

As caged gamebird suffering is exposed...

Labour's Act of Betrayal

The 2006 Animal Welfare Act (AWA) has been heralded by the government as the most significant animal protection initiative in nearly a century. But for the millions of pheasants and partridges reared for 'sport shooting' every year, the Act threatens to legitimise the most brutal form of industrialised animal production.

Scores of thousands of breeding birds are confined in metal battery cages for the whole of their productive lives. The AWA was an opportunity to outlaw these contraptions through a Code of Practice governing 'gamebird' production. Instead, the government arranged for the Standing Committee that is now writing the Code to be dominated by shooting industry figures. And to help the Committee with its deliberations, DEFRA has commissioned 'scientific research' into gamebird welfare from the avowedly pro-shooting Game Conservancy Trust (see end of report). Other government-initiated research is currently being carried out by the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), DEFRA's official advisory body. But FAWC's investigative visits to gamefarms will be pre-announced and dependent upon the cooperation of individual operators.

Animal Aid, which first exposed gamebird battery cages in November 2004, has revisited two of the four producers known to operate the system. The undercover footage we shot during the height of the 2007 egg production season shows stressed, diseased, wounded and feather-pecked birds – as well as a



large number of dead pheasants, lying prone on the metal grill floors. The battery cages adjoin each other and are arranged in long rows. The metal and wire mesh boxes are open to the elements all year round. One cock and six or seven females are confined within each pheasant unit. Partridges are held in pairs inside a metal walled box that measures just two feet by three. These cages are set to be awarded a government seal of approval under a welfare act that is supposed to penalise 'unnecessary suffering' and that requires everyone responsible for animals to exercise a 'duty of care' to those animals. Instead of securing such protection,

the government – perhaps running shy of another battle with the bloodsports lobby – is giving a virtual free hand to an industry that mass produces birds to be killed for pleasure. Many shot birds are not eaten. *Country Life* magazine has reported that some are buried in specially dug pits. The Code of Practice for Gamebird Production is expected to be brought into force in 2009.

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Every year in Britain, about 35 million pheasants and five million partridges are purpose-bred to be released for shooting. With more and more birds produced annually – as a result of the demand by shooters for ‘big bags’ – intensification of production has increased. Battery cages are perhaps the most extreme feature of a system that involves the use of industrial scale hatcheries, sheds and pens and a range of restraining and vision-obscuring devices. Such tools are aimed at limiting damage caused by the bird-on-bird aggression that is caused by the crowded, stressful conditions.



Background

In 2004, Animal Aid filmed at G & A Leisure – a pheasant farm in Mid-Wales – thereby exposing the intensive nature of gamebird breeding. The complex consisted of row upon row of small metal and wire mesh boxes that were open to the elements. Incarcerated within each were one male pheasant and half a dozen females. The majority had been feather-pecked or trampled upon by stressed cage mates, some so severely that their backs and necks were raw and bloody. This was despite all of them having been fitted with oppressive ‘anti-aggression’ face masks. The area covered at least two acres, or the equivalent of two football fields.

In 2005, Animal Aid again filmed at G & A Leisure as well as at three other battery cage operators: Heart of England Farms (Warwick), Hy-Fly Game Hatcheries (Lancashire) and Pye

‘Animal Aid’s latest undercover footage – filmed at Hy-Fly and G&A Leisure – reveals that there has been little meaningful change.’

Hall (Suffolk). Distressed, dead and injured animals were found inside the barren cages. Stereotypical behaviour was caught on film. The scale of the suffering was immense.

Animal Aid’s exposé of the breeding farms forced the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) into condemning the cages. A schism appeared in the industry. Given that three of the four battery cage units filmed by Animal Aid during the

2005 breeding season were run by members of the Game Farmers’ Association’s governing council, the GFA felt compelled to defend the contraptions. It did, however, set a minimum standard of ‘enrichment’. Unless the cages were fitted with a small piece of astro-turf, a perch and some shelter from the elements, battery cage operators would not attract the support of the GFA.

No Improvement

Three years after our initial exposé, battery cages still remain very much in evidence. And the BASC, despite its condemnation of cages, continues to promote farms using them. Animal Aid’s latest undercover footage – filmed at Hy-Fly and G & A Leisure – reveals that there has been little meaningful change. While Hy-Fly continues to keep birds in entirely barren cages, G & A Leisure cages have been ‘enriched’. But, as our footage shows, they still offer little in the way of respite or stimulation for the birds incarcerated within them.

The Conditions

Hy-Fly Game Hatcheries

The owner of Hy-Fly claims that it is the biggest game farm in Britain. Ray Holden has two criminal convictions for animal cruelty. He used a live mallard duck as decoy in a fox trap, and he maimed a jackdaw and used it as bait in a Larsen trap.





Holden is an outspoken critic of those who condemn battery cages. In 2005, following Animal Aid revelations, he hosted a reporter and television crew from the BBC regional news programme 'North West Tonight'. The presenter found a dead partridge in a cage. Holden appeared surprised and challenged the reporter to find another one. The reporter promptly did so. We filmed Hy-Fly twice in 2005 and our images sparked media interest. Since then, there has been no improvement in the sorry lives of the captive birds. Several of the cages we examined during June 2007 had dead pheasants within them. Poignantly, one of the dead birds exposed a wing braid. These are fitted to poults as an alternative to wing clipping but they have no practical use within the cage. Escape is impossible. Perhaps even more distressing is the plight of the partridges imprisoned in pairs in even smaller cages. Barely two feet by three, the birds hammer the galvanised walls of their prison in desperation and frustration.

When one partner dies, another of the appropriate sex is substituted. Holden claims that breeding partridges must be held in such cages if partridge shooting is to be maintained in Britain. Holden has resigned his membership of the BASC and encourages others to do the same. He was a member of the GFA's governing council at the time Animal Aid filmed his operation in 2005 but he is reported to have severed ties with that organisation, too. Thus, perhaps the largest game farm operator in the country is outside even the ambit of industry self-regulation. His cages show no signs of 'enrichment'. His pheasants are restrained with wing braids and with masks that are clipped on via the nostrils. Their condition is pitiful. Feather loss is evident and wounding, stress and disease can be seen to have resulted in many deaths. The high death rate in the cages was filmed after the end of the working day. The day's dead birds should already have been removed during the daily egg collection. The death rate is, therefore, probably higher than we witnessed.

Holden's despatch gang were preparing a consignment of poults for a shooting customer when we made our covert 2007 film. The birds were first caught from their enclosures in large butterfly nets and then grasped in handfuls by the legs. Dumped on a table before a senior gang member, their flight feathers were roughly scissored before the birds were crated into a Hy-Fly Game lorry.



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G & A Leisure

This hatchery is owned by Gwyn and Ann Evans. Gwyn Evans was a member of the GFA council when we last filmed at his operation. We found birds in poor condition at G & A in both 2004 and 2005. They were fitted with a type of mask that is illegal for poultry and which involves piercing the nasal septum with a barbed plastic pin. Gwyn Evans's shameful defence was to deny that the images were obtained at his hatchery. Shooting at Bettws Hall and other shoots owned by Gwyn and Anne Evans is advertised by agencies selling very expensive hospitality packages to overseas visitors. Bettws Hall has hotel accommodation and a restaurant on an adjacent site for its shooting customers. But the filth and cruelty of the breeding cages remain out of sight of the well-heeled punters. The newly-installed cage system that we exposed in 2004 and 2005 is now shabby and infested with waist-high weeds. The lack of maintenance between the massed rows of cages indicated scant attention to the birds and their needs.

Our 2007 images show that G & A cages are now 'enriched'. A wooden dowel on small chocks offers meagre relief from the discomfort of the wire mesh floor for breeding birds (between seven and nine of them) who inhabit each cage. A piece of filthy astro-turf lies behind a crude curtain under a rough felt-roofed section. A brick is provided as an outlet for aggression and there is some grit to aid digestion.

Piles of guano have developed between the legs of the units. The noise and despair is clear on our 2007 film but not the stench. Hens are fitted with a restraint on the upper beak mandible but cocks are now unmasked. Despite 'enrichment', the birds are exposed to the severity of the elements and to each other's aggression.

A lone dead crow is strung from a pole, perhaps as a primitive gamekeepers' ritual, designed to warn off predators. Nearby, corpses and rubbish from this site are thrown into a purpose-dug pit.

Conclusion

Millions of pheasants and partridges are purpose-bred every year so that they can be shot for sport. About 40% are wounded and never recovered. Large numbers die under the wheels of road vehicles. An unknown quantity, according to the pro-shooting press, are shot and dumped – there being a limited appetite for game-meat. Over the past eight years, Animal Aid has published a series of reports and undercover investigations describing the industrialised production of these birds. More recently, we have exposed the use of battery cages to confine egg-producing pheasants and partridges. The barren units offer zero comfort. The floor and roof are made of wire mesh. The birds are crowded together and often fitted with oppressive facemasks in an attempt to limit the injuries caused

by stress-induced aggression. Many suffer injury, emaciation and early death. It would be an appalling irony if the much-celebrated 2006 Animal Welfare Act became the instrument that legitimised the use of these vile contraptions. However bruised certain government Ministers might feel in the aftermath of the battle over the hunting ban, offering blanket support to hardcore elements of the shooting industry is neither morally just nor good politics. The Code of

Practice for Gamebird Production is now being written. The government has ensured that the Committee charged with the task is dominated by shooting industry figures and it has commissioned 'independent' research from a pro-shooting body. But it is not too late for the government to act honourably. If the Committee seeks approval for a Code that legitimises the use of battery cages for gamebirds, the government can and must say 'no'.



The Game Conservancy Trust

Although a charity, the Game Conservancy Trust (GCT) publishes scientific research that always concludes that game shooting is good for the environment, for the local economy and for wildlife. Its Chief Executive promotes shooting and some of its trustees sell shooting on a commercial basis. It also numbers amongst its trustees a former Chief Executive of the pro-shooting Countryside Alliance, as well as a man who holds a record for shooting the largest number of wild species in a single 24-hour period. It is this same body that is due to report back to DEFRA on the welfare implications of using bits and spectacles before the Code of Practice is drawn up.

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