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FISHING & SHOOTING



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Are lasers the answer to predators?

To Auchnerran, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) demonstration farm in Aberdeenshire. The plan is to see how, on a Scottish farm twixt hill and strath, modern farming, wildlife and shooting can live in balance with one another. GWCT is still in the final throes of a baseline study; finding out what is already on site. But what is already there is extraordinary, at least to those of us who live in towns or relatively sanitised arable country. In the space of two hours we saw lapwings, oystercatchers, ducks, pheasant, buzzards, snipe, a huge number of rabbits and brown hares. A healthy population of resident woodcock has also been recorded.

Nothing much can move at the moment without being recorded, including a flock of pretty indifferent black faced sheep.

What we didn't see, but which are known to be there, were pine martens, badgers and goshawks, all of which are protected. In normal circumstances a goshawk might not be the most desirable predator on a shoot.

But from a game and wildlife research viewpoint the goshawks are a bit of a plus for Auchnerran, as are the badgers and pine martins.

What Auchnerran observes and discovers about predator and wildlife management should eventually feed into government policy.

Of course, whether Auchnerran comes up with the "right" answers depends rather where you stand on things like raptor and predator control or whether you approve of shooting in the first place. Auchnerran has, however, been chosen by the EU LIFE programme to test laser "fencing": seeing whether non-lethal beams can be used to keep foxes, stoats and weasels and even farm animals out of sensitive areas. It works well on seagulls on airports but whether it deters sheep, rabbits, rats or predators in general has yet to be seen.

First indications are that while it works on flocks of birds – shift one and the rest will follow – it may not be so effective on individually minded species. And before you wonder: yes, it is against the law to zap a protected species with lasers. But whatever wildlife solutions may emerge GWCT still has to make the farm pay. Come Brexit and uncertainty over farming subsidies this may prove tricky. But income already includes letting a few walked-up shooting days as a demonstration to hard pressed farmers that rough shooting, if you look after the wildlife, can produce useful extra income, if not a new combine. ■

www.gwct.org.uk/auchnerran/