

Does the badger cull spell trouble for ground-nesting birds?

James Fair

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“I agree that unnecessary bureaucracy should not be imposed on companies carrying out culls, and understand their frustration in having to adapt to new information as legal processes continue.” These are the words of the environment secretary (and Conservative leadership candidate) Michael Gove in a letter to fellow Tory MP Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown following the revelation that Natural England is now requiring badger cull companies to supply data on how many foxes are being killed in their areas.

Clifton-Brown, who represents the Cotswolds – a large, rural constituency in the west of England where bTB in cattle is a serious problem – has raised the spectre of Natural England’s demands making culling impossible. “To stop it on a technicality would be a nonsense,” he told the Daily Telegraph.

But why should Natural England be interested in what is happening to foxes? The answer is because of a long-running legal battle, due to go back to the Court of Appeal in July, in which ecologist Tom Langton has argued that culling badgers precipitates a ‘Carnivore Release Effect’ (CRE) – as badger numbers go down, fox numbers go up.

This, in turn, spells bad news for ground-nesting birds, because foxes are more likely to predate them. And where culling takes place in a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), or other protected areas, Langton argues that Natural England should be monitoring this impact.

Until now, Natural England has largely denied this is necessary (though it accepts the science of fox numbers increasing in response to badger culling), and Langton described the news that it was seeking information on fox control as a “massive u-turn”.

But is data on fox control alone sufficient? Environmental consultant Dominic Woodfield, one of the expert witnesses in the legal action taken by Langton, said that

“absolutely thorough and precise data” on changes in the fox population would provide a meaningful insight into what was happening to vulnerable bird populations but he questioned whether this could be collected.

“Asking culling companies to provide that information is hopeless,” he said. “How will they obtain it? Who is keeping these records? How accurate are they? How will bias be eliminated and how will the data be standardised?”

So, why not just monitor the birds themselves? After all, this is what conservationists are worried about. In an ideal world, said Woodfield, any work would have begun before culling started and continue for the duration of the cull – a period of at least six years – and after it has stopped, too.

It would likely involve two to three site visits during the breeding season. “I don’t think it would be impossible – it’s the kind of work people like me are required to do – but the challenge is the scale. It would be very resource heavy,” Woodfield explained.

According to Tom Rabbetts, head of TB delivery at the NFU, culling companies have been asked to supply two years’ worth of data on the number of foxes shot on or within 2km of SSSIs for the past two years (2017 and 2018), but he said there’s no reason why they should have retained this data.

“The difficulty is the number of sources you need to approach,” he said. “It will take time to collect and it has come at the worst time of the year for farmers, but they will do everything they can to make sure culling can go ahead.”

Rabbetts said there were still unknown details about what exactly culling companies are required to do. “There may be legal implications for them,” he added. “They will have to consider very carefully whether they are fulfilling licence obligations.”

It would have been better had Natural England committed to surveying bird populations itself, Rabbetts concluded. “It surely falls within its remit.”

In fact, said Langton, some work on establishing bird numbers inside and outside a number of cull areas has been carried out on behalf of Natural England by the British Trust for Ornithology, but this has not been made public. “We believe Natural England doesn’t want the study to come out because it says the level of monitoring

is not enough to tell what the impact on bird populations is,” Langton said. “It really needs to do a bespoke exercise, but that will cost money.”

Asked about this piece of work, DEFRA declined to comment. It would also not confirm whether licences to cull badgers would be dependent on the fox control data.

Dr Jonathan Reynolds, head of predation control studies at the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), said he thought the impact on bird populations was likely to be minor. “You would need to keep a very close eye on how things are turning out within a SSSI where culling had taken place,” Reynolds said, “but if this is what it takes to get rid of bTB, and it’s only a temporary effect that can be recovered from, then it’s worth it. The key thing is it’s manageable because you can legitimately control foxes.”

Controlling foxes may well be a minor and manageable issue for landowners, but few farmers – or indeed anyone else with a strong view on, or stake in, badger culling – could have predicted it would become such an indigestible piece of gristle in the government’s bTB policy when it first sanctioned badger culling six years ago.