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Lasers to be used to stop sea eagles attacking lambs

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The White-Tailed Sea eagle, which breeds on the Isle of Mull, has an 8ft wing span, photo: Debby Thorne.

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LASERS are to be deployed against sea eagles on Scottish farms and crofts in a move aimed at preventing the huge birds preying on sheep.

The method is one that is being being trialled by Scottish Natural Heritage and its partners in response to concerns among the crofting and farming communities.

White-tailed sea eagles have been successfully, and controversially, reintroduced to **Scotland** since the 1970s, with the population currently standing at an estimated 106 breeding pairs.

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But is thought the the figure could double within 10 years which is causing alarm among farmers.

According to sheep farmers and crofters in several parts of the country the birds are not only taking large numbers of lambs but also threatening rural livelihoods.

Other new scaring techniques are also being trialled, including audio or light-based scaring methods and if successful could be used in future as part of a range of options to protect livestock.

The work is part of the Sea Eagle Action Plan, managed by the National Sea Eagle Stakeholder Group.

Under the plan, farmers will be licensed to use the high-tech lasers in areas where lambs have been taken by Britain's largest bird of prey in the past.

The laser beams create patterns on hillsides and fields which disorientates the birds and makes them fly away from the areas where lambs are situated.

But the lasers cause the birds no harm whatsoever and can be used to deter other predators from preying on farm animals.

Ross Lilley, SNH sea eagle project manager, said the agency was working closely with farmers and crofters.

He said: "We recognise the serious concerns that some farmers and crofters have about the impact of sea eagles on their livestock."

"The trial is about finding a balance between livestock farming and wildlife and recognising the benefits that each brings to us all.

"This is a great example of working together to tackle issues faced by farmers and crofters whilst ensuring healthy populations of this spectacular species."

Various trials are underway by SNH and its partners on how to reduce the impact of sea eagle predation on sheep

Removing trees where sea eagles nest next to lambing areas is another technique being tested on a small number of 'monitor farms' in west coast locations.

These methods are being trialled in places where other management measures, such as extra shepherding, have failed to prevent loss of livestock.

SNH has granted a licence to Forest Enterprise Scotland (FES) to fell two trees where sea eagles have nested previously.

The trees are on the National Forest Estate, north of Oban, next to a farm where losses of lambs from sea eagle

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can move nest locations when nests are destroyed by natural causes.

The licence will only be granted for periods outside the breeding season to ensure that nesting birds are not disturbed.

The effectiveness of these techniques, and the response of the sea eagles, is being closely monitored by SNH contractors.

Andrew Bauer, of National Farmers' Union Scotland, said: "Farmers and crofters affected by sea eagles will be hoping the trial is a success, but can be reassured that regardless of the outcome, their plight is recognised and work to remedy it will continue."



Duncan Orr-Ewing, head of species and land management for RSPB Scotland, said: "We accept that non-lethal management approaches may assist with resolving conflicts with livestock, whilst also ensuring suitable safeguards are in place for a species, which rightly receives the highest level of legal protection. An effective partnership approach is working towards shared outcomes."

There have been three release phases to re-establish the eagles, which went extinct in 1918.

Two releases occurred on the west coast of Scotland from 1975 to 85 on the island of Rum and from 1993 to 1998 in Wester Ross.

There was a third released on the east coast in Fife from 2007 to 2012.

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