

CHRIS PACKHAM

IT'S SHAMEFUL THAT SOME CONSERVATION CHARITIES DON'T STAND UP FOR FOXES, BADGERS AND HEN HARRIERS.

OPINION

For some time now I've been meaning to design a t-shirt with a heart symbol and the slogan "We love wildlife". In small print underneath would be the message: "Until it becomes successful or a little bit of a nuisance – and then we'll kill it!"

Often I despair of our ignorance and intolerance of other life in Britain. But I'm not talking about the general public here. I mean you and me, the wildlife lovers – and especially the conservation charities that accept our donations and purport to be looking after that "other life".

It seems there's even confusion about what wildlife is. Take the red fox. Since it's the world's most successful carnivore – and beautiful to boot – surely it counts? Surely we should all be celebrating the huge show of opposition that recently thwarted the UK government's attempt to make hunting foxes with packs of dogs in England and Wales even easier than it is already?

Hundreds of thousands of us did do our bit for wildlife in July, by saying loud and clear that we opposed a return to the barbarism of fox hunting. But notably absent were campaigning voices from

the headquarters of two of our largest wildlife conservation organisations, the RSPB and Wildlife Trusts. From them we heard precisely nothing.

Maybe they don't class Britain's largest remaining land carnivore as 'wildlife'. Maybe they don't see it as an essential part of our ecosystems, or think that protecting it is simply not their job. Maybe they just assume that the League Against Cruel Sports and RSPCA can handle all that tricky political work – a bit like with the English badger culls, where once again the RSPB and Wildlife Trusts HQ (unlike several of its constituent county Wildlife Trusts) remained ominously silent.

Or perhaps it's because charities like these two are hamstrung by outdated liaisons with the 'nasty brigade' and can't risk upsetting their old friends. This might also be why, for the second year, the National Trust and Wildlife Trusts HQ refused to support Hen Harrier Day, an awareness campaign drawing attention to criminal persecution of a threatened bird.

But then, as grouse moor owners who allow driven grouse shoots, the poor souls at the National Trust are in an awkward position – so much so that they clearly struggle to discern right from wrong. It's a shame – though not as shameful as

the absence of any support from both the Wildlife Trusts central office and the Hawk and Owl Trust.

If you're squirming at this criticism, let me be clear: I keenly support these bodies and their brilliant staff and volunteers, without whom we'd be lost. And at least Derbyshire Wildlife Trust broke ranks to

support Hen Harrier Day, while Steve Trotter, the Wildlife Trusts' admirable director for England, has attended events and written supportive blogs.

National Trust projects such as the High Peak Moors Vision commit it to raptor conservation, but this is nowhere near enough. One pair of hen harriers breeding successfully on National

Trust land in England in 2014? Does that count as a success story nowadays?

There are glimmers that some of the charities I've mentioned may be getting the message. Mike Clarke, the RSPB chief executive, took on the shooting industry in a great speech in July. He pointed out that over 50 million gamebirds are pumped into our countryside every year, with untold impacts on native species and food-webs.

Well, it's a start. But things are rapidly getting worse for wildlife, so this is a time to stand up and shout, not cower or collaborate in the hope that things will get better. We want more action from Britain's conservation leaders, not the fence-sitting and ineffectual risk-avoidance that have contributed to the mess we're in now. 🐾

CHRIS PACKHAM is a conservationist and presenter. Do you agree with the arguments raised here? We'd love to hear your views – for contact details see p5.



The National Trust is brilliant in many ways – unless you're a fox, badger or hen harrier?