

Shooting of White-fronted Geese in Wales – evidence from the Welsh Ornithological Society to the Welsh Assembly Petitions Committee.

The Welsh Ornithological Society (WOS) is a membership organisation that promotes the conservation of birds and their habitats across Wales. The Society encourages the study of wild birds and a high standard of bird recording in Wales through its publications, annual conference and grant scheme.

The Society was pleased when the Welsh Government appeared to take the initiative to cease the hunting of White-fronted Geese in Wales. We were very disappointed when, despite the overwhelming evidence presented, the decision was made to continue the current lack of protection.

This is the only area on the flyway where this species is not protected. While WOS acknowledges the role of the shooting fraternity in the long running voluntary bans on shooting in places such as the Dyfi, we would like to see a statutory ban to ensure protection of this species. Whilst the voluntary ban has worked well on the Dyfi, there is no guarantee that it works everywhere the geese might stage, and not all wildfowlingers are members of BASC and therefore not necessarily signed up to the ban. Between 1998 and 2010 a total of 29 Greenland White-fronts were shot on Anglesey. With the current decline in the population this is not sustainable - there is a very strong scientific case that hunting of Greenland White-fronted Geese on the wintering grounds is additive to normal levels of mortality, based on studies at Wexford Slobbs in Ireland, where the difference in population size from one year to the next matched the predicted change based on perfectly additive mortality in the population. In other words, every goose shot was not part of a "hunnable surplus" that would have died anyway from other causes, but their loss was in addition to other sources of mortality and meant one less goose the following year. As a result, the population is extremely sensitive to hunting mortality, and this was clearly demonstrated by the fact that the steep annual decline in population size through the early 2000s was arrested to a large extent following the cessation of hunting in Iceland in 2006.

Wales and England are the only two states where hunting is theoretically legal (and only as a result of a legal anomaly). This is despite the need to remove all sources of avoidable mortality agreed by the UK, Irish, Iceland and Greenland governments under the international population action plan for Greenland White-fronted Geese. The plan notes the international consensus "that hunting cannot currently be undertaken on a sustainable basis and any kill would exacerbate the current unfavourable conservation status of the population". The action Plan also stresses the need "to take all possible steps to eliminate avoidable sources of mortality and disturbance, particularly shooting". The scientific case for removing hunting completely to safeguard the population is overwhelming.

We further believe that there should be a ban on the shooting of White-fronted Geese in Wales throughout the year. Although two races of White-fronted Geese occur in Wales, neither are common. The European White-fronted Goose used to be regular in Wales but is no longer, and is becoming increasingly rare in the United Kingdom because of short stopping in continental Europe (where its conservation status is favourable), so there is a powerful argument both from the point of view of scarcity and risk of

misidentification (since they are very difficult to differentiate in the field) to simply ban the shooting of all White-fronted Geese in Wales.

We do not believe that continuing the status quo of a voluntary ban is sufficient for the Welsh Government to meet their international commitments under AEWA. Although poor reproductive success in recent years has been responsible for the unfavourable conservation status of the population in recent years, we cannot change factors operating on the breeding areas in Greenland that affect this. However, we know the rate of change in overall population size is dramatically affected by even small changes in survival, so even modest changes in reducing mortality can have dramatic effects on overall population size in this long-lived species.

We therefore urge the petitions committee to take note of the overwhelming scientific evidence and the level of public support indicated by the petition. The Society is happy to provide further detailed evidence if required.

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