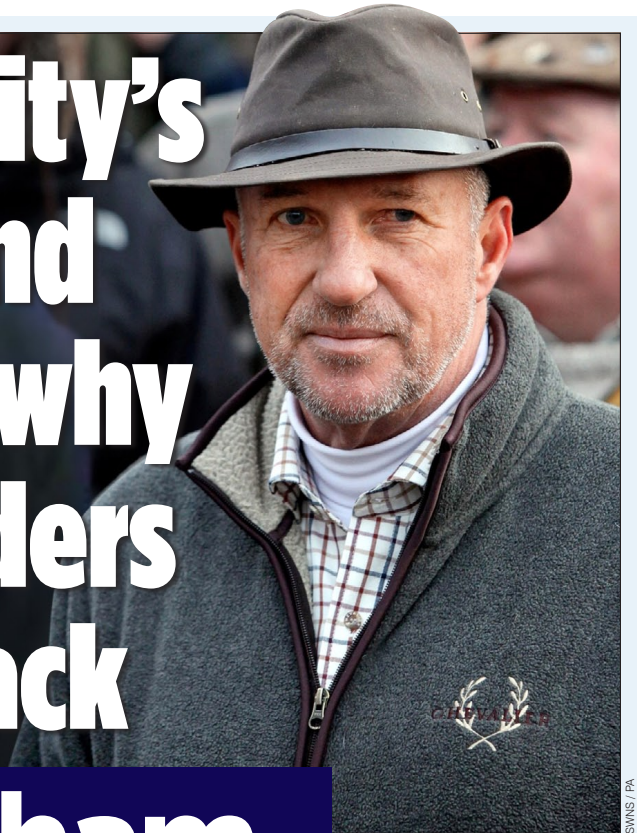


I'll sue RSPB for libel

...and after charity's incompetence and misleading ads, why I'll help MoS readers get donations back

By **Sir Ian Botham**



SUNS / PA

first gaining its respect. The RSPB definitely hasn't helped its cause by constantly slurring gamekeepers as criminals. They do this because it gives them a class war propaganda line against 'shooting toffs' to help whip up donations.

As the police know, the RSPB will push for prosecutions against gamekeepers on the flimsiest of evidence to generate another press release. A few months ago, the courts threw out a case in Northallerton where a gamekeeper was at risk of losing his job for allegedly having provided the wrong type of water for a crow. The RSPB shot 380 hours of video through illegal covert surveillance to get evidence of this 'crime'.

Now I'm not saying that there are never any problems with gamekeepers. Just as there is the occasional RSPB warden who goes off the rails, so we have had some bad apples.

However, statistics show that there are far fewer of them, because grouse moors are taking a zero tolerance approach to the killing of birds of prey even though they attack the game birds the gamekeepers depend on.

The anger gamekeepers feel about the RSPB grew even higher this month due to its publicity stunt of offering a 'reward' for convictions over the disappearance of endangered hen harriers in Lancashire – despite no



Botham hits RSPB 'dictators' for £6m of donations

AT RISK: From left, a hen harrier and hen harrier chicks. Above: Botham's Mail on Sunday article last November

sat on its hands until the eggs went cold. In similar situations around the world, conservationists put the eggs in incubators or provide supplementary food for the adult birds to keep them on the nests.

That, however, is 'impossible' for the RSPB's leaders. They have 405 fundraisers but no one with the imagination to take action to save the eggs of these beautiful birds, which are close to extinction in England. The RSPB has fought tooth and nail to block proposals by civil servants to increase the numbers of hen harriers in Britain – plans backed by the grouse moors. The twisted reason may be that if the civil service plan succeeds it would demonstrate that today it is the RSPB's leadership, not gamekeepers, who are responsible for the desperately low numbers of hen

harriers in England. The real conservationists within the RSPB appreciate that gamekeepers provide the best conditions for many of Britain's most endangered birds. They understand how ground-nesting birds thrive where heather abounds, and gamekeepers are giving them 24-hour protection from marauding foxes. Would you choose to raise a family in lawless Kabul or in peaceful Chipping Norton?

To understand how important gamekeepers are to protecting birds, look at what happened in Berwyn in Wales. When the grouse moor closed, the numbers of lapwings, golden plovers and curlews plunged. The RSPB's lily-livered approach to predator control means it should change its last two initials – because, under current management, it doesn't protect birds.

There is an alliance to be built between those who care passionately about creating great conditions for birds whether they work on grouse moors, on RSPB reserves or are just plain bird

lovers. Yet change is only going to happen when regulators force the RSPB's leaders to focus on helping birds instead of lecturing others.

A common theme among bird lovers is that bird of prey numbers have grown so fast they are distorting the natural balance. Society has encouraged so many sparrowhawks that now, when they are not butchering other birds, these poor hawks are starving to death. The other common concern is that urban foxes have become so numerous that they represent a growing menace to bird life.

An outbreak of pragmatism will sooner or later breathe through the RSPB. That may be when enough donors get fed up with being badgered for donations which pay for the RSPB's bloated pension fund deficit, its fundraising army, its campaign teams, its legal fees and its fines.

There are also stirrings within the RSPB's staff who are finding their jobs are made much more difficult when the brand is distrusted by so many. Maybe the RSPB's trustees will reshape the management – although I don't hold my breath given how the management chooses the trustees.

I hope our new flock of political leaders will help this process by banging heads together and simplifying the morass of countryside law that the RSPB uses to persecute not just gamekeepers but also pensioners with historic egg collections.

Soon the fox hunting debate will be creating a lot of heat. I hope that the quiet work of bird conservation will also get attention from government.

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