

A Special Animal Aid Report



Pheasant shooting industry leaders forced to admit:

'Greed and excess are tearing us apart'

SO MANY PHEASANTS are being factory-reared in order to satisfy the base instincts of a new breed of vain and boastful gunman, that millions of birds are going uneaten. Many are even being buried in specially-dug holes in order to dispose of the embarrassing evidence of excess. Huge numbers also end up mown down by traffic.

This is the wretched picture of modern 'sport shooting' in Britain, as described by several of the industry's own leading lobbyists, writing recently in magazines for fellow gun enthusiasts. One wrote despairingly of 'Britain's game mountain'.

In fact, greed, macho posturing and a callous disregard for the lives of their quarry and for the wider environment are jeopardising the future of the commercial pheasant rearing

and shooting industry, according to these shooting advocates.

The image of 'game' shooting presented to the world at large is one of self-discipline and respect for the countryside. But in the wake of a crisis meeting last February of the 'sport's' leading figures, Animal Aid - which last September produced a landmark exposé of the industry - can report that a series of highly damaging admissions have followed in the pages of specialist journals such as *Shooting Times*, *The Countryman*, *Country Life* and *The Field*.

Unlike grouse, who are born and killed in the wild, pheasants are 'mass produced' in industrial





hatcheries and fattened in sheds like commercial chickens, before being beaten up into the sky to be shot down for pleasure. It is now acknowledged that millions of these birds go uneaten – there is no market for them.

Production levels, it is admitted, are geared towards serving the vanity of ‘instant shooting man’, who imagines that blasting birds out of the sky will enhance his social standing and who likes to boast on Monday morning in the office about the size of his bag. These shooters might be responsible for personally downing dozens of barely-airborne birds. But they often don’t bother taking home for consumption any of their quarry.

The consequences of such over-production include ‘crop damage, soil erosion round release pens and a greatly increased risk of disease’ within the rearing sheds, according to an editorial in *Country Life* magazine. (Feb 1, 2001).

In response to the evidence assembled by Animal Aid, **Liberal Democrat MP Norman Baker** commented: ‘Most people believe that shooting is about killing a bird for the pot. This is no longer the case.

‘Today it is about blasting birds out of the sky for some kind of twisted pleasure. This gluttony of firepower is killing huge numbers of birds and causing environmental damage.

‘Even shooters themselves are now expressing concern about these bloated and unsustainable practices. Moreover, these practices are bringing shooting into disrepute. Traditional shooters are being swamped by the new style of braggarts who feel that more birds killed means the more there is to brag about.’

One man who has first-hand experience of the damage and mayhem caused by this wanton slaughter is **West Country woodlands owner, Theo Hopkins**.

Mr Hopkins told Animal Aid: ‘Once I was a “townie” and thought shooting was a respectable and even humane country sport. Now, after eight years of first renting my wood to a shoot and then just watching things, I know it is, for many people, just a matter of how many birds can one kill in a day. It’s a bloodsport here, not a fieldsport. The guns don’t eat the birds and the shoots can’t even sell them. It is time to have this wanton slaughter stopped.’ (See a detailed statement from Mr Hopkins below.)

Big bags, according to the chief executive of the premier lobby group, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, do have the potential for 'tarnishing the image and reputation' of shooting and are already causing 'real anxiety' within the industry. (*Shooting Times*, April 26, 2001). A columnist in *Countryman's Weekly* (July 20, 2001) wrote of driven shooting itself being 'in peril' because of the prevailing 'greed and excess'.

Animal Aid's September 2001 *Killing Fields* report – backed by shocking undercover footage – exposed as a sham the image of tweedy amateurism, good breeding and respect for the countryside that the pheasant industry likes to present to the world. In reality, *The Killing Fields* revealed, pheasant rearing and shooting is a poorly regulated agribusiness that combines the worst aspects of factory farming with a live-target shooting gallery.

Written principally by a former head investigator of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, our report described how around 36 million shed-reared birds are released for shooting every year. Millions suffer crippling blast injuries and are never found.

The Animal Aid report also exposed how the self-appointed 'guardians of the countryside' annually dump thousands of tonnes of

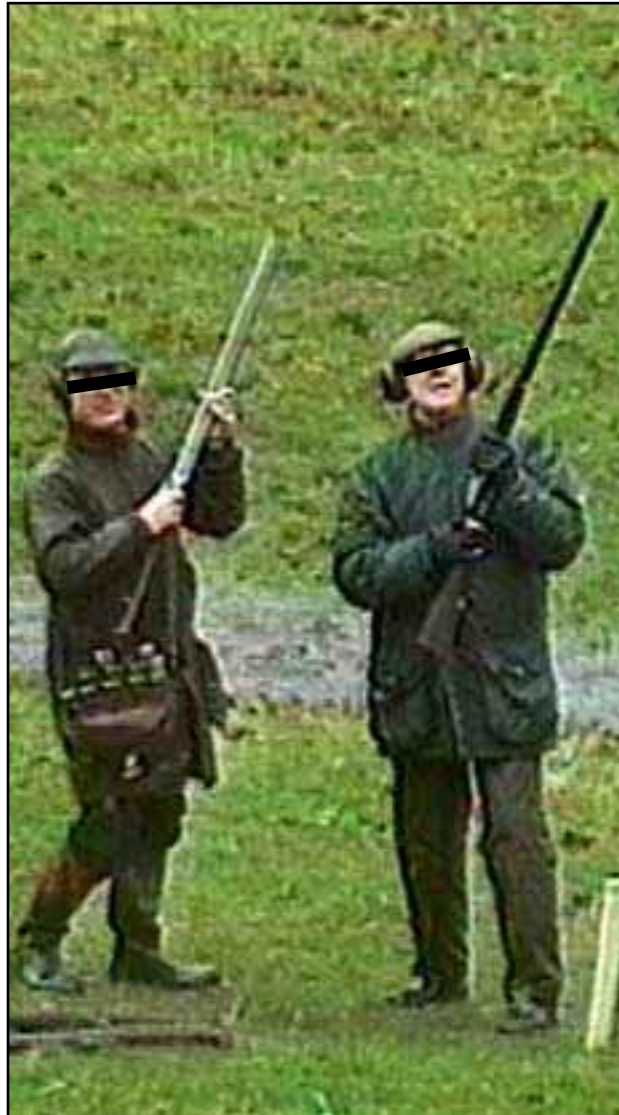
leadshot, whilst killing around five million wild birds and mammals with snares, poison and body-crushing traps in predator control programmes. Gamekeepers deliberately target foxes, stoats and weasels, because they are attracted to the unnaturally large number of 'tame' pheasants. But species

ranging from badgers to cats – even protected birds of prey like owls and kestrels – are caught and killed. Animal Aid's undercover video shows a number of animals dying in traps – as well as downed birds flailing on the ground whilst unconcerned shooters line up their next feathered target.

Even before they become target practise for the heroes in wax jackets and country tweeds, the shed-reared birds suffer serious privations. In an attempt to eliminate aggression caused by the crowded conditions in the rearing sheds and release pens, the birds are subjected to painful restraints and mutilations.

These include:

- Beaks being partially amputated with a red-hot blade
- Blinker-like 'spectacles' fixed in place – sometimes by pins driven through the nasal septum
- The fitting of plastic or metal 'bits' to prevent closure of the beak
- The tying of one wing to prevent escape prior to release



An array of pharmaceutical products are also liberally administered to try to combat the diseases that flourish in the crowded conditions. These products include DMZ, which the European Union banned in the mid-90s for all species except game birds, because there is no accepted safe level.

At the time of publication, our report was

rejected by industry spokespeople as fanciful and extreme. But the admissions made during the past year by leading bird-shooting advocates to their fellow enthusiasts, not only support much of our critique but suggest the industry sees itself as being ensnared in a major crisis of its own making and from which recovery is far from assured.



What follows is a selection of recently-published comments from the industry's own leading advocates

The taste of victory

Comment, Julian Murray-Evans, Editor
Shooting Times & Country Magazine,
30 August 2001

'It is staggering, and more than a little embarrassing, that far too many shooters don't eat the game they shoot. If we don't do our bit, then how can anyone complain about low game prices and attacks on rearing. We have to "Eat for victory".'

Will big bags finish us off?

Shooting Times & Country Magazine,
26 April 2001
John Swift, Chief Executive, British
Association of Shooting and Conservation

'At the moment I do not believe big or excessive bags are bringing shooting into disrepute. There is very little public

perception of gameshooting compared with, say foxhunting, and the only public media references were related to the Animal Aid campaign last year, which contributed to the demise of the John Lewis shoot...

'However big bags could well become a problem if shot birds are not used for human consumption or if there are lots of birds killed on roads...

'Within the sport, people have real concerns that the shooting of excessive bags is distasteful and is tarnishing their image and reputation. There is real anxiety...

'I can see the day when the sport as a whole makes it clear that bags of more than 500 pheasants and partridge are not acceptable, but that opinion must come from the grass-roots...

'The problem is not confined to commercial shoots, rather it centres on greed, whether the shoot is commercial or private. Sometimes it can be greed for money, and sometimes just a question of shooting more birds than the next Gun or exceeding those shot at another shoot. It becomes a matter of ostentation...

'Naming and shaming will be a sanction of the last resort, but if that is what it takes to save our sport, it must be done.'

Mark Firth, chairman of the Campaign for Shooting

'As a rule, big bags should be avoided, as they can give the wrong public perception...

'Shoots must realise that it is probably difficult to make frequent and excessive bags, yet still leave a conservation "plus"...

'Of course excessive bags are not confined to commercial shoots, and many excesses actually take place on totally private shoots...'

'Dr Nick Sotherton, head of research, Game Conservancy

'At higher [release] densities, we see bad management, pollution and habitat destruction, where the land can't support the density released.'

Dr Steve Tapper, head of public affairs, Game Conservancy

'As far as shooting is concerned there are at least two criteria. First, can the Guns cleanly kill and retrieve the game, without compromising the bird's welfare and its integrity as food? Second, can all game be marketed or given away for human consumption? If it can't be eaten, it should not be shot.'

Pheasants: feathered targets or food?

Comment, *Country Life*, 1 February 2001.

'...many large estates now shoot four or even five days a week from November to the end of January, killing as many as 2,000 birds a week. Shooting on such a large scale can be justified if there is a ready market for the birds bagged. This no longer exists. During this past season the price paid by game dealers for a brace of pheasants has fallen to

between 60p and 80p a brace. In some areas, over-supply has led to shoots being forced to give away their bags, or, worse still, bury their surplus...

'There is one simple reason for the slump in demand for pheasants: over-supply. About 13 million pheasants were shot during this past season, which is probably twice as many as the market can absorb...

'Worryingly, on many commercial shoots, pheasants and partridges are regarded as feathered targets, not food. Many people who shoot even decline to take home their traditional brace of birds...

'Demand for big bags has led to considerable overstocking with tame, hand-reared birds...

'...the ecological impact of releasing 20 or more birds per hectare – a common stocking figure on many commercial shooting estates – is serious. It not only reduces the breeding success of wild stock, but leads to crop damage, soil erosion round release pens, and a greatly increased risk of disease...

'Rearing and releasing game for shooting has already been outlawed in Holland, and there seems little doubt that coming years will see the threat of similar legislation in this country. If such legislation is to be avoided, then a radical rethink of lowland game shooting is essential...

'Those who shoot will have to rethink the size of their bags and realise that the quality of a day's sport should not be measured by the number of shots fired, or the number of birds killed. If the majority of game shooters and shoot managers can be persuaded to think on these lines, then pheasant shooting has a future. If the big bags of unwanted pheasants continue, then game shooting is sure to find itself in trouble.'

Big Bags: fact or fiction?

Columnist Graham Downing *Shooting Times & Country Magazine*, 18 January 2001.

'Excessive bags, topping up drives with birds long after the start of the shooting programme, an over-supply of dead game, leading to catastrophic drop in prices from

the dealer – the unacceptable face of gameshooting has been chewed over everywhere in recent months, from the boardrooms of the shooting organisations and the pre-shoot country house parties, to the beaters' trailer...

'There is an unease about commercialism fuelled, just as it was in the mid-1980's, by a thriving economy, that has created in gameshooting, just as in other areas of leisure consumerism, a strong and buoyant marketplace...

'The ability to achieve consistently high numbers is certainly at the root of topping-up, a practice which is most definitely outlawed by the Code...

'On a well-managed shoot...topping up is unnecessary. Unfortunately the shoot manager faced with a shortage of birds to satisfy the programme he has already sold – possibly as a result of losses from disease, which has itself been brought on by overcrowded pens, coupled with poor stock and poor husbandry – may not see it that way...

'The result [of the lack of demand for pheasant meat], as we are all too aware, is that dealers now pay next to nothing for dead game, even if they can be persuaded to collect it at all.'

Greed and excess results in big bag syndrome
Nimrod column, *The Countryman's Weekly*, July 20 2001.

'You're driving down a country road in August, minding your own business and admiring the view. Suddenly, the road ahead is alive with half-witted pheasant poultts scuttling along the verges or trying to commit suicide as they meander aimlessly in front of passing traffic...Smashed bodies are scattered along the tarmac, birds that didn't know the Green Cross Code and the general scenario is hardly one to endear the unknowing urban visitor towards shooting.

'...By far the majority of shoots are discreet and try to avoid public conflict or poor public relations, yet there are a number of shoots which are, as we all know, putting down vast

numbers of birds in order to meet an increasing demand for commercial driven shooting...

'Huge numbers of birds are being reared to provide bags of 400 to 500 or more birds a day, five days a week, at a time when game dealers are paying pennies for dead game and even, in some cases, taking birds away for nothing.

'Reports of 40 pheasants to the acre circulate, an imbalance which must inevitably affect the environment into which they are released, while rumours of birds being buried for lack of a market are also rife...

'The big bag syndrome was very much a feature of the 1980s shooting scenario...Men who had never shot before suddenly found themselves invited to corporate shoots, lessons were quickly taken, guns and the "right" clothing acquired and, suddenly, "instant shooting man" appeared on the scene. Big bags were the boast of the Monday office in the city and driven shooting was seen to be a fashionable "fun" thing to do...

'I recently spoke to a gamekeeper who has been in the business for half a century and who told me that, unless shooting sorted out the current problems associated with big bags and high birds, he could see no future for the sport. He is right. Greed and excess prevails at the moment and, until a reasonable compromise is reached and we return to sporting attitudes, driven shooting is placing itself in peril.'

Filthy Bad Manners: An ideal day's shooting is ruined

Columnist Laurence Catlow, *Shooting Times*, 18 January 2001.

'It was the guns that were the problem which became clear to me at the beginning of the first drive, as I stood by my peg and watched one of them marching up to the edge of the covert, where he proceeded to let off both barrels at pheasants breaking back down the middle of the wood, varying his sport by taking other birds as they flapped past him barely at head height.

These tactics brought half a dozen pheasants falling to earth. The man who put them there was as pleased as punch...

'Time and again pheasants that would have found speed and height to test someone further down

the line were shot by a nearer Gun just as they rose to the trees.

Gunfire greeted virtually every bird that flushed, whether at point blank range or at 20 yards beyond

its further limit; height was immaterial; speed was of no importance. As long as a bird was moving and off the ground it was fine and fair game; once it had fallen to the ground, it was very likely to be forgotten...

'My host muttered apologies in my ear and walked around looking miserable. I thought that, if this was what driven shooting was usually like, I should want nothing to do with it and should probably want it banned.'



Too easy by half

Columnist Laurence Catlow, *Shooting Times and Country Magazine*, 25 January 2001.

'I hereby proclaim to readers of Shooting Times, that the problem with driven shooting is that it is far too easy...For the truth is that driven shooting – which, by the way, I love - demands no knowledge from the man standing at a peg of the ways of game...It calls for little energy or endurance, since it is the beaters, not the Guns, who do all the hard work...

'[Driven shooting] often appeals to men whose interest in shooting and the countryside is no more than superficial. Such men like a change of scene at the weekends and they may well think that, in buying a Range Rover and becoming a shooter, they have somehow enhanced their social standing. They have found that there is a strange satisfaction to be found in pulling a trigger and connecting with their target.'

Everyday story of country folk

Letters page, *Richmond Borough Guardian*, 2 November, 2000

'I worked as a beater at our lord of the manor, Major Burn's annual pheasant shoot in North Mymms on several occasions. We were instructed to scare the birds into the air anyway we could, if not a poke up the backside with a stick, then a little encouragement with the boot would do. Sometimes the cowering birds were simply picked up and launched on high. They crouched low on the ground, as since being small chicks they had been fed by humans, and when we appeared on the scene they detected no threat...

'They flew over a chosen few 'Charlies', who, if they were not yelling at their dogs for chasing rabbits, having their guns reloaded, or having a stiffy from the flask, would launch into an inaccurate barrage of hot lead... After simulating the sound effects of the third battle of the Somme, they retired to celebrate another successful day. The gamekeeper counted the decimated corpses and instructed that they should be ploughed into the earth.'

'It is time to have this wanton slaughter stopped.'

Theo Hopkins used to allow the shooting of pheasants in his West Country wood. Then he came to understand the calibre of the men he was dealing with.

Ten years ago I bought 50 acres of beautiful ancient semi-natural oak woodland near Oakford in Devon. I manage it for the wildlife and to maintain the natural ecology, as well



as looking after the more ecologically diverse and important woodland edges and their traditional Devon hedgebanks.

I like to think it is a pleasant place, through which local people can walk. It's on one side of a valley with a broad stream and some little rivulets. It's my love and my pride and my hobby. In the summer I sometimes live there in a tent.

Eight years ago a pheasant shoot started in the valley. I was happy with this development at the time. A few local people would spend Saturday afternoons with their dogs, shooting the odd pheasant for the pot...or so I thought. No animal welfare problems were apparent. Game shooting? A quick kill, they

say - and a traditional gamekeeper nearby to nurture the land and maintain the wildlife. I didn't know that I was a townie being taken for a ride by a rural agribusiness.

The shoot offered to rent my land: £500 in my back pocket each year for just allowing them to feed and shoot a few pheasants. Not bad. Woodlands cost money to maintain, even when managed for biodiversity. I happily accepted.

For the first year things were fine. A few birds shot, a little noise, no problem. And a 'thank you' brace of pheasants from the 'keeper at Christmas. I even did some beating: it's sociable and fun. But I became just a tad worried when I saw that the empty feed sacks we had used to flush pheasants into the air carried the warning: 'This feed contains antibiotics'. Not, perhaps, the organic bird I had imagined. Oh well.

In the second year, the shoot expanded and intensified. One evening I went up to my precious hedgebank. I was horrified. A hundred pheasants in a hundred metres were demolishing the bank - crawling over it like feathered maggots. The floral layer, violets, mosses, dog's mercury and bluebells were being rooted up, the earth turned to dry dust. And with them went the bugs and beasties that feed the native birds, mice and voles. I told the shoot to leave: keep your money, I want my hedges intact.

The shoot grew and expanded.

At first, I just worried about the ecological destruction, for I was starting to get damage even though my land was not 'in the shoot'.

The pheasant, an alien bird, likes our woodland edges and hedgebanks. However, these woodland edges and hedgebank

combinations are vital for habitat and biodiversity. I discovered that with the expansion of big commercial shooting, this damage was happening all around me, and even the Exmoor National Park Authority were having trouble.

All around me were cover crops of kale and maize. Lines of plastic feeders sprang up by the hedges, encouraging yet more damage. And netted release pens were being constructed, inside which hundreds of birds fresh from the even more crowded rearing sheds were crammed together. The more I found out about the shooting, the more I realised that this was a squalid, environmentally damaging agribusiness. (Agribusiness was a word the gamekeeper happily agreed with.)

Up till then, while I had taken part in beating birds into the sky, this had been done in patches of thick cover some distance from the guns themselves. I had never been to see the actual shooting. But one afternoon I wandered over to watch.

What I saw made me flip.

My first reaction was one of incredulous laughter. Grown men, in Edwardian costume, were being chauffeured from peg to peg in polished luxury 4x4s, from where they shot at dozy, over-weight and cultivated birds – birds who were flying only because locals were scaring them into the air directly over the shooters' line of fire. It was a cross between a semi-intensive chicken farm and a fairground shooting booth.

My second reaction was deep shock. I am not an animal welfare person, but I have spiritual and ethical concerns. Life, in this case a pheasant, was being created for the sole purpose of it being an interesting target to be destroyed. There was no other purpose - for I discovered that the industrialised pheasant shooting industry can sell only half of what it shoots.

No one really knows what life is. We all recognise it, but none of us can understand it. Scientists have decoded DNA and the genome, but none probably ever will find the gene that expresses 'life'. What's clear, however, is that these pheasant rearing and destruction activities are a total disrespect of this life.

At these big commercial shoots, the honourable field sport of 'one for the pot' has become a squalid blood sport, where the question is, 'I killed fifty today...how did you match up?' In Holland, the breeding of animals just to use them as targets has been banned. I'm in favour of that.



I complained to the man who owns this shoot. He told me it has a turnover of £750,000 year and that, by complaining, I was trying to 'spoil his entertainment' and the shoot 'wasn't a business, anyway', though the gamekeeper told me three quarters of the guns came from abroad. I have hundreds of 'his' pheasants using my land and causing environmental damage. I asked him to stop running his business on my land, to stop damaging my environment and to stop using my land in a way that contravened my ethics. He replied quoting the legal nicety that his shed-reared pheasants are 'wild birds'; that it was entirely my problem and absolutely none of his responsibility.

I made a complaint to the shooting industry's Code of Good Shooting Practice Secretariat, describing my own experiences and citing what their own code demands. I await their reply. Meanwhile, here are some noteworthy points:

The Code says:

"Respect your quarry."

The birds being shot are retrieved by dogs and taken straight to the game cart. The customer (or 'gun' as they fancy being called) never touches the bird he shoots. I challenged the Secretariat to answer this question: If the customer clearly would be unable to recognise the animal he has just shot amongst the hundred on the game cart, how can he be according it respect?

"Don't be greedy."

If you kill many more than you can eat, how can that be anything other than greedy, especially as there is only a 50% chance of the bird being sold for food?

"No more birds shall be released than can be sustained without damaging the surrounding habitat."

My own woodland and hedges are being damaged. Hedges elsewhere are being damaged. Neighbours are losing the grapes from their vineyard. The pheasants are eating all the natural food that a friend wants for his free-range ducks. People's vegetable gardens are being pecked to pieces. Pheasants swarm all over the local roads:

there has been at least one local car accident. Can they explain why this is allowable?

"Avoid spent shot or birds falling onto neighbouring property."

Shot falls all over the place, on people's roofs, in the streams and on my land. I estimate that 300 wounded pheasants flew into my wood last year and died there.

"Proper provision should be made to retrieve all shot game."

The one time I went to watch the shooting, I saw birds falling in front of the guns unrecovered. Then there are the 300 clearly-unrecovered birds who died on my own land.

"Guns should make every effort to assist in the retrieval of shot game."

While watching shooting, I saw a wounded, dying bird flapping at the feet of one gun. He carried on shooting.

Once I was a 'townie' and thought shooting was a respectable and even humane country sport. Now, after eight years of first renting my wood to a shoot and then just watching things, I know it is, for many people, just a matter of how many birds can one kill in a day. It's a bloodsport here, not a fieldsport. The guns don't eat the birds and the shoots can't even sell them. It is time to have this wanton slaughter stopped.

Theo Hopkins (wildwood@gn.apc.org)



Animal Aid exposes and campaigns peacefully against all animal abuse, and promotes a cruelty-free lifestyle.

Animal Aid, The Old Chapel, Bradford Street, Tonbridge, Kent TN9 1AW.
Tel: (01732) 364546 email: info@animalaid.org.uk website: www.animalaid.org.uk