

Cheating The Public – How The Game Shooting Industry Misuses The Organic Label

'Game birds are wild birds eating natural food, so if you want to eat something fantastic and support an ethically sound food source, this is where it's at'.

Jamie Oliver, taken from his book 'Jamie at Home' and the Countryside Alliance 'Game-to-Eat' website.

'Game is a top-quality food – healthy and free range – and is very good value as its currently in season. It's now readily-available in supermarkets and butchers, so there's no excuse not to try it!'

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall – from the Countryside Alliance 'Game-to-Eat' website

Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall both made high-profile media attacks on the intensive poultry rearing industry in early 2008. Their talent for showmanship brought the misery of millions of chickens into the front rooms of Britain.

They also laud the eating of 'game birds', whom they mistakenly announce as free-range, natural and healthy. They conjure a cosy image of game as a completely ethical alternative to the cruelly confined poultry, whose treatment they both abhor.

Game is not 'organic' or 'natural'

Pheasant and partridge production typically involves the use of metal battery cages for breeding birds, as well as industrial hatcheries, sheds and large pens. Once released to be shot, they are not wild but feral – that is to say, they are domesticated or 'cultivated' animals who are existing in a wild state.



In fact, they continue to be fed and even 'whistled in' back to the enclosures at night, in order to ensure that they don't stray too far and thereby ensure that paying customers have plenty of feathered targets. At the end of the shooting season – despite being the dead of winter – feeding stops.

The process is dependent to a large extent upon imports from France – the home of the caged laying system for game birds. Every year, millions of intensively produced pheasant and partridge eggs and one-day-old chicks are shipped across the channel. The enterprise is as far removed from the ethical standards associated with organic produce as it can possibly be. Yet the shooting industry is encouraging the deception that game is organic.

Why game fails the organic test

To receive organic accreditation from one of the 13 authorised bodies in Britain, livestock producers must adhere to specified welfare standards. Diet, the use of veterinary medicines and the method of slaughter are also controlled. Game shooting can never meet these criteria. The birds are released for a short life in uncontrolled dietary conditions

and they are drugged before release. The veterinary medicine Avatec is widely used in an attempt to control the parasitic disease coccidiosis. Administered in the birds' feed and water, it contains the powerful and dangerous antibiotic Lasalocid Sodium. There is a withdrawal period before human consumption.

But it is the outrageous manner of a game bird's death that puts organic status firmly out of reach for the shooting industry. The virtually tame birds are scared into the sky and shot by paying punters. Many of the 'Guns' will be inexperienced and none is compelled to demonstrate their competence with a firearm. The shotguns they use have a range of only 35 yards, and the inertia of the spread shot drops off rapidly with increasing range. Many of the large pheasants are not killed outright but crash-land from altitude. They are picked up alive by dogs and, if lucky, are dispatched by an enthusiastic beater with a wooden club, known as a priest. Not so fortunate are those who are wounded but not retrieved. Forty per cent of birds seen to be hit are wounded and go off to die what will often be a protracted and wretched death.

Ria Sands, a Soil Association (SA) Certification Officer, spelt out for Animal Aid the official SA position:

'The term "organic" is a legal term and, under EC Regulation 2092/91, it is an offence to market any product as organically produced unless covered by a valid certificate of registration from an approved certification body. This means that if a third party is marketing food products as "organic" and they are not certified to do so by an organic certification body, they are doing so illegally.'

We asked Ria if game could ever be termed 'organic'.

I can confirm that, as there are no standards under the EU regulations to cover grouse, pheasant or partridge, they cannot currently



be certified as organic. I have spoken to our standards director, Francis Blake, who has confirmed these details and told me that the EU prohibits products of hunting and fishing being called organic.'

We asked if butchers must also be organically certified. Ria explained:

'You are correct in thinking that a butcher or abattoir must be certified in order for processed meat to be sold organically. Therefore, an organic farmer wanting to sell cuts and joints from his organic beef animal, would need to use an organically certified abattoir and/or butcher in order to sell his meat as organic.'

* * *

'If it's organic and free-range the public want, then we are surely in the hot seat to deliver'

With these carelessly selected words, Will Hetherington, of the up-market *Shooting Gazette*, opened his February 2008 issue. Hetherington is the long-standing editor. He is also a shooter. There are many people who shoot and many who don't who believe that shot game is organic. Despite holding a position of influence, capable of persuading his readership that game has the virtue of being organic, we accept that Hetherington is simply misguided. He believes that game is organic because he is a cog in an industry that is content to foster such a self-serving deception.

'Cheap, free-range, organic, fat-free, and extremely tasty'

These words come from Simon Heffer, the prominent journalist and supporter of country bloodsports. He was referring to game; particularly pheasant, partridge and grouse.

He added, in his 11 August 2007 *Daily Telegraph* Saturday column, that these shot creatures 'tick every health-conscious box you want'. Simon Heffer is wrong. Game birds are not cheap to produce. They are not organic – and no meat is fat-free.



Why the shooting industry fosters the false image of organic game

The British have expressed no great interest in eating shot birds. That is why the shooting industry has three separate marketing initiatives running to persuade us to eat them.

In short, game shooting has an immense problem. The people who are willing to pay more than £1,500 per day to shoot birds, do it for the pleasure they get from bringing down their quarry. Many have little or no interest in actually eating the shot birds. Their indifference is such a public relations problem for the industry that codes of shooting etiquette have been written to counter it. Alongside absurd entreaties for shooters to wear a collar and tie and visit the dead hanging birds in the shoot larder to show respect for the quarry, is the plea that they take a brace of birds home for their own consumption.

The pheasant and partridge carcasses are a massive disposal issue for shoots. They must be given away, sold at a fraction of the rearing cost, or dumped and buried as quietly and as unobtrusively as possible. EC regulations for the safe and hygienic handling of game, introduced in 2006, have made disposal of shot game harder. Even in Victorian days the expression, Up goes a guinea, bang goes sixpence, down comes half-a-crown, was a sardonic commentary on the waste of shooting. In the 21st century, a pheasant currently costs between £12.50 and £25 to rear – and the cost is set to rise significantly because of the rising price of feed and fuel. By contrast, a brace of pheasants can be purchased for £3. Nobody knows how many are given away. The industry has 15 million to shift every year. In fact, the consumption of game in Britain is so insignificant that the Office for National Statistics does not bother to maintain data. This is in contrast to the

figures it publishes on how much chicken, pork, beef, milk, eggs and other food products the public consumes.

It is little wonder, therefore, that the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) and the Countryside Alliance are desperate to talk up shot birds as food.

It seems that the game shooting industry just can't help itself. It has told or accepted the lie for so long that the truth has become a stranger. We wrote to Simon Heffer of the *Daily Telegraph* about his claims with regard to game birds and, of course, he provided no answer. Neither did Will Hetherington of the *Shooting Gazette*. We asked Hetherington if he was noble enough to print a retraction in the editorial for his March 2008 Edition. Of course he wasn't.

Conclusion

The game bird industry is where factory farming meets a live quarry shooting gallery. It is about the mass production of birds so that well-heeled 'guns' can take pleasure in shooting them from the sky. Pheasants are not good flyers – they can flap their wings only for about ten seconds before having to glide down to earth. Even so, a survey by the industry's own leading lobby group (the BASC) revealed that some 40 per cent of shot birds are not shot cleanly but are wounded and not retrieved. Of those who are retrieved, a significant percentage are not eaten. This is because consumer demand for shot game is so low. Shooting magazines have reported that some of these unwanted birds are buried in the ground. Others do end up in specialist butcher shops or on supermarket shelves – and here, as we have seen in this report, they are often marketed in a way intended to conceal the cruelty and squalor that are at the heart of this industry.