

Botham: I'll sue RSPB over bird killing slur

Dominic Kennedy

Sir Ian Botham is threatening to sue the RSPB for libel after he claimed the charity had accused him of killing protected birds.

A dispute between the former cricketer and the society plumbed new depths in a row over the mysterious disappearance of three rare hen harriers.

Sir Ian is a figurehead for You Forgot The Birds, a pressure group that wants the RSPB to concentrate on practical conservation rather than ideological campaigning.

Hen harriers are at the forefront of a dispute between conservationists and gamekeepers. Campaigners claim that the protected birds are targeted by gamekeepers because they are seen as a threat to grouse moors.

Emotions have been raised by the disappearance of three nesting males from Lancashire. Two females abandoned the nests in the absence of a male to feed them. Police are investigating

and the RSPB has offered £10,000 for information leading to a conviction.

Sir Ian reacted by saying he would pay £10,000 to anyone who saved the eggs, incubated and hatched them so the chicks could be released into the wild. The RSPB mocked him, saying the eggs were cold and that although the charity wanted to save the hen harrier from extinction, "we've not yet worked out how to bring them back to life".

Sir Ian wrote in *The Mail on Sunday* yesterday: "On a personal level I was more than a little annoyed when the charity accused me on the BBC of illegally killing birds of prey. Have they heard of the law of libel? I don't take kindly to being lied about and my lawyers — who make me look like a pussy-cat — have written to the RSPB."

Although Sir Ian did not specify, he was referring to an item on *Farming Today* on Radio 4 about the hen harrier dispute. The BBC interviewed Ian Gregory, a lobbyist at You Forgot The Birds, which represents supporters of the

grouse industry, and Martin Harper, the RSPB's conservation director.

Mr Harper said: "The National Wildlife Crime Unit says that intelligence continues to indicate strong association between raptor persecution and grouse-moor management and my challenge to Sir Ian and Ian Gregory is: to stop trying to deflect attention away



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from themselves, and on to the RSPB, and do what any responsible industry should do. Get its own house in order, stop illegal killing and let's get our uplands back into better condition."

Sir Ian and his son Liam, a former rugby player, enjoy grouse shooting. You Forgot The Birds was launched last

year with a complaint about the RSPB to the Charity Commission that it was misleading donors by claiming that 90p from every pound donated went directly to conservation work.

Accounts suggested that only 24 per cent of the income went into nature reserves with much of the rest being spent on research, fundraising and administration. Sir Ian said at the time: "It's a massive bureaucracy where donations are spent on homes for office workers not for birds. I am a country lad. I don't go into the city and tell them what to do nor do I expect city folk to come and tell us how nature works."

The RSPB backed down and agreed that the spending claim could be construed as misleading.

Mr Harper wrote on a blog yesterday: "We can confirm that we received a letter from lawyers acting on behalf of You Forgot the Birds. Our lawyers have responded and the matter is now in their hands."

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Ferdinand thanks fans for messages over death of wife

Rio Ferdinand has described being "overwhelmed" by messages of support he received from football fans after his wife died. The former England captain said that Rebecca Ellison's battle with cancer was "the most difficult period" for his family and paid tribute to her as "an incredibly brave woman".

A number of football's star names, in-

nand's former Manchester United team-mate Nemanja Vidic, turned out for 34-year-old Ms Ellison's funeral, the Queens Park Rangers defender added.

Writing in *The Sun*, he said: "It has been the most difficult period of my life, what with managing the emotions of our three children and watching such a great woman as my wife Rebecca die

about it. After Rebecca died, we held a service on a lovely sunny day which was arranged to perfection.

"Rebecca was an organisational freak and planned much of it herself while the kids picked the music. She wanted it to be a celebration of her life rather than a morbid occasion and it went just the way she would have liked."

its good wishes, including Liverpool and fans at his former clubs, West Ham and Manchester United.

"It was refreshing to see such compassion in the game, with tribalism removed," he said.

Ferdinand, 36, and Ms Ellison married in August 2009 and had three children: Lorenz, nine, Tate, six, and