

## Living with Capercaillie: experiences from Boat of Garten

*Dr. Katrina Brown, social scientist at the James Hutton Institute, reports back on the findings of her study of experiences of dogwalking at Boat of Garten since the implementation of measures for Capercaillie conservation. Here she explains some of the factors that make it harder or easier for humans and endangered species to share space.*



### Meeting the needs of people and birds

Throughout the world there are major challenges associated with living cheek by jowl with endangered or protected wildlife. Just think of wolves in Norway, tigers in India or lions in Africa. Thankfully there is nothing wanting to eat us or our animals in Deshar woods, but meeting the needs of people using the woods for recreation whilst also helping to sustain a supportive environment for endangered capercaillie<sup>1</sup> is increasingly seen as a challenge.

Disturbance to capercaillie from recreation, particularly recreation with dogs, is asserted in the Park's Capercaillie Framework<sup>2</sup> as one of a number of factors (including climate, predation and lack of suitable habitat) bringing the bird perilously close to becoming extinct in the UK. Yet people need to exercise their dogs, and the woods adjacent to Boat of Garten are a well-established, easily accessible and attractive place to go walking.

The need for new housing in Boat added urgency to addressing the question of how to meet the needs of people and capercaillie. In 2012 the Park consulted the community and instigated measures to reduce disturbance to capercaillie from dogwalking in Deshar woods. Signs were put up to mark areas that were particularly sensitive for the birds (map signs at the main entry points, and blue signs on the boundary to the sensitive area asking people to put dogs on leads, see photos) and a ranger was employed.

### The Research

These new measures in Deshar woods a good case study for research taking place under the 'Vibrant Rural Communities' theme of the Scottish Government's Food, Land and People Programme, 2011-2016, since the funder wanted to better understand how to meet multiple land use objectives, what worked well and not so well. Here this meant understanding people's actual experiences of dogwalking and how such measures shape those experiences, using an in-depth qualitative approach.

So, since 2012, my colleagues, Esther and Petra, and myself have spoken to many of you – residents and regular and occasional visitors, and have accompanied a number of you on your dogwalks. You have generously shared your experiences of dogwalking (and of running and biking with dogs) in these woods and how the measures have shaped those experiences.

It was clear that Deshar woods play an extremely important role in the lives of dogwalkers, socially and for physical and mental health. We found that generally dogwalkers regularly made big efforts for their outings to be as positive as possible, socially and environmentally. We also found that there was a range of reasons that made it easier or harder for dogwalkers to meet the requests of the capercaillie measures.

---

<sup>1</sup> The capercaillie is a ground-nesting bird that features on the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List of Threatened Species.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://cairnsgormsnature.co.uk/capercaillie-framework>

## What makes it easier to share space with capercaillie

**Measures require little compromise trade-off:** Some users didn't need to use the 'sensitive' part of woods much or kept their dog on a lead anyway, or alternative routes adequately met the needs of both dog and human. But this was rare. For most users the requested behaviour change is a sacrifice, curtailing where they want to go and the quality of experience for people and/or dogs.

**Giving ecological or economic value to capercaillie:** Some people are motivated to look after the ecology of the woods either because of holding strong environmental values generally or because they recognise particular species bring in economic benefits for the area.

**Being constructively reminded of capercaillie presence:** Because capercaillie are very hidden in the landscape, people found it easier to keep them in mind when they were reminded in a positive way of their presence (preferring the presence of the wooden capercaillie sculpture, for example, rather than signs telling them what to do).

**Interactivity and ease of dog-human relationship:** For some people, the direct interaction with the dog that was necessary at times was not always a source of pleasure (e.g. if their dog was tugging on the lead or if they just want to de-stress and be alone with their thoughts), whilst for others developing dog handling skills was a central part of the joy of the outing. The latter found keeping to the management requests made less of a dent in their quality of experience.

**Ranger presence:** A number of people found the ranger a useful source of information about wildlife and how to support it.

## What makes it harder to share space with capercaillie

**Lack of genuine alternative routes:** Many people felt that keeping to management requests meant that their needs (or those of their dog) were not met. Although some alternative routes were provided, there was a mismatch between route features needed and provided e.g. character of the landscape, character of the trail, route length, route remoteness, and routes where you could hope to meet or avoid other people (or dogs).

**Ineffective or unclear signage:** Most people found the signage unengaging and/or not completely clear, especially the on/off lead boundary away from the main trails. Very few people found the map sign informative. The blue signs were clearer in informing people of what to do and when, but many felt they lacked sufficient explanation of *why* dogs needed to be on leads, and were therefore not motivating.

**Lack of information about, and cultural ownership of, capercaillie:** There is an overall sense of ambivalence towards capercaillie. This comes partly from a feeling that, besides the ranger, little effort has been made to reach out to the community with knowledge making clear why they should go to the bother of making daily sacrifices. It also comes from a sense that the bird doesn't 'belong' to ordinary people but rather to lairds or birders.

**Lack of scientific legitimacy:** Some people were not convinced that there was enough knowledge about capercaillie to justify 'picking on' recreation more than other factors affecting the birds.

**Out of sight, out of mind:** Capercaillie are not very visible in the landscape. The harm dogs can do to capercaillie is also not very visible (e.g. people were particularly moved to learn about the dangers of hens and chicks becoming separated – yet this would be impossible to see on the ground, and female birds and chicks rarely feature in communications about capercaillie).

**Capercaillie not acting as if they are 'sensitive':** Male birds can at times be very bold and aggressive – and are often reported as such in the press, which is the main way capercaillie are visible to people – which makes it difficult to be convinced that the birds are actually 'sensitive' to disturbance.

## Lessons for management

From this we can identify ways in which people and capercaillie can be helped to better co-exist. These include:

- ) Making a better case for why management measures are important: More knowledge, openness and public participation regarding capercaillie, why they are important and how they can be harmed;

- ) Greater clarity (and, for some, being more specific) in the what, where and when being asked of people;
- ) Alternative routes that genuinely meet the needs of diverse dogwalkers (including those who need longer routes, want to run or bike, want somewhere that feels remote or where they are not likely to encounter other people and dogs);
- ) Support could be provided for people and dogs to develop their skills, such as through training opportunities or infrastructure.

If anyone has questions or would like to be informed of the academic work relating to this project, please get in touch: [katrina.brown@hutton.ac.uk](mailto:katrina.brown@hutton.ac.uk)