

**THE ROYAL SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF BIRDS**

Cefn Croes plateau is a mix of Forestry Commission blanket conifers, 'improved' and 'semi-improved' grassland, 'unimproved' grassland, heather and blanket bog. Two Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are located on the plateau.

Cefn Croes has a diverse bird population, the most important being the black grouse, which is of Welsh and UK importance owing to its decline in recent years. A few upland wader species have been recorded at the site and merlin breed there. Hen harriers have been seen hunting the area at all times of the year indicating that the plateau is an important feeding area during migration, and red kites breed locally and also hunt across the moorland. The area was the stronghold of the red kite when the population crashed in the early 1900s due to persecution, and its revival has resulted in this bird becoming an iconic emblem for Mid Wales.

In a response dated March 6<sup>th</sup> 2000 to a campaigner enquiring of the RSPB whether they would object to the Cefn Croes development, signed by the Conservation Officer Nick Thomas, it was stated that:

*'The RSPB has had serious concerns about the proposed development of a wind farm at Cefn Croes for exactly the reasons you state, namely that:*

- *The area still retains a remnant population of black and red grouse, merlin, snipe, curlew and ring ousel, all of which could be disturbed by the wind farm and as a result cease to breed in this area.*
- *We have been involved in the Mynydd Y Ffynnon Project, one of the principal aims of which is to improve or restore semi-natural habitats to the area for the benefit of wildlife, including the birds mentioned above. **Much of this work could be harmed by the construction of the wind farm.**' [Editor's emphasis: this admission has never been acceded to by ADAS or the Forestry Commission – see FC Chapter).*

But then continued:

*'The black grouse is one of the RSPB's top priorities at present. Before entering into discussions with the developers, we were broadly of the opinion that we would only object to the wind farm, if it directly affected mating (lekking) areas of this species, around which black grouse tend to feed and breed. The area of the proposed wind farm has no statutory protection (eg Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Protection Area (SPA) etc), and so we could not object on the grounds that a protected conservation area would be damaged. Having discussed the*

*windfarm with the developers we have now come to the conclusion that black grouse and other species mentioned above are unlikely to be affected by the wind farm, indeed the habitat restoration may well enhance this area for some of the species, notably red and black grouse. As a result of this we have decided not to object to the proposed wind farm.'*

Please note the contradictory statements in the same letter.

It should also be noted that two of the proposed turbines are less than 100 metres from the boundary of Lllynoedd Ieuan SSSI according to the developers' maps.

What had happened for the RSPB to lose their '*serious concerns*' about the proposal?

We were told the developers had agreed to mitigation measures and had also agreed to pay £250,000 for the lifetime of the wind farm through a Land Management Plan. Could this have been the reason why RSPB did not object to the development? (To set the promised £250,000 in context over the 25-30 years lifetime of the power station – this is less than £10,000 per annum, hardly generous, and will probably be spent on environmental surveys.)

Campaigners were still unhappy that the RSPB was willing to risk the small numbers of breeding black grouse and the other threatened birds at the site, when little research has been done into the effects of noise on breeding birds. Nick Thomas replied on May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2000

*'In general the RSPB will only object to developments that affect:*

- *Statutory sites (eg Sites of Special Scientific Interest – SSSI) – the area affected by the windfarm is not covered by any statutory designation.*

(this is untrue as the site is designated as an Environmentally Sensitive Area)

- *Rare species or important groups of species – the area affected does have a few species that could fit into this category, namely black grouse, ring ousel, curlew and merlin. However, on inspection of the developer's proposals we believe that none of these species will be seriously affected by the windfarm, because the turbines and tracks are located in areas away from those used by these species.'*

Note 'seriously affected'. If a species is already threatened, any adverse effect becomes 'serious'.

In a letter date May 8<sup>th</sup> 2001 from Tony Prater, Conservation Manager Wales, he admitted that

*'..... little research has been carried out on the impact of noise on birds – we have to use our judgement on these issues.'*

As there are no other wind 'farms' in the UK using turbines the size of those proposed for Cefn Croes, it is difficult to understand on what the RSPB based their judgement.

One campaigner wrote to ask how the decision not to object to Cefn Croes was taken, whether there were minutes of that meeting and who made that decision. On May 19<sup>th</sup> 2000 Nick Thomas wrote:

*'The decision not to object.....was taken following discussions between myself, Dr Tony Prater (Conservation Manager Wales), Dr Tim Stowe (Director Wales) and Dick Squires (Ynyshir Warden). ..... There are no minutes of this discussion.'*

How can such a major development on land that was being publicly funded for the Mynydd-y-Ffynnon project be taken by just three people at an unminuted meeting?

In November 1999 RSPB launched 'RSPB Energy'. Their website states that;

*'RSPB energy offers you 'green' electricity, and gas which will:*

- *Help ensure a better environment for future generations*
- *All at no extra cost to you*
- *Help birds and other wildlife today.'*

How does it work? For every household who signs up to RSPB Energy, £20 (£10 for electricity £10 for gas) is contributed to RSPB funds. And in addition £10 (£5 for electricity and £5 for gas) is then contributed for each year that the customer remains in the scheme. This is a partnership with Scottish and Southern Electricity.

Why does the RSPB not encourage its members to save energy? Instead of giving new members a bird book or a nestbox when they join, they could do as the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales does and give energy efficient light bulbs. More CO<sub>2</sub> could be saved by REDUCING the energy we use, rather than erecting turbines which destroy habitat and landscape.

The answer is probably money. Millions of households have signed up to the 'Green Energy' scheme so it is generating a lot of revenue for the RSPB. Energy-saving is not a money-spinner.

Since the launch of RSPB Energy, many members have expressed their concerns through the letters page of their quarterly magazine, 'Birds'. Concerns are growing about more and bigger turbines in the landscape, and it is known that people have cancelled their membership to the Society because of the RSPB's stance on turbines.

One campaigner wrote a lengthy letter when she resigned from the RSPB and received a personal letter from the Chief Executive, Graham Wynne dated May 19<sup>th</sup> 2002. He wrote:

*‘.....We supplied the developer with data on recent lek sites near the development site and the proposals were redesigned to ensure that no turbines were located within 1.5 kms of any lek. This distance is our ‘best practice’ disturbance radius for black grouse, which we employ with our partners such as Forest Enterprise. Outside this radius, we do not believe the turbines pose a significant threat to the birds.’*

Note again the word ‘significant’ as a qualification.

How do they know that the turbines will not pose a significant threat when Tony Prater had admitted *‘little research has been carried out on the impact of noise on birds?’*

Another former RSPB member received this response from Ian Peters on May 17<sup>th</sup> 2002 when he discontinued membership:

*‘The RSPB is only neutral on the subject to a certain extent because of the contradictory nature of this form of energy. Obviously, there is the issue that they are ugly and obtrusive and present a danger to migrating birds. On the other hand it is a very green source of energy. As such, the society is caught between arguments and we have been forced to oppose development adjacent to our reserves. It is possible that the RSPB will change its stance towards wind farms as time goes on. However, at present we are committed to supporting green energy sources albeit with a few reservations. I realise that this must appear as having double standards but the society’s stance has to be based on sound scientific knowledge. The consequence is that there are occasions when aesthetics have to be sacrificed. If further research suggests that the vanes are a considerable risk to birds then the society would revise its current stance.’*

Mr Peters says *‘the society’s stance has to be based on sound scientific knowledge’*, yet his statement sounds more like an apology for BWEA with wind promoted as a ‘very green’ source of energy. Ian Peters words contradict Tony Prater’s assertion that *‘little research has been carried out on the impact of noise on birds’*. How can one RSPB official so blatantly contradict another? How can a Society that is dedicated to protecting the bird life of this country allow any developments that are potentially harmful to wildlife?

In the Report of the Director of Environmental Services and Housing for Ceredigion Council under Section 9, 'Findings' this point is made:

'..... At worst the proposal may fragment habitat and may have an impact on bird populations. A precautionary approach is considered appropriate.'

The RSPB obviously did not consider it appropriate to take a 'precautionary approach'.

In December 2002 a red kite was found seriously injured beneath the turbines at Ystumtuen above the Rheidol valley. It had a terrible injury in which the end portion of the wing was almost severed. The vet who examined the bird, (and subsequently had to destroy it) said that the injury was wholly in keeping with being hit by a turbine blade. A few years ago the body of a long-dead kite was found under a turbine at another wind 'farm'. As the corpse was so decayed it was impossible to say how it died but collision was not ruled out. (Source – Welsh Kite Trust Newsletter Issue 13 Spring 2003.) The Ystumtuen turbines are just a few hundred yards from the Forest Enterprise Nant-yr-Arian kite feeding station and Cefn Croes is located just 8 kilometres west. With a total of 47 turbines within a few kilometres of this feeding station, covering an area where red kites hunt, how many more of these magnificent birds will be injured and killed?

The RSPB has maintained throughout the correspondence with campaigners that the landscape is not part of their remit. Surely condoning the destruction of landscape is not part of their remit either. Habitat is part of the landscape and most birdwatchers would agree that they would prefer to see birds in their natural environment rather than flying in and out of flailing turbine blades. Wind power stations are alien structures in the landscape. They are a threat to the birds that hunt and nest in the vicinity of these areas.

Increasing numbers of RSPB supporters are now questioning the Society's policies, and it will be interesting to see if they do a 'U' turn on this. Is this yet another organisation that is straying from its original remit and core values?