

David Stewart
Convenor
Public Petitions Committee
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

RSPB Scotland

24th March 2014

Dear Mr Stewart,

Thank you for inviting Gordon Buchanan and I to present evidence in person to the Petitions Committee of the Scottish Parliament in January 2014, on our proposal that the golden eagle should become Scotland's national bird. I am also pleased to note the largely positive public support for our proposal which has taken place subsequently in the Scottish media and on the internet. I am grateful for the opportunity to comment upon the three responses that your Committee has received regarding our petition. Firstly, I must say that I am encouraged by the generally positive support from all the correspondents; it seems to me that any small concerns raised by these stakeholders focus largely upon the nature of the consultation, and the process of designation, rather than querying the need for a national bird, or indeed the suitability of the golden eagle as the identified candidate for this esteemed position.

I shall comment upon each letter individually. The first correspondence I received was from Scottish Natural Heritage. I was pleased to see Dr Ron MacDonald echo our sentiments that Scotland is an important place for the golden eagle. It is indeed true that Scotland has 14 'Special Protected Areas' (SPAs) designated for the species, indicating the international importance of the population. The importance of Scotland's golden eagle population in the UK context is also highlighted, as Scotland is home to all of the UK's breeding pairs of golden eagles. I also welcome the reaffirmation by SNH that they consider the golden eagle to also be embedded in Scotland's rich cultural history. In our country's history, Scots have often used symbols of this species in recognition of its special characteristics of strength, survival and beauty.

Dr Macdonald also mentioned other bird species could contend to be Scotland's national bird, including the crested tit and Scottish crossbill. These are two birds that are very important to RSPB Scotland and its members, as well as to members of the Scottish Ornithologist's Club, and the wider general public. We actively manage many areas of land, including our Abernethy Reserve, to provide habitats for these precious species. I find it heartening that Scotland has such an array of charismatic wildlife that could be considered as a national emblem of our country and its natural heritage. However, this said, RSPB Scotland feels that the golden eagle provides both a symbol of our natural heritage *and* illustrates the Scottish people's strong cultural bond with its wildlife, and that this distinguishes it uniquely from other potential National Bird candidate species.

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a partnership of conservation organisations
working to give nature a home around the world.

The firm endorsement of our petition from Mr Patrick Stirling-Aird of the Scottish Raptor Study Group (SRSG) is also most welcome. As the nation's foremost experts on the species (and raptors in general), it is positive that the group not only considers the golden eagle suitable for the national bird accolade, but also celebrates the cultural ties of the golden eagle to the Scottish people. The SRSG also proposes some potential significant benefits that the status of National Bird could have for golden eagle, and raptor conservation more widely in Scotland. Namely, the increased attention brought to raptor persecution, and recognition that the golden eagle is at the top of the food-chain, and therefore a key indicator species of the wider health of Scotland's environment.

In the third letter, I was pleased to read of the Minister for the Environment and Climate Change's personal admiration for the golden eagle. As mentioned in his letter, he has worked assiduously to combat the continuing illegal persecution of raptors in Scotland, including cases of the illegal killing of golden eagles. I would like to thank him for these efforts. The Minister also acknowledges how Scotland's sense of place is often characterised by the golden eagle, further recognising the cultural benefits of having the golden eagle as our National Bird. The Minister suggests that more debate both within and outside the Scottish Parliament is required to gauge what species should be chosen as the National Bird. I would fully support these proposals not only to progress our petition, but also recognising the opportunity for the nation to discuss – and hopefully celebrate – this fantastic species. We accept his advice on procedure, and that our petition could follow the precedent set by the recent designation of a National Tree of Scotland. This should perhaps be complemented by a debate in the Scottish Parliament to provide a political mandate. I understand that this could be achieved through a member's business motion from an interested member of the Scottish Parliament.

I also support the Minister's recommendation that other committees could be consulted on the issue, The Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment (RACCE) Committee are the most obvious, however in my view Economy, Energy and Tourism (EET) are also likely to make an important contribution.

In summary, I support the recommendations from the Minister and welcome the support and advice of the other key stakeholders. Finally, if there is anything which our organisation can do to facilitate your committee's work on this petition, please contact me. I am grateful for your efforts with this 1500th petition of the Scottish Parliament. I look forward to hearing from the Committee discuss it again in the near future.

Yours sincerely

Duncan Orr-Ewing
Head of Species and Land Management, RSPB Scotland