



CALLING THE SHOTS

2014

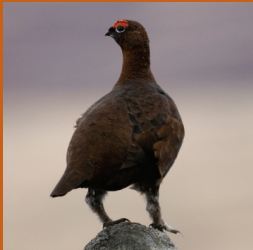
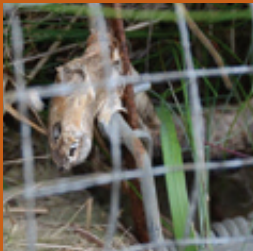
**The power and privilege of
the grouse-shooting elite**

CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES

- **End the use of public money to subsidise grouse shoots**
- **Introduce state licensing for shoots and gamekeepers – the retention of such licences being dependent on adherence to wildlife protection laws**



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KEY DEVELOPMENTS

Key developments since the October 2013 publication of *Calling the Shots*:

- **The amount of CAP Moorland Payment subsidies is to nearly double. Although intended for farmers, their representative bodies have expressed concerns that much of the money could end up in the pockets of grouse moor owners. (See page 7)**
- **The new chairman of Natural England – appointed in January 2014 – is a chartered accountant, venture capitalist, founder of a property company and generous Tory party donor. (See page 4)**
- **The RSPB has called for an end to all burning on deep peatland after it discovered at least 127 separate agreements under which Natural England has ‘consented’ to burning taking place on legally protected blanket bog habitats. (See page 3)**
- **Sixteen red kites and six buzzards were found dead within a two-square-mile area near Inverness in what is believed to be the largest mass poisoning of birds recorded. (See page 6)**
- **The government dismissed calls to license shoots and gamekeepers. Critics are demanding a scheme whereby licences would be revoked if there is a breach of wildlife protection laws. (See page 6)**

In our groundbreaking report, ***Calling the Shots***, published last October, we revealed how millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money is being used to subsidise millionaire grouse shoot owners.

We described grouse shooting, much of which takes place on the moors of Northern England and Scotland, as a vicious indulgence that kills and maims huge numbers of animals and leaves vast swathes of precious peatland burnt dry, scarred with vehicle tracks and purged of much wildlife, a notable exception being the unnaturally large populations of red grouse. These birds are nurtured, medicated and defended from predators by gamekeepers until the shooting season starts on August 12. They too are then slaughtered by ‘sporting guns’, each of whom can pay more than £3,000 for a single day’s shooting.¹

Britain’s grouse moors were recently described on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme by a despairing ornithologist as ‘grouse factories’.²



Since *Calling the Shots* was published, disquiet has grown markedly about the whole grouse shooting industry. Several troubling developments have prompted that unease.

There is, for instance, to be a near doubling of a 'Direct Payment' farming subsidy, some of which, it is anticipated, will fall into the hands of grouse moor owners. It has come to light that Walshaw Moor – the subject of ongoing claims that it committed serious environmental damage – is receiving even more public money than first thought. We have learnt more about the officially sanctioned damage that many grouse shoot operators are doing to internationally protected peatlands. And there has been widespread outrage over the government's recent refusal even to consider introducing a licensing system for grouse shoots that could help restrain those estates that hunt down and destroy protected birds of prey because they deem them a threat to their grouse cash crop.

RSPB speaks out

Whereas, in the past, the RSPB has often been tentative in its public utterances on grouse shooting, in recent months, pressed by its increasingly angry grassroots supporters, it has demanded action on two fronts. It has backed calls for the introduction of a licensing scheme for driven grouse shoots – such licences to be revoked if birds of prey are persecuted. The society has also called for an end

to burning on deep peatlands (carried out to promote the growth of heather on which the grouse feed).³

The Society announced in March that it has discovered at least 127 separate agreements, or 'consents' – each of them relating to areas managed for grouse shooting – that allow burning on blanket bog habitats.⁴ In good condition, England's spongy deep peatland habitats lock up vast stores of climate-changing carbon, provide clear drinking water, and help hold back water that would otherwise flood low-lying areas. They are sites, furthermore, that are recognised as being internationally important for wildlife.

But the overwhelming majority of these deep peatlands are in what is known technically as an 'unfavourable recovering' condition – i.e. the hazard lights are flashing.⁵

In order to recover, says the RSPB, the burning has to stop and drainage ditches, known as 'grips', must be blocked.⁶ Grouse moor lobbyists, however, insist that burning must continue, or else grouse numbers will dwindle and their businesses will be fatally damaged.⁷

Towards this end, they have an ally in Natural England, which currently uses public money to subsidise grouse moors on which burning is being carried out.⁸

Environmental damage

Beyond the issue of burning, a senior RSPB official in Scotland recently complained about shoot operators who he said are engaging in ‘ever more intensive and unsustainable management practices... to achieve ever larger grouse bags for clients. Many grouse moors in Scotland,’ according to Duncan Orr-Ewing, Head of Species and Land Management at RSPB Scotland, ‘seem bent on beating Victorian grouse bag targets’.^{9,10}

Another influential voice raised in fury over the activities of grouse shoot operators is that of environmental blogger and former RSPB Director of Conservation, Mark Avery. He has written: ‘The scale of burning of English blanket bogs revealed by the latest RSPB work is scary... Yes, of course grouse shooting brings money into local communities, but this private benefit should not be at the expense of carbon emissions, water discolouration, increased flood risk, damaged habitats and illegal removal of protected wildlife.’¹¹ Avery has now launched an e-petition calling on ‘the next government to ban driven grouse shooting in England’.¹²

But the prize for the least inhibited grouse shoot critic goes to that compellingly lucid environmental writer and campaigner George Monbiot: ‘We subsidise the

landed gentry and their shotguns,’ he writes ‘... while the poor are plunged into brutal insecurity.’¹³

Of the environmental damage done by grouse shoot operators, Monbiot declares: ‘The hills in many parts look as if they have been camouflaged against military attack [having been] burned in patches for grouse shooting. It is astonishing in the 21st Century that people are still allowed to burn mountainsides – destroying their vegetation, roasting their wildlife, vaporising their carbon, creating a telluric eczema of sepia and grey blotches – for any purpose, let alone blasting highland chickens out of the air.’¹⁴

New chairman for Natural England

The development that has enraged critics as much as any other is the choice of new chairman of Natural England, the body responsible for protecting nature, including Britain’s grouse moors. He is Andrew Sells, a chartered accountant, venture capitalist, founder of a property company, former chairman of Wyevalle Garden Centres and a generous Tory party donor.^{15,16} The appointment could be called breathtakingly cynical but our breath has too often been taken away by a government that appointed as minister for grouse moors a man, Richard Benyon, who owns his own grouse moor (as well as a pheasant shoot) and who, while in office, refused to make possession of a banned, lethally toxic pesticide called carbofuran an offence, even though carbofuran is commonly used to poison birds of prey, such as golden eagles, peregrine falcons and red kites.¹⁷

Rotational burning is carried out to promote the growth of new heather





Dipper caught in a Fenn trap

The persecution of raptors

When the RSPB and others release new statistics and case studies that point to the ceaseless persecution of raptors by grouse shoot interests, the gun lobbyists come back with their own accounts purporting to show that such criminal activity is a rarity and that populations of several birds of prey are at a healthy level. The recently published story of young eagle Fearnan serves as a poignant corrective to the apologists. Fitted with a small GPS tag in July 2011 by an RSPB official and a bird artist/enthusiast in order to monitor his movements, Fearnan was tracked around the central highlands for nearly two years. In late 2013, he moved into Angus Glens, an area 'with a recent appalling history of crimes against birds of prey'.¹⁸ Within days, the motionless GPS tag was signalling danger. Soon after, his bedraggled, poisoned body was found on a grouse moor.

There was the predictable something-must-be-done outrage. But, according to wildlife monitoring website Raptor Persecution Scotland (RPS), Fearnan was just one in a long line of Angus Glens grouse moor victims who they have recorded since 2004. Other cases include: a long-eared owl and two short-eared owls starved to death in a crow cage trap; a peregrine nest destroyed; numerous buzzards poisoned; a tawny owl



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Shot crows

poisoned; several poisoned white-tailed eagles; poisoned golden eagles; a poisoned red kite; buzzards caught in illegal crow traps; a shot buzzard; a golden eagle killed in a spring trap; and numerous cases of poisoned animals (woodpigeons, mountain hares, rabbits) left out as lethal bait for raptors. Not one of these cases, reports RPS, has led to a successful prosecution.¹⁹

Even keen shooters have gone public with their disgust over the raptor slaughter: 'I find it very hard to support



Ring Ouzel caught in a Fenn trap



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Dead rabbit strangled in snare



Male Dunlin singing

the driven grouse moors', said a Reader's Letter in *Shooting Times* magazine. 'As they become more intensively managed, I feel very aggrieved that these beautiful uplands are where the vast majority of these crimes take place, and that some of our most celebrated species are being killed so that a handful of Guns can enjoy a few days' sport at a price very few could afford.'²⁰

In April this year came reports of what ornithologists believe is the largest mass poisoning of birds to be recorded. In just two weeks, within a two-square-mile area on the Black Isle, north of Inverness, the bodies of 16 red kites and six buzzards were found. On 5 June, Police Scotland announced: 'Fifteen have been confirmed as having digested an illegally held poisonous substance [12 red kites and three buzzards]. Post mortem examinations and toxicology work continues into all the birds seized.'²¹ Many other red kites are feared poisoned – their bodies hidden by those responsible.

Government support

At the same time, Defra was refusing even to give serious consideration to a call, made in a petition supported by more than 10,000 signatories, for state licensing of shoots and gamekeepers.



Crimes against birds of prey are ‘abhorrent’, went the official statement rejecting the proposal, but shooting, it was insisted, does considerably more economic and environmental good than harm.²²

Rather than punish the shoot sector, the government had fresh rewards in mind. David Cameron is said to have intervened in a debate over the cost of gun licences.²³ It ended up being frozen at £50 – a price unchanged since 2001, even though police say the cost of background checks on applicants now runs to £196 each.

A few days later came confirmation that the government is to nearly double the CAP Direct Aid moorlands subsidy – up from £30 to £56 per hectare.²⁴ The money, which is payable from January 2015, is intended for farmers. But bodies including the National Farmers’ Union and the UK Tenant Farmers’ Association have expressed fears that a

substantial proportion of the increased funding will go to grouse shoots.²⁵ As one commentator noted, such enterprises ‘borrow an agricultural backdrop but have nothing to do with food production’.²⁶ An indirect way that shoot operators lay claim to these public funds is by increasing the rents of their tenant farmers, to whom the subsidy is formally allocated. Even Defra has acknowledged this scenario.²⁷

The Direct Aid money comes on top of the millions of pounds paid out annually by Natural England (NE) under Environmental Stewardship schemes (ES), whose declared purpose is to preserve and restore precious habitats. In response to Animal Aid’s Freedom of Information request, NE admitted that £17.3 million was paid out in the financial year 2012/13 *in relation to land on which grouse shooting takes place* – NE would not or could not be more precise than that.²⁸



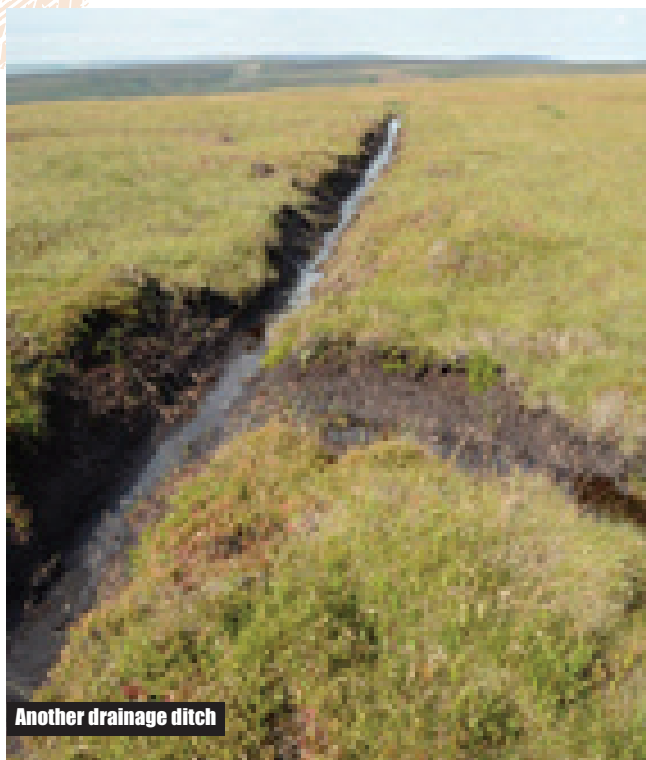
In *Calling the Shots* we told the story of Walshaw Moor, a South Pennines shoot owned by retail tycoon Richard Bannister, who was accused by Natural England of multiple environmental offences.

Walshaw faced prosecution on 43 grounds of alleged damage to the Site of Special Scientific Interest by ‘unconsented activities’.²⁹ However, the prosecution was unexpectedly dropped in March 2012 and Bannister was awarded an Environmental Stewardship subsidy worth £2.5 million over ten years.³⁰ That is about half the reported running costs of his shoot.³¹ The 25-year agreement allowed Bannister to keep and maintain all his ‘unconsented’ car parks, tracks and grouse butts – many of which were the subject of NE’s intended prosecution.³²

In addition to the ES money, Walshaw claimed, in 2013, Direct Aid subsidies of £52,198.³³

And the featherbedding doesn’t end there. We have discovered that Bannister is receiving ‘staged payments’ – the details of which are being kept secret – because his original contract with NE was terminated in the midst of the dispute between the two parties, and a new one signed.³⁴





Another drainage ditch

NE's capitulation to Bannister is being challenged by the RSPB, which is pursuing a complaint through the European Commission.

A comment posted earlier this year by a visitor to ex-RSPB man Mark Avery's blog describes a recent lengthy walk on Walshaw Moor. It paints a dismal picture – one that accords with what Animal Aid found during our own visit in the summer of 2013: 'On my whole walk, the only wildlife I saw, other than a few grouse, were a pair of mallards in the sediment pool at the head of the upper reservoir... So far as I could see the whole estate was a picture of multi-coloured strips where the ground has been burnt or scarified/rolled. You could see evidence of vehicle tracks all over the place.'³⁵

Meanwhile, Animal Aid has joined with others in pressing Natural England to produce evidence demonstrating that the large sums of taxpayers' money awarded to Walshaw to restore damaged blanket bog and generally improve the habitat condition is being used for the purpose intended.



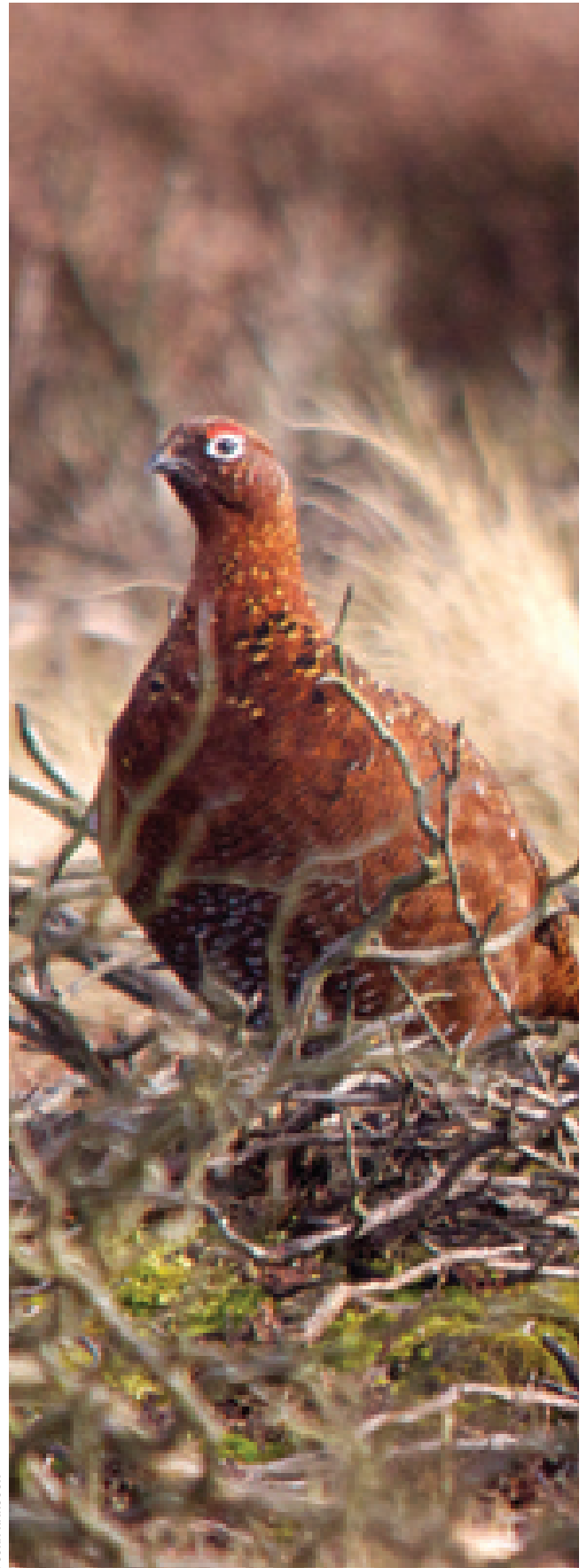
A toad (top left) and a smooth newt are trapped in a sunken grouse butt

Our Freedom of Information Act request asked NE: *‘What restoration work has been carried out since the new agreement [between Walshaw and NE] was reached; what is the schedule of work over the next 12 months; and what measures are in place to ensure that restoration work is carried out to a suitable standard and on schedule?’*

The June 19 response indicated that no actual restoration work has taken place since the agreement was signed in March 2012.³⁶ There has been a survey of grips (drainage ditches) with a view to drawing up a blocking plan, and there has been a trial of herbicide spraying to clear heather and allow dwarf shrub species to re-establish. The grip-blocking schedule set out in NE’s response seems absurdly leisurely. The first group of grips are due to be blocked by July 2015. The whole programme is scheduled to be finished in July 2021 – nearly nine years after the agreement calling for this work to be undertaken was signed.

Handout for grouse moor millionaire convicted of environmental damage

Another example of a grouse shoot operator who has faced allegations of environmental damage, and yet who has been treated extremely generously by the taxpayer, is Michael Cannon. In 2008, Cannon, who owns the Wemmergill Estate in upper Teesdale, pleaded guilty to three criminal charges relating to the construction of an access road and car park over part of the moorland. He was fined £50,000, ordered to carry out £220,000 of restoration work and to pay Natural England’s full legal costs of £237,500.^{37,38} Less than two years later, Cannon – a former poultry farmer who made his fortune from the pub trade – won permission to lay 5km of surfaced tracks and associated car parks on the moor. In 2012, Wemmergill Estates LLP received almost £300,000 under CAP’s Rural Payment scheme (which is administered by – among others – Natural England) and more than £425,000 in 2013.³⁹



A stoat falls prey to a gamekeeper's trap



Driven grouse shooting is a violent and destructive enterprise. Precious peatland habitats are systematically damaged, and native wildlife is methodically killed, having first been castigated as pestilential vermin. This is all so that huge red grouse populations can be developed and sustained – birds who are shot for ‘sport’, starting on that least glorious day in the calendar, August 12.

Inevitably, this dark side of grouse shooting is absent from a self-congratulatory, industry-commissioned survey published this month, called *The Value of Shooting*. The report contains no account of the widespread damage to internationally important landscapes; no acknowledgement of the failure to deal with the illegal killing of iconic birds of prey; and no spelling out of the considerable sums of public money showered on already enormously wealthy shoot owners. But, depressingly, we can expect to see *The Value of Shooting*'s airbrushed self-portrait – with all its inflated numbers relating to income generated and jobs created – faithfully regurgitated by government ministers and the gun lobby's backbench cheerleaders in the months to come.

The millionaires who run the English and Scottish grouse moors have been able to count on the support of a succession of British governments. But this

current Tory-led coalition has distinguished itself for the way in which it has increased the flow of public money in the moor owners' direction while stripping away controls that could moderate their reckless excesses.

Since we published ***Calling the Shots*** in October last year, these tendencies have grown even more marked, as this updated report illustrates.

As pernicious as any of the specific developments relating to the use of public money and the cynical deployment of wildlife law, is the puppy dog enthusiasm with which the government nourishes a bogus public image of grouse shooting as an activity that benefits animals, the environment and the wider economy. It does none of these things and, in refusing to recognise this truth, the government and its relevant agencies are guilty of wilful blindness.

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