



Cairngorms Local Outdoor Access Forum

Dogs on leads in capercaillie areas – proposed extension of dates

1. Introduction

There is wide consensus that this form of disturbance to capercaillie can be mitigated through dogs being on leads during the bird breeding season. This position has previously been supported by the LOAF group (see section 4 below).

The current signage in sensitive capercaillie areas states that dogs should be on a lead between 1 April and 15 August. This is a consistent message in use across the Park.

LOAF members are asked to:

- Consider an extension to this period from 15 August to 31 August.

2. Background

Capercaillie are an endangered species that are in decline with only 542 birds¹ left in the UK. The Cairngorms National Park is home to over 85%¹ of these remaining capercaillie. Through the previous Capercaillie framework and current Capercaillie project, much work has been undertaken by the Park Authority, land managers and partners to conserve capercaillie. However, in the last five years capercaillie numbers have decreased by over 50%ⁱ.

Research shows that being able to exercise dogs off-lead is the single most important requirement for people walking dogs and that dog walkers specifically seek places for off-lead activity. This can cause capercaillie to avoid areas of good habitat, thereby limiting the amount of space they have to live. Research also shows that people with dogs are a greater cause of disturbance to wildlife than people alone, and that lone dogs can flush birds 100% of the time. This can cause birds unnecessary stress, force them to leave their nests in the case of ground-nesting birds like capercaillie and can separate mothers from their dependent young.



Under the direction of the Scottish Government (June 2023), the Park Authority and NatureScot are to lead a co-ordinated action plan, to explore and deliver a range of options to halt the decline in capercaillie populations.

The Cairngorms Capercaillie Project is working with the dog walking community to create and develop dog walking spaces in Badenoch and Strathspey, ideally in woodlands and accessible on foot from communities, to meet the needs of dogs and their owners away from sensitive areas for wildlife.

3. Reason for change

Through brood monitoring and wildlife camera footage, local RSPB staff have increasingly noted young chicks present until late August / early September. It was observed that while these chicks could fly, they were still immature, were not competent fliers - struggling to gain height and sometimes colliding with trees - and were slow to flush (fly off in response to danger).

RSPB staff, based on these observations, felt that many of the broods they observed on the ground were still vulnerable to dogs off the lead at this time of year. The question was raised about changing the dogs on leads signs from 15 August to 31 August to increase the chance of chick survival and overall breeding success.

This proposed date change was referred to the Scottish Capercaillie Group for consideration. The group responded that they were supportive of the recognised capercaillie breeding season being extended to 31st August.

NatureScot then confirmed the recognised capercaillie breeding season as ending on 31 August. This has been published and NatureScot's Policy and Advice Manager confirmed that the extended season to 31 August could be used publicly with immediate effect.

4. Previous LOAF involvement

The LOAF has consulted on dog signage in capercaillie areas on several previous occasions:

- 2010 - The LOAF group agreed that for protected sensitive species the bird breeding season message "keep dogs on leads" could be used, as opposed to



the SOAC suggested wording of "on a lead or under close control". It was agreed that a stronger line should be taken, which needed a clear and consistent message.

The capercaillie BAP group advised that for capercaillie the breeding and chick rearing season ran from 1st April - 15th August this was adopted as the critical time period within which to adopt the stronger dogs on lead messaging in capercaillie areas.

- 2013 - The capercaillie BAP group requested the LOAF to consider extending the dog on leads period to 31 August. This was following outcomes of discussions which resulted in the limiting of orienteering activities in capercaillie woodlands until after 31 August.

The LOAF decided the period should not be extended and the recent position adopted in 2010 (1 April - 15 August) should be maintained.

- 2021 - The LOAF in the context of dog walker signage for sensitive capercaillie sites in Carrbridge, confirmed the position that requesting dogs be on leads is consistent with SOAC.

5. Advice sought

Given the context of the decline in capercaillie populations and the instruction from Scottish Government to take action, in addition to the capercaillie breeding season now being recognised by NatureScot as 31 August:

Does the Cairngorms LOAF group support the extension of the period for use of 'dogs on leads' signage, in sensitive capercaillie areas across the Park, from 15 August to 31 August?

The updated 'dogs on lead' period would then be 1 April - 31 August.

With regards to other ground nesting birds, signage will refer to the breeding season as April to end of July. The use of "dogs on leads" will also apply to schedule oneⁱⁱ species of ground nesting bird that are susceptible to disturbance during the breeding season.



^{i 1} Cairngorms Capercaillie Project website, accessed 30/08/2023

ⁱⁱ [Protected species list - WCA schedules 1, 1A, A1, 2, 3 and 4 | NatureScot](#)