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CAIRNGORMS LOCAL OUTDOOR ACCESS FORUM

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**Title:** Dates for signage regarding dogs on leads in the bird breeding season at designated sites and other sensitive areas

**Prepared by:** Justin Prigmore, Cairngorms Nature Officer

**Purpose** This paper seeks advice from the Forum about suggested changes to dates associated with responsible dog ownership signage at designated sites and other sensitive areas that have a visitor pressure and are important for endangered ground nesting birds.

**Advice Sought**

Forum members are asked to consider the issues, note the action to date and comment on the suggested changes to the wording of signage relating to responsible dog ownership.

**Background**

1. Ground-nesting birds, particularly capercaillie, are subject to disturbance by dogs. Birds can be killed, injured or family groups separated resulting in chick mortality which can have a significant negative impact on breeding success.
2. Capercaillie populations in Scotland have declined significantly from an estimated 20,000 birds in 1970 to 1,285 at the most recent national winter survey in 2009/10. The Cairngorms National Park holds a significant proportion of the national population – at least 75% of the national number of lekking males. The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust annual brood counts suggest that the vast majority of the most productive breeding sites are found within the National Park. Despite this, evidence suggests that capercaillie continue to decline in some areas of the park, particularly in the East.
3. Disturbance is included in the factors that contribute to the poor productivity of the species. With populations at such vulnerable numbers, any factors that could impact on the breeding success of individual birds could have significant impacts for the population as a whole.

### Work to Date

4. In February 2010, CNPA introduced a paper to the Forum highlighting concerns amongst the land management sector that the SOAC is unclear regarding wording relating to “dogs on leads or under close control” where land managers have ground nesting birds present. The CLOAF supported the use of wording to “*Keep your dog on a lead during the ground nesting bird breeding season*”. Members agreed with the principle that in order to promote responsible dog ownership, messages needed to be clear and consistent across the National Park. Wording exists within the guidance (SOAC p.106) that can remove this ambiguity and allow for clearer messages to be used. At sensitive areas for ground-nesting birds (at the discretion of the landowner) it was agreed to adopt a much firmer line by recommending to land managers that signage says “keep your dog on a lead” during the ground nesting bird breeding season. Members agreed that use of such strong messages should be in conjunction with wider campaigns to promote responsible dog behaviour, clearly explaining why such guidance was necessary.
5. It was recommended that dog walkers should be informed when they have entered and when they have left the area of sensitivity. The Capercaillie BAP Group advised that the capercaillie breeding and chick rearing season runs from 1<sup>st</sup> April to 15<sup>th</sup> August (this was originally proposed to be set from 1<sup>st</sup> March, but was later considered to be unnecessarily restrictive) and CNPA have considered this as the critical time period within which to adopt this stronger interpretation of the SOAC. For sites containing mountain specialist such as dotterel and ptarmigan, alternative dates could be used, as appropriate.
6. Much work has been done over the last several years to help land managers with ground nesting bird and visitor pressure sensitivities to ensure that appropriate and consistent signage is in place. This has involved working with designers to produce an online template; direct work with each individual land manager to ensure that signage is tailored to personal circumstances; and the funding and production of high quality signage for use at several key estates within the CNP.
7. In 2009 an agreement was written between the Capercaillie BAP Group and the Scottish Orienteering Association on the use of forests for Orienteering competitions and training where capercaillie are present. The agreement specifies that SOA will advise of all areas they are using for orienteering training and competitions in the capercaillie core zones, to be reviewed annually. Within the period 1<sup>st</sup> March to 31<sup>st</sup> August, orienteering clubs should seek advice from the Capercaillie BAP Group Project Officer. Specifically, this agreement states that in forest blocks with leks, no orienteering between 1<sup>st</sup> March and 31<sup>st</sup> August. In Forest blocks with known or probable capercaillie nesting and brood rearing, no orienteering between 15<sup>th</sup> April and 31<sup>st</sup> August. The Capercaillie Project Officer will apply consistent advice based on capercaillie biology, but will seek site-

specific opportunities to minimise any restrictions that are imposed. The SOA and its affiliated clubs will abide by these restrictions.

### **Changes to current advice**

8. Following a refusal to grant permission to stage the World Orienteering Championships in August 2015 at the FCS Inshriach site, there have been calls by SOA to alter these dates. Recent discussions at the behest of the SOA with various members of the Capercaillie BAP Group, have suggested that inconsistent advice is being given in relation to dogs and orienteering which is discriminatory. Although dog walking and orienteering are separate activities with potentially differing impacts, interpretation of the science by the Capercaillie BAP Group indicates that capercaillie chicks are still dependent on the hen at the end of August although broods will be able to fly into trees by the 15<sup>th</sup> August. As a result, the Capercaillie BAP Group agreed that the precautionary principle should be applied and that 31<sup>st</sup> August is the most appropriate date for restrictions to end for both orienteering and dog-walking. The Capercaillie BAP Group have not suggested a change to the inconsistency relating to the start dates.
9. The Capercaillie BAP Group have requested that this issue be considered by the Cairngorms LOAF.

### **Options for Consideration**

The following options are being suggested for consideration. The Forum is invited to discuss and give their comments and observations on these options.

**Option A** – Stick to the position originally directed by the Capercaillie BAP Group and adopted in 2010 by the Forum and CNPA i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> April to 15<sup>th</sup> August.

**Option B** – Alter the dates and advice to reflect the recent changes recommended by the Capercaillie BAP Group i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> August and ensure that all signage is changed. Contact all land managers that have already received signage over the last several years and fund alterations to all signs to retain consistency across the CNP.

**Option C** – Alter the dates and advice to reflect the recent changes recommended by the Capercaillie BAP Group i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> August, but do not change signs already produced. All new signage produced from this point will adhere to the new dates, but signs produced previously will not be altered.

**Justin Prigmore**

**Cairngorms Nature Officer**

[justinprigmore@cairngorms.co.uk](mailto:justinprigmore@cairngorms.co.uk)