The Maltings
East Tyndall St,
Cardiff CF24 5EA

Jack Sargeant MS
Chair
Petitions Committee
Welsh Parliament Cardiff Bay,
Cardiff, CF99 1SN

6th January 2022

Dear Mr Sargeant

Evidence - Petition P-06-1201 Ban the shooting of critically endangered birds...give them the protection they so desperately need

Thank you for inviting us to present evidence on the subject of Petition P -06-1201 as above. We are a research and education charity that has had over 1,000 scientific papers published in peer-reviewed journals over the past 80 years. Below you will find a brief paper on woodcock which will give you a flavour of the complexity of the matter.

You will see in the conclusion below that the removal of woodcock from the quarry list in Wales will have no benefit to the woodcock population status because they don't breed in Wales and are even less likely to do so as climate change results in more frequent episodes of wet and cold spring weather. The woodcock shot in Wales come from the much larger and stable continental population identified by the IUCN as being of least concern and can therefore be considered a sustainable harvest.

We are very happy to provide further evidence given more time and explain how the shooting community are incentivised through their passion can deliver the best habitat for these species. The banning of shooting would remove that incentive for the shooting community to actively manage for these species which is done at no expense to the wider public.

Yours sincerely

Sue Evans

Director Wales

WOODCOCK SHOOTING IN WALES

WOODCOCK IN THE UK

Calculating the breeding population of woodcock is difficult due to their secretive nature and cryptic plumage, which makes locating nests very difficult. The established method of censusing woodcock is to count displaying (roding) males in woodland in spring. Woodcock are polygynous and females are not easily censused so an equal sex-ratio is usually assumed to estimate total numbers. Dr Andrew Hoodless of the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) refined this technique further (Hoodless et al 2007). Using sonogram recordings that enabled the identification of individual males whilst they displayed, he was able to relate the number of individuals to the total number of woodcock passes in an evening, enabling an estimate of the number of displaying males to be derived from raw counts.

BTO breeding bird surveys recorded a long-term decline of 52% in observed Bird Atlas squares between 1971 and 2011. This observed decline resulted in the UK population being placed on the BTO's Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC) red list. This status stands in contrast to the continental population which in 2019 the IUCN classified as of 'Least Concern' over the rest of its huge boreal breeding range stretching from north-west Europe to the far east of Russia.

Ringing data from as far back 1891 has shown that our resident breeding population is sedentary. Our modest UK population is joined in winter by an estimated 1.2 – 1.5 million migrant woodcock that arrive in early November from Russia and Scandinavia. These stay in the UK until increasing daylight length and rising temperate trigger a return migration to their breeding grounds in mid-March.

These UK wintering woodcock are spread across the country with high densities in western Britain and Ireland, including Wales. The secretive nature, cryptic plumage and nocturnal habit of woodcock lead many bird watchers to consider the species to be rare in the UK, however it has been recently estimated that woodcock are the most abundant wintering wader in Wales. This is confirmed by data from long-term ringing and monitoring on a study site in West Wales showing an average density of 0.66 woodcock per ha observed on pastures at night where woodcock feed.

Despite their Red List status in the UK, woodcock remain on the quarry list because research has shown that shooting has very little impact on our breeding population. A study conducted by GWCT in collaboration with the Edward Grey Institute, Oxford University used feather samples from woodcock shot across the UK to measure the relative levels of hydrogen isotopes in order to determine the area of origin of each bird. This showed that less than 3% of the samples were from our native UK woodcock population and 97% from wintering migrants from the population designated by IUCN as being of 'Least Concern'. As previously stated, there are very few records of woodcock breeding in Wales and, due to the sedentary nature of woodcock breeding in England, the likelihood of any woodcock from the declining UK population being shot in Wales is very remote .

Despite this finding, as a precautionary measure, GWCT advises shooting estates in areas where there are breeding woodcock to delay the start of their season until 1 December, by which time large numbers of migrant woodcock have arrived, thus further reducing any impact from shooting. This measure has been widely adopted by shoots and, in addition, many shoots have voluntarily imposed bans on shooting woodcock in recent years.

It is now widely accepted that shooting is not a significant factor in recent breeding woodcock declines, GWCT published research (Heward et al 2013) that identified the probable drivers behind the UK decline.

This research found that the greatest declines have been from small woods near to major towns and villages suggesting that human disturbance from increased public amenity use of woodland is a major driver. Furthermore, analysis of the data shows that breeding woodcock are more abundant in heterogeneous woods illustrating that management resulting in varied age/structure is likely to be beneficial. Declining woodland management such as coppicing (Hopkins & Kirby 2007) has been identified as a reason for the general decline in woodland ground-nesting bird species such as wood warbler and nightingale, and is also likely to have impacted woodcock. With a few exceptions, suitable woodland management that encourages the desired growth of understorey is now largely restricted to woods that are managed for game shooting. Increased light penetration enables the spring growth of important ground cover that is essential for nesting, shelter and protection from predation and significantly improves brood survival. It is also the case that woods on shoots experience lower levels of public disturbance, more deer control ensuring less understorey browsing, and greater nest and brood protection by means of predator control.

Climate change has been widely recognised as a significant driver moving the breeding ranges of many woodland species such as wood warbler and nightingale northwards or eastwards; it would be astonishing if woodcock did not show to the same trend. Being on the western fringe of the boreal woodland habitat, the UK and Ireland have witnessed climate induced fluctuations in woodcock numbers in the past.

Gilbert White's 'Natural History of Selborne' debates whether woodcock were a widespread breeding species in the UK in the 18th century. Literature also documented that in the early 19th century woodcock were considered a rare breeding bird in Ireland, however by 1880 they were regarded as widespread. This dramatic westward breeding range expansion coincided with the end of the 'Little Ice age' and the return of warmer drier spring weather that encouraged nesting and ensured sustainable brood survival rates. Today south and west regions, including Wales experience higher rainfall and lower spring temperatures than the rest of the UK so it is no coincidence that these areas have never seen woodcock breeding in any significant number. The latest GWCT/BTO breeding woodcock survey showed no breeding plots in Wales.

CONCLUSION

The removal of woodcock from the quarry list in Wales will have no benefit to the woodcock population status because they don't breed in Wales and are even less likely to do so as climate change results in more frequent episodes of wet and cold spring weather. The woodcock shot in Wales come from the much larger and stable continental population identified by the IUCN as being of least concern and can therefore be considered a sustainable harvest.