

David Stewart
Convenor
Public Petitions Committee
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh EH99 1SP

18 November 2014

Dear David,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your Committee's activities to further our petition. First, we would like to thank you and the Minister for taking the time to comment on our petition. We find it heartening that he has no opposition to either the principle of a National Bird for Scotland, or that the Golden Eagle would be a fitting choice.

As we mentioned in our previous note, we share the sentiment of disappointment in the responses from some of the other Parliamentary Committees. We acknowledge that they are very busy but find it disappointing that the opportunity to agree what national symbols in Scotland are appropriate, has been missed. We would welcome any other comments from these committees and in particular some firm clarification as to whether they feel that a national bird should be one of the appropriate symbols of Scotland (as is the case in many other comparable countries).

With regard to the Golden Eagle being the proposed species for Scotland's National Bird, we find it heartening that the minister reaffirms his commitment to tackling raptor persecution and understands the impact that this illegal activity is having on Scotland's national reputation as a country which should be caring better for this important part of its natural heritage. As well as being justified in its own right, we believe that the designation of the golden eagle as a national symbol would serve to bring wider public attention to the ongoing travesty of raptor persecution in modern Scotland and help reduce its impact on the populations of some of our most vulnerable and iconic raptor species. We consider that the acknowledgement that such a bird can 'represent' a nation is a worthwhile symbol to have in order to illustrate to the world the "psyche" of Scotland. Indeed, as the minister stated in last year's debate on the National Tree, symbols "*Highlight the value we put on our trees, woods and forests*" a national bird would be an international statement of the value we place on Scotland's internationally important populations of birds and wildlife more generally.

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The RSPB is part of BirdLife International,
a partnership of conservation organisations
working to give nature a home around the world.

In response to the Minister's statement that "*It seems to me that there are probably other arguments that could be put forward in favour of other birds*", We welcome the minister's affirmation that not only could a Golden Eagle be a worthy national symbol, but that Scotland is blessed with other special birds that are potential candidates. We agree that Scotland has a fantastic asset in its wide variety of bird species and this is something that we should showcase to the world.

We believe that the minister is correct to ask what Scotland would want from any new national symbols. We think the answers to this are readily available to us. Much could be taken from what was said during the two Parliamentary debates for the National Tree in May and June of 2013. During the first debate, it was mentioned that symbols indicate this aforementioned 'value', achieve and both the species and the public benefit from the increased level of awareness of the importance of both the species and any threats it may face. We also believe that as Joan McAlpine mentioned in the same debate that '*symbols would help the country to enhance its international brand.*'

In response to the Committee's question as to whether our organisation would be prepared to perform a public consultation on the matter of a National bird, we are happy to do what is necessary to further this petition, including such a consultation. We would, however, add some qualifications. We feel that if any public consultation were to be performed, it may not be best carried out by ourselves in order to allay any concerns that there may be any of bias in the information provided, since we have already stated our preference for a particular bird to be chosen for our national bird. We ask your committee to consider asking a statutory agency to perform the consultation with our support, in order to ensure impartiality.

Secondly, it seems that the minister's primary concern is with the lack of debate on the matter so far. We believe that it is this concern that should be addressed first and that the principal way to do so is to have a committee business debate on the issue of national symbols. This would allow the general principle of a national symbols to be discussed. We believe that this would help to reassure the Minister of the virtue of designating such a species at the end of this Year of Homecoming.

Third, we also ask that the committee consider contacting Visit Scotland, some business leaders and perhaps SCVO, to garner wider opinion on national symbols. We believe that this suite of activities would allow us to settle the concerns of the Minister.

With regard to garnering the considered view of Parliament, we suggest that a motion debating the general principle of designation of a national bird would be sufficient. This would allow for a thorough discussion of the merits of symbols, and provide a mechanism to illustrate cross-party support for the symbol to articulate the truly comprehensive support. It could then be a later public decision on what specific species is chosen. We would also reiterate that this campaign has support from members from across the chamber such as Rhoda Grant, Annabel Goldie and Angus Macdonald as well as several other non-governmental organisations such as the Scottish Ornithologists' Club.

In conclusion, I think the pertinence of designating a national bird is enhanced by the widespread and ongoing discussion of Scotland's future, initiated by the recent Referendum. An extensive list of the world's national birds can be found on this website- <http://www.wellreadnaturalist.com/2014/11/birds-of-many-nations/> National symbols can help a reaffirm the unifying principles of a society, including a commitment to its wildlife. We hope that your committee can endeavour to further this petition with this in mind.

Kind regards,

Duncan Orr-Ewing
Head of Species & Land Management