

Grouse shooting

Making a Killing

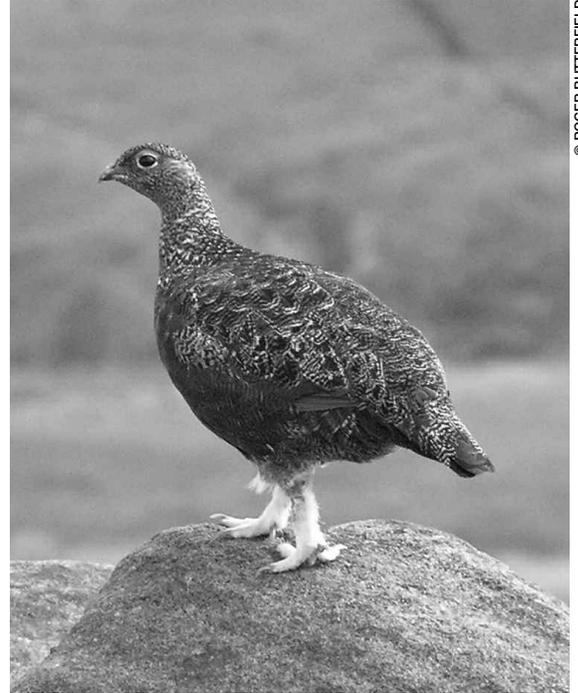
Grouse are classed as gamebirds and around half a million are killed every year in Britain for 'sport'. The start of the grouse shooting season – known as 'The Glorious Twelfth' by the bloodsports lobby – is 12 August. The season ends on 10 December in mainland Britain (and 30 November in Northern Ireland). The 'sport' is an expensive indulgence for wealthy estate owners, who receive £150 for every pair of birds shot down on the moors of Scotland and northern England.¹ Grouse are said to be good sport because they fly low and are relatively difficult to kill cleanly. However, no training or proof of shooting competence is necessary to go grouse shooting.

The Guns are placed in butts (a hide for shooting, screened by a turf or stone wall) and the birds are driven towards them by beaters. Grouse shooting can also be undertaken by 'walking up' grouse over pointers, or by flushing the birds with other dogs. This traditional method of shooting birds was largely supplanted by formal driven shooting in the mid to late 1800s, although the older practice is reported to be regaining popularity. It is also said that driven grouse shooting is the only commercially viable means of running a grouse moor. There are about 500 grouse moors in the United Kingdom covering 1.5m hectares. These moors range from Wales and Derbyshire in the South to the highlands of Scotland in the North. An average size moor is 2,000 hectares, while the smallest is 200 hectares and the largest, 10,000.

Wildlife and the Environment

Writing about grouse moors in August 2007, Alastair Balmain, Deputy Editor of *Shooting Times*, commented: "While it may look wild, natural and free, it isn't. Our upland areas are amongst the most intensively managed landscapes around ..."² Proponents of shooting claim that their activities help the environment. The reality is that they construct an artificial heather-rich landscape and persecute any animals who dare to interfere with their 'sport'.

They use euphemisms like 'control' and 'management' for the killing of vast numbers of foxes, stoats, weasels and squirrels. And, even though raptors are legally protected, hawks, falcons, owls, hen harriers and even eagles are trapped, poisoned or shot, or their nests are destroyed. Pro-shooting lobbyists – such as Teresa Dent³, Chief Executive of the Game Conservancy Trust (now appealingly renamed the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust) – attempt to justify their practices by playing the conservation card. They



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talk of songbirds and waders as if they are more valuable than other creatures who share the same habitat, and who gamekeepers persecute. Then there is the assault on the landscape. The upland moors are our equivalent of the South American rainforests for storing and absorbing carbon⁴. The heather is burned by those who manage the moors to encourage new shoots, which the grouse thrive on. But this releases massive quantities of global-warming carbon, the equivalent of a tenth of British industry's total emissions.

The intensively-managed landscape is an ideal breeding ground for heather beetles. Once hatched, they eat the young heather shoots and damage the stems, causing the heather to wither and die. The speed with which they can destroy vast areas of heather is a concern to gamekeepers who are only interested in populating the moorland with grouse ahead of 12 August. There have been complaints in the shooting press of an infestation of the beetle, together with calls for public funding to remedy shooting's self-inflicted problem.

Disease

It is true that some ground-nesting birds do well in this abused landscape. But in such an environment, the grouse population goes through a cycle of boom and collapse. It is the moor 'management' that disrupts the natural balance of predators to the predated. With fewer predators and so much heather to feed on and shelter in, numbers increase to a level the moors cannot support. The birds then



fall prey to a fatal gut parasite, called Strongylosis, and numbers crash.

Grouse cannot be successfully bred in captivity, and are marketed as up-market, free-range, wild birds for the table. But grouse are treated with medicated grit – containing anthelmintic drugs – to combat worm parasites.

Characteristics of Grouse

Five species of grouse populate Britain. Red Grouse, who are found only in the British Isles, are the most favoured for ‘sport’ shooting, despite having RSPB Amber – under threat – Conservation Status. Grouse typically have feathered legs and feet and live in demanding conditions, such as bleak heather moors or mountain tops. Several types of grouse exhibit ritualised social behaviour typified by the *lekking* of the Black Grouse. Males ‘display’ in order to achieve the best chance of being selected by a female, but take no part in incubating eggs or rearing the young.

The birds are ground nesting. They make a shallow hollow scoop in the earth and line it sparsely with pine needles and grass. Eggs are laid between April and July and the birds have only one brood a year. Their varied diet includes seeds, berries, shoots, buds and flowers of many shrubs, hedges and trees. The chicks depend upon a diet of insects.

Types of Grouse

Red Grouse

The red grouse is medium-sized, reddish-brown in colour, with a plump body, short tail and a lightly hook-tipped bill. They breed and live in the uplands of the north and west of the UK and travel very little in their lives. Red Grouse can be found all over Ireland, the Scottish Pennines, and Dartmoor and Exmoor in England. The life of a Red Grouse is short. Two out of three will not survive a year after hatching.

Black Grouse

The Black Grouse is relatively large and lives in forest clearings and on the edges of moorland in Britain and most of Scotland, the Pennine moors and upland areas of Wales. At the leks (the Spring display sites), the males simulate fights to impress the reclusive females, who watch from hidden vantage sites nearby. However, they are easily disturbed and the males fly off at long-range if approached. They are vulnerable, and there are currently only 5,100 British male birds.

Willow Grouse

(also known as Willow Ptarmigan)

The Willow Grouse is the parent species from whom the Red Grouse descends, and is similar to the Red Grouse apart from the adoption of all-white plumage (except for a black tail) by both sexes in winter. In summer the Willow Grouse has a reddish brown body, black tail and white wings and distinctive white underbelly. The Willow Grouse lives for up to seven years and occupies Western regions of Scotland, Wales and Ireland.



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Ptarmigan

The Ptarmigan is a smaller, more delicate version of the Willow Grouse and can live for up to seven years. They are completely white in winter, and have grey, salt and pepper plumage on the upper body in summer. Like the Willow Grouse, they have black tails. The Ptarmigan is found only on the highest Scottish peaks and extreme northern moors, and it is estimated that there are 10,000 UK breeding pairs.

Capercaillie

The largest grouse, the Capercaillie, is sensitive to disturbance and typically shy and secretive. The birds inhabit forests, mainly in Northern Scotland, and can live for up to 10 years. The UK Capercaillie population has declined so rapidly that it is (for the second time) at very real risk of extinction and is an RSPB ‘Red List’ species. There are fewer than 1,980 wintering birds.

Government-Approved Bloodsport

The proponents of shooting argue that their ‘sport’ is beneficial to the environment and that without the efforts of those who ‘manage’ the moors, wildlife and the landscape would suffer and deteriorate. But the reality is that these intensively-managed moors are far from natural, and whilst they may provide suitable breeding conditions for grouse, the processes of burning the moors damages the environment. Some species of wildlife may also thrive in these conditions, but any species regarded as a threat to the grouse population is legally – and illegally – persecuted. The pro-shooting lobby attempts to justify its activities by talking about ‘conservation’, but the bottom line is that the grouse moors are managed so that those with enough money to go shooting can gain pleasure from killing defenceless birds.

References

1. www.independent.co.uk/environment/grouse-moors-under-fire-411456.html
2. Shooting Times, 23 August 2007
3. Daily Telegraph, 12 August 2006
4. Fred Pearce, New Scientist, 12 August 2006