

REARING PHEASANTS FOR SHOOTS

By Clare Druce,

Director of the Farm Animal Welfare Network

Every year in the UK more than 20 million pheasants are reared for 'sport'. Does this mean that pheasant meat (or game) is the thing to choose if you want to avoid the cruelties of factory farming? Surely these birds have enjoyed free and natural lives before the moment of instant death?

On the contrary, the vast majority endure extreme forms of abuse in the months leading up to the shoot. Rearing birds for shoots is big business; some of the cruelties inflicted on pheasants rival the worst aspects of intensive farming.

Most people would be outraged to see a robin, a skylark or a blackbird de-beaked, wearing blinker-type spectacles (perhaps illegally kept in place by a pin driven through the nasal septum), fitted with a 'bit' to keep the beak permanently open, maybe with one wing restrained. The picture evoked is horrendous, ludicrous even, yet most commercially-reared pheasants experience a range of these abuses. Ornithologists and bird-lovers in general rarely raise their voices on behalf of gamebirds; does the fact that they're edible, the stuff of 'sport', in some way set them apart?

Many pheasants are shot when only 20 weeks old, though their potential lifespan is several years. On the day of the shoot, 'beaters' (often children) are employed to flush the birds out of their cover, to provide the 'guns' (as the men, women and even children who shoot are called) with their targets. And every year, in addition to the young purpose-bred birds, ex-breeders and around a million pheasants 'caught up' from the wild are deemed fair game. Game Conservancy (GC) literature suggests that birds reared for the shoot should enjoy at least one month's liberty before they face the guns.(1)

A typical pheasant's life before the shoot:

Hatching from the egg

Most are artificially incubated, though broody hens may still be used to hatch the young in smaller rearing units. GC literature describes how the broody hen can be tethered, to make it easier for the gamekeeper to return her to the nest after periods of exercise. The GC notes 'the initial period of tethering can often witness the broodies flapping about and fighting.'(2)

Breeding units cause stress, especially where stocking density is tight: The *Veterinary Record* noted that: 'A decrease of 20 per cent in egg production, in association with a severe cannibalism problem, was observed in a pheasant laying unit which had dramatically increased the stocking density from the previous year.'(3)

Incubator-hatched chicks are transferred to a brooder system, where they're densely stocked and kept warm for the first few days under artificial heat, essential warmth that is provided in nature by the mother's sheltering wings. Most rearing units hold several hundreds of pheasants, often divided into pens of a 100 or 200 birds. But much larger numbers may be incubated together: '*Escherichia coli* septicaemia in three-to-four-day-old pheasant chicks was thought to have resulted from a malfunctioning aerosol spray in the incubator. Affected birds had lesions of pneumonia and pericarditis and losses

amounted to approximately 5 per cent of 20,000 chicks.'(4) In the wild, pheasants live in groups of less than a dozen.

Orphan chicks

The birds are gradually acclimatised to greater freedom, as they 'progress' from the brooder house to enclosed grass runs and then to release sites. Birds can become severely stressed when moved, failing to feed and contracting a variety of diseases. Stress leads to aggression, as the *Veterinary Record* reports:

'...one (veterinary investigation) centre suggested that an outbreak of cannibalism was due to a recent move to release pens.'(5)

The presence of feed hoppers encourages birds to remain nearby, so their movements are predictable on the day of the shoot. In fact, because they've been treated like domestic fowl, birds may become inconveniently reliant on humans. Warns the GC: ' Also try to avoid buildings exposed to excessive disturbance and human activity. While exposure to humans causes no harm to the birds, they may become very tame, possibly resulting in poor flying performance on a shoot day.'(6)

Semi-intensive systems clearly increase the birds' risk of disease and parasitical infestations. According to the *Veterinary Record*: 'Deaths in pheasants aged five weeks were the result of heavy gapeworm (*Syngamus trachea*) burdens. The pheasants had been reared in a static building with access to grass runs, which had been in use for ten years.'(7)

The price the birds pay

In the wild, pheasants live in small groups, in a harem system during the breeding season. In the non-breeding season the cocks live alone or in small groups, and the hens gather together. Pheasant cocks are naturally aggressive and fight to establish their territory. Forcing hundreds of birds to live in close proximity results in an increased and totally unnatural degree of aggression, which is played out in confined spaces, especially in the first few weeks.

The 'release' pens

Ironically, the greater freedom of release pens seems to do little to improve health or to calm the birds. Reported the *Veterinary Record*: 'A familiar pattern of infections was noted as pheasants were moved into release pens. Centres reported diagnoses of trichomonas infection, with mortality in one incident as high as 25 per cent. Gapeworm infection was also reported, and one centre suggested that an outbreak of cannibalism was due to a recent move to release pens.'(8)

It seems that little-understood disease conditions are emerging: 'The Veterinary Laboratories Agency has been investigating a condition that occurs in reared pheasants between the ages of approximately eight and 20 weeks, principally during the period when the birds are in release pens in late summer and autumn. Affected birds become markedly ataxic...Gamekeepers describe the birds as exhibiting a 'drunken' or 'staggering' appearance.'(9) (NB Ataxia is caused by a variety of lesions throughout the nervous system, including the midbrain.)

To counteract losses from aggression promoted by the stressful living conditions, gamekeepers may resort to a variety of mutilations, and to the use of cruel devices.

Mutilations

The definition of mutilation is given in Article 11 in the Council of Europe's Draft Recommendation Concerning Pheasants (August 1994, still in draft form):

'...a procedure carried out for other than therapeutic purposes, and resulting in the damage to or loss of a sensitive part of the body, or the alteration of bone structure, or causing a significant amount of pain and distress.'

The same Article states (in paragraph 3): 'In the case of beak-trimming, only the upper tip of the beak shall be removed, at the most advanced age possible, and this procedure must be carried out by a qualified operator.'

Partial beak amputation (PBA) or beak trimming/debeaking

In its 1997 Report on the welfare of laying hens, the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) states: 'We consider that beak trimming is a most undesirable mutilation which should be avoided if at all possible and only used if essential to prevent worse welfare problems of injurious feather pecking and cannibalism.' (para 69) and : '...if beak trimming is essential, it should be carried out at up to 10 days of age...'

Pheasants, however, may be repeatedly debeaked during their short lives. Game Conservancy literature advice is clear: 'The beak will normally grow back again after 10 to 14 days, when a further feather picking outbreak may occur, requiring additional treatment. Some game rearers automatically repeat the beak trimming process at 10 to 14 day intervals.'(10)

Research in the mid-1990s (funded by MAFF and the British Turkey Federation) claims that debeaking at an early age 'influenced behaviour only to a minor extent'(11). However, previous research carried out at the Edinburgh Research Station, Roslin, found that long-term behaviour changes in chickens debeaked at approximately 14 weeks of age indicate that birds suffer in a similar way to human amputees who experience 'phantom limb pain'.(12) Since the MAFF/BTF research, the debate has centred around whether to mutilate at an early stage, or later on.

Welfarists prefer to give birds the benefit of the doubt, assuming that the crude amputation of part of one of their most sensitive and vital organs, richly endowed with nerve endings, is likely to be traumatic and painful and may cause lasting discomfort. Welfarists also claim the bird's right to keep its beak intact. The fear in the eyes of the pheasant pictured in the GC's 'Gamebird Rearing' (p 85) as s/he is held against a heated blade, about to lose one third of his/her top mandible, speaks for itself.

The estimated time needed for two people to beak trim/de-beak 1,000 birds is two hours(13) - approximately seven seconds per bird, excluding the time needed to pick up the birds and return them to pen or crate. Clearly, the procedure is rough and ready. Again, GC literature gives ominous warnings: 'Beginners to this technique would be well advised to seek a practical demonstration with an experienced operator. If done incorrectly, severe damage to the bird could occur.'(14)

A veterinary expert has stated that PBA is becoming less common. Clearly, the use of bits can do as much to discourage feather pecking. Millions of commercially-reared pheasants are doomed to the 'choice' between having their beaks mutilated or being fitted with a plastic or metal bit.

The worst scenario involves both. The Game Conservancy advice is to be thorough, the belt and braces approach: 'A useful system operated by the Game Conservancy involves beak trimming pheasants at 10 days old, followed by biting at three and a half weeks with Size B alloy bits.'(15) See below for 'bitting'.

The photograph accompanying the above GC advice speaks for itself: the terror in the bird's eye, the permanently half-open beak.

The gamekeepers' arsenal

1. Bitting

'Bits' are incomplete rings of plastic or metal, fed between the upper and lower mandibles of the beak, and clipped into the nostrils to keep the device in place. They come in several sizes, and must be changed as the birds grow. Their purpose is to stop the beak from closing properly, so preventing effective pecking of fellow birds. If they are not changed, deformity or death through starvation will result. Veterinarians have blamed ill-fitting bits for causing the death of pheasants: 'Heavy losses were associated with the following conditions: yolk sac infections; failure to find food; rotavirus infection; fitting of overlarge bits...' (16)

In *Gamebird Rearing* (GC,1990), a caption under a photograph of a three week old pheasant fitted with a bit reads: 'Note how the beak fails to close tightly, thus helping to prevent feather picking.' In fact, the beak is permanently half-open; picking up small particles would be impossible, and eating difficult: 'It has been found that once birds have been beak bitted, they find growers pellets much easier to pick up than the smaller mini pellets, thus reducing spillage and wastage.'(17) And possibly preventing starvation too.

Bitting has been associated with outbreaks of fatal disease: 'An air sacculitis* was found in pheasants aged four weeks, which died following bitting.' (18) [*Inflammation of the birds' respiratory system, causing air sacs to be filled with thick yellow pus in late stages of infection; often associated with *E. coli*.]

The Game Conservancy Trust (GCT) states that there are no figures available for the use of bits(19) but several companies supply them, suggesting that they are very widely used. The Director of the GCT has stated: 'The use of bits will be in the interests of the birds if the alternative is widespread feather pecking and consequent cannibalism.'(20)

The status quo that suits the industry or 'sport' dictates what happens to the animals, with no reference to their natural behavioural needs and rights. In turn, gross abuses come to be described as 'welfare' measures.

2. Spectacles, often known as 'specs'

Specs are blinker-type devices designed to restrict the field of vision and lessen the damaging effects of aggression. They're mostly used to discourage egg eating in the breeding stock. Some specs have been outlawed, others remain legal.

- The legal sort are specs that clip into the nostrils.
- Those that are outlawed are similar to the above, but are kept in place with a 'pin' (usually plastic) driven through the sensitive membranes of the nasal septum (i.e. in one nostril, and out through the opposing one).

Specs with pins are specified as illegal for poultry under the Welfare of Livestock (Prohibited Operations) Regulations 1982 (SI 1982, No. 1884). However, specs of whatever type are clearly in common use.

The Director General of the Game Conservancy Trust has stated: 'The use of "specs" is declining, it is not recommended by us, and the ones that pierce the nasal septum have not been seen by us for some time.'(21)

Despite the illegal status of these devices, one company (Pintail Sporting Services of Romsey, Hampshire) supplies specs with pins, priced at £12 per 100. A call from the Farm Animal Welfare Network (FAWN) to Pintail Sporting Services on May 17, 2000 confirmed this. The 'good' news is that the spokeswoman for PSS said they hadn't sold any 'for a few months'.

As recently as 1994, an investigator for the *Sunday People* discovered that specs with pins were being used on the Queen's estate at Windsor Great Park. FAWN had noticed them in Quadtag's catalogue and raised awareness about this instrument of torture. (Quadtag Limited, suppliers of game rearing equipment, operates by appointment to Her Majesty the Queen.) At least two companies (one of them Quadtag) have now stopped supplying the illegal specs with pins; a spokesperson for one of these companies has stated that the changed policy is due to 'these animal rights people'. A spokesperson for the other company explained that birds fitted with specs with pins could become entangled in the netted roofs of rearing pens, resulting in death.

Specs with or without pins still in common use

The GCT's optimism about the decline in the use of specs appears to be ill-founded. In his recently published paper 'Causes of Mortality and Culling in Adult Pheasants', T.W. Pennycott of the Veterinary Science Division, Avian Health Unit, Auchincruive, stated: 'Following standard practice (Wise 1993), plastic "spectacles" were fitted to all the birds to reduce egg eating and cannibalism, ribbon brails were applied to one wing to reduce mobility, and the spurs of the males were blunted to reduce damage to the females.'(22)

3. Brails

These are bands of material, looped over the shoulder of one wing and twisted to keep the wing closed, in order to prevent birds from escaping from unroofed pens. Wing spreading and preening represent basic behavioural needs, and brailing must cause severe frustration. In addition, circulation may be impaired, causing muscle wastage.

NB All the above devices are removed before the day of the shoot; their presence would detract from the 'natural' image.

(Dr. G.R.Potts, Director General of the Game Conservancy Trust, has informed FAWN that the GCT's *Code of Good Rearing Practice* is to be 'revised and strengthened'.(23) Meanwhile the series of books published by the GC is still on sale, to be replaced by a series of leaflets when stocks are exhausted.)

Diseases

'Many of the diseases recorded by the Ministry of Agriculture Veterinary Investigation Centres and the Scottish Agriculture Colleges Veterinary Services are directly related to the intensification of gamebird production.'(24)

Wild birds suffer from a wide range of diseases, but intensively-kept gamebirds are open to specific diseases of intensification to the same degree as factory-farmed animals. Furthermore, some of these diseases represent a serious threat to human health. States the Veterinary Record: 'Salmonellosis and *E coli* septicaemia caused the deaths of pheasants up to six weeks of age. A combination of *Salmonella orion*, *Salmonella enteritidis* DT4 and rotavirus infection resulted in the deaths of 300 of 7000 birds, and *S enteritidis* DT4 was the only agent identified in a unit where 300 of 700 birds died at between one and three weeks of age.'(25)

'Problems in a new crop of pheasant and partridge chicks included starve-outs, impaction of the gizzard with wood shavings, yolk sac infections, rotavirus infections, and pullorum disease caused by *Salmonella pullorum*'.(26) Similar diseases are rife in broiler and turkey sheds.

Infectious sinusitis is common: 'Several reports of infectious sinusitis included one particularly severe incident causing approximately 25 per cent mortality of affected pheasants.'(27)

Tumours are increasing too: 'Birds with infectious sinusitis often had thickened conjunctiva, mucoid to purulent material in the sinuses, and periorbital loss of feathers...Lymphomatous tumours around the eyes were seen in two flocks of adult pheasants.'(28) Furthermore, 'Lymphomatous tumours were found around the eyes and the leg of a pheasant which had been shot. The Veterinary Science Division notes that there are anecdotal reports that this condition is becoming more common in pheasants.'(29) Lymphomatous tumours are similar to those found in poultry suffering from Marek's disease, a form of cancer.

Marble Spleen disease was first diagnosed in pheasants in the UK in 1972, and is now widespread in the species. Symptoms include severely congested lungs with or without the typically diseased spleen. Mortality can exceed 50 per cent. It has been suggested that the disease is precipitated by stress, possibly at the onset of egg production.(30)

Another disease on the increase is pheasant corona-virus associated nephritis. First recorded in Hampshire in 1983, it has now spread to many other parts of the UK. Suggested causes include chilling, water deprivation, a change of accommodation and the need to mobilise calcium for egg production.(31)

The worst of both worlds

Some birds 'caught up' from the wild harbour diseases. Mixing them with vulnerable younger birds under stressful intensive conditions maximises disease risk. The danger works both ways in that younger birds can infect older birds as well. Infections spread like wildfire in over-crowded units. Reports the *Veterinary Record*: 'The current practice of releasing young, intensively reared pheasants into the environment could easily result in a population of semi-wild pheasants which are carrying *Salmonella pullorum*...Additional problems include the widespread movement of pheasants and

pheasant eggs on a local, national and international basis, and the practice of custom hatching, in which eggs from several different sites are incubated in a common hatchery and the chicks are then redistributed.'⁽³²⁾

The following report from *The Veterinary Record*, May 27, 2000, points to the level of suffering birds can experience. 'The seasonal flow of submissions [of diseases in gamebirds during the current season] started in April. Laying pheasants, which had been brought in from the woods and penned in readiness for breeding, developed infectious sinusitis with swollen orbits and discharging eyes The Veterinary Laboratories Agency notes that this condition, which is associated with *Mycoplasma synoviae* infection, represents 'a considerable challenge to the welfare of the affected birds.'

The drugs

Drugs licensed for poultry are prescribed for gamebirds. Thus, intensivism in gamebird rearing, with its reliance on drugs, is contributing to the worldwide threat of antibiotic resistance in human and veterinary medicine.

'...*Salmonella typhimurium* DT41 was believed to be responsible for the deaths of pheasant chicks aged 14 days, in which a common post mortem finding was the presence of caecal cysts. A good response to enrofloxacin was reported.'⁽³³⁾ Enrofloxacin is one of the fluorinated quinolones, a group of antibiotics introduced in recent years into veterinary medicine, despite warnings, reported in *The Lancet*, from members of the medical profession.

Physicians fear that veterinary use will endanger the usefulness of this group of antibiotics in human medicine: 'Thought needs to be given as to whether quinolones (*NB see spelling above*), such as enrofloxacin, should be given to animals.'⁽³⁴⁾ Enrofloxacin is cross-resistant with ciprofloxacin, the drug used in human medicine in cases of salmonella-induced blood poisoning and against the infection most dreaded in hospitals today, MRSA.

The *Veterinary Record* refers to 'anecdotal reports' that oxytetracycline (a broad-spectrum antibiotic) added to pheasants' drinking water provided 'a satisfactory response' to a disease problem⁽³⁵⁾, an indication of the way in which life saving antibiotics are being squandered in order to reduce mortality caused by intensivism.

Another antibiotic, tiamulin, may be administered via drinking water. Tiamulin is listed in MAFF's 1998 *Review of Antimicrobial Resistance in the Food Chain* under the heading: 'Antimicrobials used in agriculture which may affect the antimicrobial status of food borne pathogens or contribute to the antimicrobial resistance pool in man.' (Appendix 2, p139)

Since many 'modern' pheasant diseases are similar to those occurring in poultry, treatment will be on a similar scale. For detailed information on the dangerous misuse of antibiotics in farming, see *The Use and Misuse of Antibiotics in UK Agriculture* (part 2: Antibiotic Resistance and Human Health - Soil Association £15 (SA members £10); and *The Drugs Don't Work*, from FAWN, P.O. Box 40, Holmfirth, Huddersfield HD7 1QY, 25p or £2 for 20.

Emtryl - the one that escaped an EU-wide ban

In 1996, the UK Government managed to avert an outright ban on the drug Emtryl. *UKEPRA NEWS*, an egg industry publication, reported that the UK's Veterinary Medicines Directorate 'is adamant that a safe administration level can be set for Emtryl and that the ban was never justified'.(36) The EU-wide ban (for all except gamebirds) came about following concern that no safe maximum residue limit in the meat of animals treated with Emtryl could be set. The active ingredient of Emtryl is dimetridazole. Now, an absurd situation exists where the potential dangers from dimetridazole residues are recognised except in gamebirds.

The hazards were indicated in a *Veterinary Record* report: 'Milk from another dairy was withdrawn from the food chain when dairy cows broke into a pheasant release pen and were exposed to the gamebird ration containing dimetridazole.'(37)

Cold turkey?

'Clinical sinusitis due to *Mycoplasma columborale* was diagnosed in adult (pheasant) layers. The onset of disease coincided with a switch to non-medicated feed on one site...'(38)

Pheasants and UK legislation

According to MAFF: 'Gamebirds kept on agricultural land for the production of food are protected by the *Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968* which makes it an offence to cause unnecessary pain or unnecessary distress to any livestock. They are also protected by relevant regulations made under the Act'. On the other hand: 'Gamebirds reared for sporting purposes or on non-agricultural land would not be covered by the provisions of the 1968 Act or by the Welfare Code, but, like all captive animals, are covered by the *Protection of Animals Act 1911-88*, which makes it an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any such animal.'(39)

Potential for direct danger to humans from diseased pheasants

Erysipelas produces a potentially dangerous zoonosis* known in humans as erysipiloid which '...causes painful skin lesions which occasionally progress to septicaemia, encephalitis and endocarditis and can be acquired from scratches when handling infected birds (Mutalib and others, 1993,1995).(40) Peck injuries, common in stressed pheasants, were believed to provide a potential route for infection.(41)

*Any infectious disease naturally transmissible between vertebrates and humans (*Oxford Concise Veterinary Dictionary*).

References:

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- 2 *Gamebird Rearing*, Game Conservancy 1990, p 18
- 3 *Veterinary Record*, vol. 141, No.10 p238
- 4 *Veterinary Record*, vol. 145, No. 1 p6
- 5 *Veterinary Record*, vol. 143, No. 17 p463
- 6 *Gamebird Rearing*, Game Conservancy 1990 p57
- 7 *Veterinary Record*, vol. 145, No. 9 p242
- 8 *Veterinary Record*, vol. 143, No. 17 p 463
- 9 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 140, No. 8, p 211
- 10 *Gamebird Rearing*, Game conservancy 1990, p 85
- 11 Farm Animal Welfare Council 1995 *Report on the Welfare of Turkeys*, para 57
- 12 Gentle, M. et al. (1990) 'Behavioural Evidence for Persistent Pain Following Partial Beak Amputation in Chickens', *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 27 149-157, Elsevier Science, Publisher B.V., Amsterdam.
- 13 *Gamebird Rearing*, Game Conservancy 1990 p 6
- 14 Ibid p 85
- 15 Ibid p 86
- 16 *Veterinary Record*, vol. 131, No. 10, p 208
- 17 *Gamebird Rearing*, Game Conservancy 1990 p 53
- 18 *Veterinary Record*, vol. 141, No. 13, p 324
- 19 Letter from Director General of the Game conservancy Trust to FAWN dated 24 3 1999.
- 20 Ibid
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- 22 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 146, No. 10, p 273-278
- 23 As 19-21
- 24 'Game Disease in 1993', First Annual Report of the Veterinary Investigation Service and the Game Conservancy Liaison Group.
- 25 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 141, No. 16, p 411
- 26 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 143, No. 12, p 322
- 27 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 141, No. 18, p 462
- 28 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 143, No. 6, p 154
- 29 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 142, No. 21, p 563
- 30 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 146, No. 10, p 275
- 31 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 146, Number 10, p 273-8
- 32 Ibid
- 33 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. Vol. 143, No. 13, p 350
- 34 *The Lancet*, Vol. 336, July 14th 1990, p 125
- 35 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 143, No. 13, p 350
- 36 *UKEPRA News*, March 1st 1996
- 37 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 143, No.23, p 625
- 38 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 143, No.10, p 264
- 39 MAFF letter to FAWN dated January 6th 1994
- 40 *Veterinary Record*, Vol. 141, No. 13, p 340-341
- 41 Ibid