

By Dave Slater, Natural England's Director for wildlife licensing.

Yesterday (15 April) we granted licences for three falconers to permit the taking of a small number (six in total) of peregrine falcon chicks from the wild for use in falconry. Each falconer intends to take one male and one female chick to form a breeding programme with the other licensees.

We understand that some people may have questions and concerns over the taking of birds from the wild and so I wanted to outline more about our decision.

We issue wildlife licences for a range of purposes, and falconry and aviculture are listed as purposes for which licences can be granted under the legislation. This includes the potential to take a small number of birds from the wild for these pursuits – but only if strict welfare and conservation conditions are met. The taking of birds from the wild for these purposes is also practised in a number of other European countries.

Our expert staff have taken care to ensure the strict legal tests have been met, and that there will be no negative conservation impacts to the population. To ensure this is the case, the licence holders need to meet a number of conditions before they can take any chicks from the wild. We have also put in place strict conditions to safeguard the welfare of any chicks taken, and we will be closely monitoring the operation throughout.

Conservation status of peregrine falcons

Peregrine falcons have a [conservation status of green](#) which means they are widespread and their numbers are not under threat. In fact, the species' current range and numbers are greater than at any time since detailed recording began in the 1930s. The peregrine population has particularly increased over the last 50 years – there were just 47 breeding pairs in England by the 1970s but by 2014 this number had increased to 826 breeding pairs.

Conditions of the licence

Part of the licence assessment process is to consider the expertise of the applicants and those involved in any field work. The applicants have also had to demonstrate that they will appropriately consider, and provide for, the welfare of any chicks taken.

We are only permitting a chick to be taken from a nest where three or more chicks are present. We know from detailed studies that peregrines typically lay 3-4 eggs and that only two of these are likely to survive to adulthood. **We have specified that the smallest (weakest) chick must be taken from the nest and so are only permitting the taking of a chick which would ordinarily not survive in the wild.**

We will be closely monitoring the operation including through asking the applicants for evidence to ensure compliance, whilst staying within the government guidelines around Covid-19.

We have limited the licence period to two years and retain the power to suspend or revoke any licence if necessary.

Why do these birds need to be taken from the wild?

Falconry is an ancient tradition which has been practised in England for centuries and is recognised as an 'intangible cultural heritage of humanity' by UNESCO. The applicants wish

to breed verifiably British peregrines for use in their falconry activities, and the European Commission's (EC) Wild Birds Directive includes reference to the sustainable use of species to fulfil cultural requirements, providing this does not affect their conservation status.

Following comprehensive discussions, we concluded that birds already held in captivity cannot provide verifiably British birds. This is because it is incredibly difficult to definitively establish the provenance of birds held in captivity due to poor documentation.

Wild peregrine falcons which have arrived in captivity due to injury are also not likely to be suitable as breeding from a bird from the wild is much more difficult than one reared by humans – they are simply not used to humans and are not as likely to breed successfully as a chick taken from the wild and reared by a human.

The above alternatives have been carefully considered by Natural England when reaching a decision. This has included the need to consider the alternatives and evidence in a manner proportionate to the likely conservation impacts which could occur from the licensable activity. In concluding our decision we have noted that there are likely to be some minor conservation benefits to the peregrine falcon population as a result of these licences; for instance in reducing the likelihood of non-native and hybrid birds escaping into the wild during falconry.

Are these licences a one-off?

These licences are intended to provide birds for a specific breeding programme and the issuing of a licence does not mean that Natural England will issue licences for further taking of wild birds in future.

This will provide UK native peregrine falcons to falconers and potentially limit the amount of peregrines taken from the wild in the future, and it will also have the added benefit of creating a captive population on known provenance which we have never had before and would give us options in the future

In summary, while we do understand that many will find taking these magnificent birds from the wild uncomfortable - our rigorous approach has ensured that this will have no impact on populations, will be done humanely and will support legitimate and responsible falconry practices.

9 comments

1. Comment by **Dr Rob Thomas (Cardiff University)** posted on 17 April 2020

Hi Dave, thanks for this blog -which perhaps raises as many questions as it answers! In the interests of transparency, and to pre-empt an expensive freedom of information request, would you be willing to publish the license application as submitted to Natural England (presumably a re-draft of the application previously submitted to Scottish Natural Heritage), along with

any subsequent correspondence between the three applicants and Natural England? Many thanks.

[Link to this comment](#)

Reply

- Replies to Dr Rob Thomas (Cardiff University)>

Comment by **Dean Leadon** posted on 17 April 2020

Decent idea..but the birds should only be taken for falconry...not breeding. There are far too many being bred in captivity and sold for prices up to £5000 per female...the wild birds are holding their own up to a point of saturation...also taking age must be considered...birds should not be taken as downies allowing for imprintation...no money should be made from wild stock as I can see the ££££s appearing in many eyes...birds should be flown/hunted and released...

[Link to this comment](#)

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2. Comment by **Richard Goswell** posted on 17 April 2020

Your reasons for this are valid; all EXCEPT the fundamental argument for the application behind this license: what relevance does obtaining birds of 'British provenance' have to the cultural value of falconry?

[Link to this comment](#)

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3. Comment by **Richard Taylor** posted on 17 April 2020

So when these birds are fully manned and trained, how much are they worth? 2k? Each female has 3-4 chicks which is 6-8k possibly more? Iv no problem with falconry as i do it myself. But people are going to make alot of money out of these licenses. For the right reasons? I dont think so

[Link to this comment](#)

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4. Comment by **Alistair Crowle** posted on 17 April 2020

It seems to me that that this is a moral rather than nature conservation issue. I am disappointed though that some of the issues that appear to have led to this request are not being addressed nor the answer to the question of what is in it for the Peregrines? For my part, I could live with this decision more if there were conditions attached to the effect that neither the breeding birds nor their progeny could ever be taken abroad. Maybe for every 6 chicks successfully reared, 1 or 2 should be hacked back to the wild and after 4 years, all breeding birds are to be hacked back and the process starts again. To some degree, this would address the "what's in it for peregrines" question. An

additional action should be for Government to enact a ban on the cross-breeding of falcons of different species. The gyr/peregrine/saker/lanner crosses are an abuse of science and nature and cannot be said to be a cultural part of falconry. More rigorous controls on captive breeding may help prevent a repeat of the perceived need (by some), for this project in the first place.

[Link to this comment](#)

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5. Comment by **Russell Finney** posted on 17 April 2020

Falconry is an ancient tradition which has been practised in England for centuries and is recognised as an 'intangible cultural heritage of humanity' by UNESCO

We also use to sacrifice humans and animals for religion many moons ago but we move on...

Just because its an ancient tradition DOES NOT MAKE IT RIGHT or LEGAL!

How much are fully grown and trained birds worth? Will these so called falconers be putting this amount in to conservation, I think not.

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- Replies to Russell Finney >

Comment by **Sandy rollo** posted on 17 April 2020

Just the same as eating fish and chips . Both are a natural recourse only the fish ends up on a plate . Falconry has a place in modern society just as much as millions who enjoy fish and chips . You may not like just as much as don't like people allowing domestic cats out to kill wildlife for fun , but we obviously realise that will never come to fruition , you like me will just have to respect others wishes. It's called democracy

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6. Comment by **Ian Malone** posted on 17 April 2020

?You say 6 chicks , is this per year , Does this include going back if one dies. Also the removed chick supplied the larger chicks with food and as a live victim the first kill, will the remaining chicks now fight it out for survival. And how will this be monitored. Yes you claim to monitor the removed chicks but how about the raided nest.

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7. Comment by **sarah orbell** posted on 17 April 2020

If a genetic sample can be taken from these young then later when they are used for breeding they can be "tracked" as can any other zoo animals in breeding programmes. Future young should also then be registered on their sale. Possibly micro chipping could help in this.

I would also like to see included in the rules that some income generated from the sale of future offspring should also be put back into paying for these and/or further conservation.

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