

The management of non-native birds in the United Kingdom

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In common with many other parts of the world, the UK has a long history of bird species establishing themselves either naturally, such as the collared dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) and little egret (*Egretta garzetta*) in the last 50 years; or as a result of deliberate or accidental introductions. Introduced species such as the little owl (*Athene noctua*) and Canada goose (*Branta Canadensis*) have been present for hundreds of years and are regarded by many as part of the 'natural' avifauna of the country. Debate continues about whether other species, such as the eagle owl (*Bubo bubo*), have at some time been naturally present and should be regarded as native rather than introduced, even though the individual birds now breeding in the UK are almost certainly escapees from captivity. Others, such as common pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*), continue to be released in huge numbers every year for sport shooting.

The impact of these species on the ecosystems that they occupy is poorly understood. For example limited information is available on the impact that hundreds of thousands of released common pheasants have on other ground feeding birds or on the impact of the growing population of Canada Geese on UK wetlands.

The legal status of non-native birds in the UK is also complex. All wild birds are subject to the EU Birds Directive, and the UK Wildlife and Countryside Act, which protects all wild birds and permits management of particular species by the issue of licenses. Game birds, such as common pheasant and red-legged partridge (*Alectoris rufa*) are subject to the Game Act, however, and are not regarded as 'wild birds'. Recently arrived species, which are not on the official UK list of wild birds, and which have not arrived by natural means, are not protected at all

Against this background, the UK government and its conservation agencies need to make decisions about the management of non-native birds. Historically, the approach has been inconsistent and subject to pressures from interest groups such as the hunting lobby, bird conservation organizations and animal rights groups. Financial considerations have also played an important part in decision making, with some species now regarded as simply too expensive to manage with current population sizes. In an effort to bring more consistency to the process of managing non-native species (both plants and animals) the UK has established the non-Native Species Secretariat, which commissions expert risk assessments for non-native species and these are used to help for policy on whether, or how, these species are managed. These risk assessments, combined with logistical feasibility and cost are used to inform decisions about future management actions.

This paper describes the complexities involved in the management of non-native birds in the UK and uses a number of examples ranging from do nothing to licensed control to complete eradication to show how different decision making processes have resulted in different outcomes for the UK's avifauna.