RSPB does in all aspects of nature conservation. To underline this, the RSPB ended the financial year with more members than at any time in our 126-year history. With their support, we prefer to concentrate our energy and resources on the protection and conservation of wildlife."



Unable to legally trap and relocate raptors, gamekeepers have been accused of illegally killing predator birds that nest on their estates, a claim that is vigorously refuted (Alamy)

By emphasising the already publicly-acknowledged connection between You Forgot The Birds and the British grouse industry, the RSPB gives some indication of the antagonism the charity feels towards those who manage Britain's grouse moors. And that antagonism boiled over earlier this month following the disappearance of three hen harriers in the Forest of Bowland in Lancashire. With just a handful of breeding hen harrier pairs in the English Uplands, the loss has dealt a blow to conservation efforts around this endangered species.

• **[RSPB 'sit on their hands' as endangered species die, Sir Ian Botham says](#)**

On Radio 4's Farming Today, Ian Gregory of You Forgot The Birds and Martin Harper, the RSPB's conservation director, took part in a discussion about the missing birds. The latter made a link between "ongoing illegal persecution on our English grouse moors" with intelligence supplied by the National Wildlife Crime Unit "that indicates a strong association between bird of prey persecution and grouse moor management".

Harper also issued a challenge to Sir Ian Botham to "stop illegal killing" of birds of prey, a remark the cricketer believes to be libellous.



A red grouse on a heather moorland (Alamy)

It may all seem like an almighty row over one bird, but the background to the dispute lies in the hen harriers' taste for grouse. If it nests on a grouse moor, it targets grouse, and that impacts on gamekeepers' livelihoods. Hence the suspicion that they are hindering efforts to increase numbers of hen harriers.

However, there have only been 20 prosecutions of gamekeepers over the past 13 years for endangering protected species of birds – an average of 1.5 per year. And Andrew Gilruth of the **Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust** notes that no Uplands gamekeeper has ever been prosecuted for harming a hen harrier. “That doesn't mean it isn't happening,” he adds, “but it shows how polarised this row can get.”

On one side sits the RSPB, with its brief to protect birds such as the hen harrier. Because it is ground-nesting, it can easily fall foul of foxes and other natural predators, so it prefers nesting on grouse moors rather the RSPB bird reserves because they provide an environment where gamekeepers will have excluded such predators to protect ground-nesting grouse.

On the other side are the owners, operators and sportsmen and women who use grouse moors. An estimated 1.6 million people participate in what are called “shooting sports” and enthusiasts are eager to point out that its image as a “toffs' pastime” is far from accurate.



The success of a shoot can rest on the number of hen harriers in the area (Alamy)

Hen harriers are also sociable creatures who like to nest close to each other. If a gamekeeper has several nests of hen harriers, full of chicks, on his or her grouse moor, they will pay a heavy price in terms of grouse taken and killed.

“Every grouse lost to a hen harrier will have cost £100 to raise,” highlights Ian Gregory. “If a nesting pair have four or five chicks to feed, they can quickly get through 100 grouse and that’s the cost of a gamekeeper’s job.”

And without gamekeepers, the grouse moors will become uneconomic and close, draining money from the local rural economy. Even then the hen harrier will not benefit because the unattended moor will be open once again to foxes. “Everybody loses out,” explains Andrew Gilruth, which is why his organisation is working to find a compromise to satisfy the opposing camps. The only way forward, he says, is for all parties to get around a table. And that was precisely what happened in August 2012, when all stakeholders were brought together by **Defra**, the government department responsible for rural affairs. After much negotiation, Defra drew up a six-point draft plan, “The Hen Harrier Joint Recovery Programme”, dealing with both crimes against endangered wildlife, and the potential causes of such crime.

The most contentious recommendation was that, when one breeding pair of hen harriers made their home on a grouse moor, they and their chicks should be left in peace by gamekeepers, even if it meant them attacking grouse. However, if another breeding pair appeared within a 10-kilometre radius, the chicks, once hatched, would be removed, taken elsewhere to be raised and, when ready, released back into the wild.

It was based on successful schemes in France with other nesting birds. “It could even,” Gilruth argues, “make the hen harrier the gamekeepers’ friend because they could be assured that their grouse moor wouldn’t be overrun by these birds.”



A Hen Harrier bird (Alamy)

Though part of the group shaping the six-point plan, the RSPB is now, however, opposing it. This stance flies in the face of an opinion poll carried out for the Countryside Alliance – which describes itself as “the voice of the countryside”. It found 67 per cent of RSPB members questioned were in favour of the plans, with only nine per cent opposing them. Instead the RSPB is pushing for a licensing scheme for grouse moors. As a result Britain’s 3,000 full-time and 3,000 part-time gamekeepers have been left once again feeling they are being blamed for the woes of the hen harrier, and so tempers have frayed. It’s back to square one.

You Forgot The Birds is one manifestation of that current impasse. Its campaign for reform at the RSPB has certainly been vigorous. Already it has caused the Charity Commission to get involved – to look into charges laid against the RSPB by Sir Ian Botham in a newspaper article last year.

The commission found in the charity’s favour. “The concern we raised about the way the RSPB explained how their income was spent was quickly acknowledged and your website now gives a very clear graphic breakdown of how money is raised and spent in a way that is easily understandable to the public,” wrote the commission’s Harry Iles in a letter to the RSPB on November 11. “I can confirm to the trustees that the Commission has not identified further regulatory concerns.”

However, a subsequent judgment by the Advertising Standards Authority on one of the matters Sir Ian had raised found that the RSPB had been “misleading” potential donors in its publicity when it claimed to spend 90 per cent of its income directly on conservation. You Forgot The Birds had pointed out to the regulators that the RSPB’s own accounts showed that only 26 pence in every pound was going into conservation at the RSPB’s nature reserves. The RSPB website has now been amended to state that the charity spends “90 per cent of net income on conservation, education and advocacy”.

It would be a mistake, says Weekend Telegraph’s **County Diary** columnist Robin Page, to see You Forgot The Birds as simply an isolated pressure group out to make life

uncomfortable for the RSPB. It has, in his opinion, touched on a deeper vein of frustration among those who live and work in the countryside and who are just as concerned by conservation matters as the RSPB.

• **Country diary: We're in terrible terrier trouble**

“Many feel that the RSPB is in a state of denial about what happens in nature. They are ignoring the evidence of farmers, foresters and shepherds as well as gamekeepers because these practical conservationists haven't got degrees and are therefore judged ignorant by the designer conservationists at the RSPB. In the shrinking countryside of Britain, you have to be prepared to manage the environment and manage species that eat weaker creatures, and the RSPB too often appears reluctant to do that.”

Part of the problem, alleges Ian Gregory of You Forgot The Birds, lies in the RSPB's methods of raising money. “Their marketing strategy is to frame nature into victims, persecutors and rescuers – regardless of the facts. So they paint the hen harrier as victim of wicked gamekeepers and make an emotional invitation to donors to help them 'rescue' the birds. It's an effective cash-raising yarn and that's why the RSPB is loath to see the government hen harrier plan succeed.”

All attempts so far by You Forgot The Birds to get the RSPB leadership to engage in a private dialogue about reform have failed. Whether the threat of a high-profile libel case with a sporting hero will break the deadlock before the start of the grouse-shooting season on August 12 remains to be seen. Right now the RSPB is refusing to say a word.

## Gerry Francis

Gerry Francis has had a pigeon loft at his home since the mid Seventies, when he was captain of the national football team. But such has been the impact on his beloved racing pigeons by legally protected predator birds such as sparrowhawks and peregrine falcons that he is thinking of giving up his hobby. And he lays the blame on an inflexible RSPB, which refuses to engage with the threat posed to the “lowly pigeon”.



A pigeon loft (Alamy)

“I have thought many times I should pack it in,” says 63-year-old Francis of the pigeon loft at his Surrey home, “because it’s not nice to see pets you love eaten alive. I can’t let mine out — it’s just advertising dinner. If they fly around, within 20 minutes you will have a pair of sparrowhawks there.”

He has, he says, lost hundreds of pigeons to raptors, including champion racers. “If it was cats or dogs being attacked,” he says, “there would be an outcry. But these pigeons are much loved — and worth a lot of money.”

To relocate a sparrowhawk, Francis would need a licence but, under current procedures, he has no chance of being granted one. So he is fronting a campaign by the **Royal Pigeon Racing Association (RPRA)** for a change to reflect the soaring number of sparrowhawks and peregrine falcons, and their migration into urban areas.

Francis and RPRA have the support of the Law Commission, but their efforts are being blocked, they believe, by the RSPB. “We get the impression that people in government are afraid to cross the RSPB,” says the RPRA’s spokesman, Stewart Wardrop. “Pigeon fanciers are still largely working class. To the middle class leadership at the RSPB, our birds are just ‘flying rats’.”