

COMMENT

Unkindest of all the cuts

T'S bad. It must be.

For as long as we can remember, those experts we have turned to for updates and insights into the local business world have always steadfastly accentuated the positive.

They have always insisted it's not PR, it's simply good business and, in fact, it's simply human to look on the bright side of life no matter how irksome the other side of it might be.

But this week's results from the Cairngorms Business Partnership's latest survey finally defy their best intentions.

The barometer can be tapped as hard as we like, thumped with a whole fist even, but the needle is not going to budge from "stormy" – at this particular juncture, anyway.

The percentages are too big, the perceptions too stark.

Even our FSB man David Richardson, who might have helped Monty Python write that song for Life of Brian (you know it), accepts that although we are rallying somewhat it was a particularly "slow start" this year.

And as if to hammer the point home, we couldn't even go to press without hearing from our favourite timber sawmill.

Tony Hackney, its chief executive, lay the risk to his 40 employees firmly at the door of the global downturn across the industry and the consequent drive to improve efficiencies.

Plus, he knows, the backdrop of a pandemic and all the conflict in Ukraine.

Plus, he also knows, the increasing energy costs and a 40-year high in cost of living expenses.

"To counter the impact of this, we have had to make the very tough decision to propose to close our sawmill at Boat"

On hearing the devastating news, Mr Ewing MSP was offering to help however he could.

"I had understood that there were hopes of investment by the company but these have not come to pass."

We wish him well in his dealings with HIE and the Scottish government minister as he attempts to arrange their meeting with the company.

Every effort must indeed be made to find a way of keeping the business at the Boat site and all those loyal and dedicated employees in work.

He does, after all, have some experience in these matters and knows that in time the sector must recover.

There are many opportunities in the sawmilling sector and there are many in the corridors of influence fully capable of making the most of them.

Over to you, Forest and Land Scotland.



QUICK: MONITOR ME...

Photo of the Week

Send us your photographs showing off all this wonderful part of the world has to offer. It doesn't have to be just the stunning surroundings – photographs can be of anything, providing they are taken in the strath. Email them to editorial@sbherald.co.uk



'Thought you might like the attached photo,' writes John Walker in Carrbridge. 'A red squirrel showing interest in our hedgehog house, but didn't venture in. Probably looking for a free breakfast.'

Are our capers being monitored into extinction?

I READ Peter Cairns on capercaillie (July 13).

Mr Cairns obviously has little experience of pine martens, unlike the many gamekeepers who encounter them in their day-to-day toils.

Looking for fresh news on the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project website, I sadly found next to none – not even spring male lek numbers. The project was intended to save the capercaillie from extinction, just as the previous one had been. The current project covers almost the same area in Speyside. Millions of public funds were spent then, and now again.

That earlier project failed: the population continued to decline and they now estimate only 1000 are left, with 80 per cent of those being in Speyside.

The project's plans have gone down much the same road as its predecessor. The official website maintains it has become a "research and study project" and not the "save them from extinction project" it was supposed to be.

As always, the science world and RSPB grab a large chunk of the funds for their personal pet studies. A further large lump goes on paying wages and expenses of eight staff – most likely lovely folk, but employing only one gamekeeper,

when it should have been eight experienced keepers working across Speyside. They could have reversed much of the decline.

The other seven consist of a project manager, project officer, development coordinator, communications officer, advisory officer, advisory assistant, project coordinator...

All of them with expensive transport and expenses, I would guess.

They're all great titles, but what do they actually do? How are those eight officers going to save the capercaillie from predators? Maybe they hope to talk them out of declining.

All those who have dwelt and earned their living on Speyside estates for generations, managing the wildlife, know that the main problem is predation.

Those who predate on the capercaillie and many other ground-nesting birds in the UK have been shielded by the conservationists' Wildlife and Countryside Act.

The protection of those predators, such as pine marten, badgers, goshawks, along with foxes, stoats, crows, means keepers are always hard-pushed to protect the capercaillie. The

sheer numbers of protected predators of capercaillie alone can seriously limit the bird's recovery.

There is any amount of capercaillie habitat in Speyside. But all the funding needs to be targeted at effective predator control. If there is not an increase in keeper numbers undertaking effective predator control around key capercaillie breeding areas the project will fail again.

Speyside estates don't need desktop conservationists to tell them how to save capercaillie. These birds don't get the chance to die of old age or even a disease. Numbers are seriously limited by predation of their eggs, chicks and adults – and now public pressure through tourism promotion by the park authority and RSPB.

It's not rocket science that's needed here, simply effective predator control of all known killers of capercaillie, with those legally protected being translocated, far away from the capercaillies' home while the species recovers.

Now the project is considering bringing in birds from Sweden!

Why? When they claim they don't know yet what

results the project is actually having?

Until they do demonstrate the recovery of existing capercaillie and reverse that decline they will only be importing more targets for the predators, who will suffer the same fate as such.

They are also planning a project extension, once more demonstrating that they have all their priorities wrong.

On their web page they say "Action in the national park is therefore critical to prevent extinction". The project also says there is no "silver bullet". Work therefore involves "five essential actions" delivered across the Cairngorms National Park; helping communities to create and deliver their own community-led actions for capercaillie; raising awareness of the plight of the bird and how people can help; researching the genetic diversity of capercaillie in the national park to help inform action; improving and creating more habitat for capercaillie and controlling predators in "key areas"; strengthening capercaillie monitoring to enable more informed decisions.

Here we go again. Look at the list of five essential actions – another project monitoring a species into extinction, spending millions of pounds of public funds to do so. Give me strength! There will soon be no birds to monitor, folks.

Bill Cowie
Isle of Rona

Contact the Strathy

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