

Nick Halfhide

Interim Chief Executive, NatureScot
Great Glen House
Leachkin Road
Inverness
IV3 8NW

Dear Nick,

I write to you in your capacity as Interim Chief Executive of NatureScot to highlight our deep concern regarding the licensing of the 2025 guga hunt. The Scottish Seabird Centre acknowledges the deep cultural heritage of the hunt, a tradition that has been part of Ness community life for centuries. However, in light of the significant challenges facing seabird populations – including climate change, unsustainable fishing, offshore development, invasive species, and the devastating impact of avian influenza – we believe it is time to reconsider this practice. We wish to express serious concerns about the continued licensing of this activity for 2025.

Nearly two-thirds of Scotland's seabird species have declined over the past twenty years, with some species experiencing reductions exceeding 50%. The recent outbreak of avian flu in seabird populations around Scotland has caused mass mortalities, notably of tens of thousands of Northern Gannets. In combination, these factors place seabirds under significant and escalating conservation pressure.

The 2025 licence cap of 500 guga represents a substantial reduction compared to previous years. Nonetheless, the broader context indicates that granting this licence may still be inappropriate given current conservation status.

We therefore request that NatureScot:

- Review the 2025 licence with reference to current seabird monitoring data and influenza impact and publish the scientific assessment of the impact of any consented activity.
- Suspend future licences in recognition of urgent seabird conservation and welfare concerns.
- Engage with stakeholders and affected community members, including conservation organisations and Ness representatives, to explore alternatives that honour cultural heritage without compromising seabird conservation.

While understanding the importance of tradition, the Scottish Seabird Centre strongly believes that prioritising the conservation of Scotland's globally important seabird populations must now take precedence. We appreciate this is a complex and challenging issue and would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence or engage in consultation in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in grey ink that reads "EMBurton".

Emily Burton

Senior Conservation Officer, Scottish Seabird Centre