



Game bird shooting

Many people think of game bird shooting as a traditional British countryside sport, or pleasant rural pastime, that involves a few wild birds being shot for the pot.

In reality, the vast majority of game birds are pheasants who have been purpose-bred and intensively reared for commercial shoots where people often pay thousands of pounds to kill up to 800 birds a day.^{1,2,3}

Pheasants and partridges

Every year more than 60 million pheasants⁴ and red-legged partridges⁵ are reared and then released on shooting estates so that they can be used as living targets for people's amusement.^{6,7}

Rearing the birds

Many of the pheasants and partridges who are used as 'breeding stock' to produce eggs, are confined for the whole of their productive lives in cramped metal battery cages. The crowded conditions in the cages make the birds so stressed that they frequently peck at each other. Rather than trying to reduce the birds' stress, gamekeepers instead fit restraining devices (bits) over the birds' beaks to limit the damage that the birds can do to one another. The birds fly repeatedly at their cage roofs in an attempt to escape. This is called 'jump escape' behaviour.^{8,9,10}

Animal Aid's undercover investigations revealed



Partridges in a barren battery cage.

that birds suffer feather loss as well as back and head wounds from stress-induced aggression. Cages are exposed to the elements and the birds have little respite from the wind, rain, cold and burning sun.¹¹



Rows of battery cages on a game bird breeding farm.

Once the eggs have been collected and hatched, the newborn chicks are put into crowded sheds often holding hundreds of birds. At a few weeks of age, they are transferred to outdoor pens where they are reared by a gamekeeper.

Gamekeepers feed the birds so that they come readily to his or her call, and kill wild animals, such as foxes, to 'protect' the game birds until the day of the shoot.



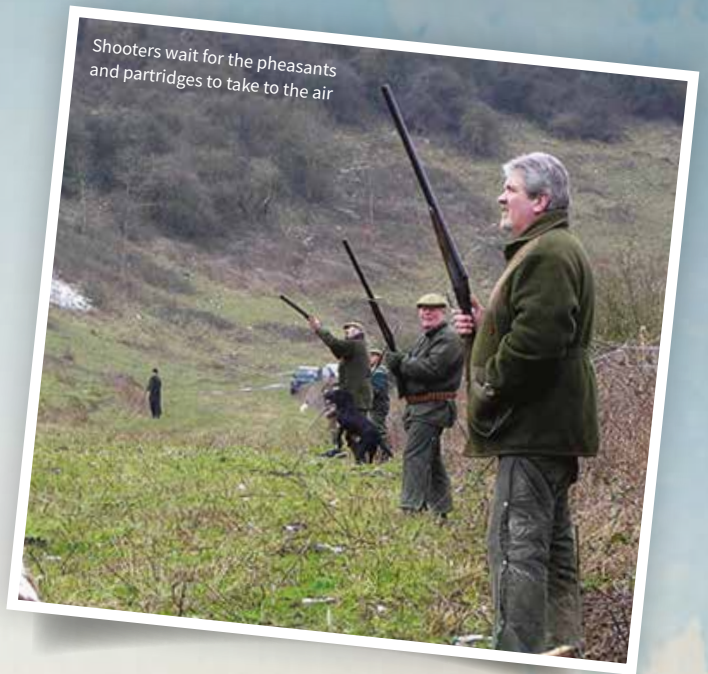
The shoot

On the day of the shoot, gunmen line up alongside the wood where the pheasants or partridges are kept, while 'beaters' flush the birds out of their cover and scare them into taking off and flying over the line of guns so that they can be shot.

With each of the guns shooting rapidly at hundreds of pheasants, many of the birds are wounded rather than being killed outright, which means that a quick death is far from guaranteed.

Dogs are used to retrieve the downed birds and take them to a shooter, who then clubs them over the head or breaks their neck, if they are still alive. However, many birds are left to die slowly when they are not retrieved by the dogs.

Shooters wait for the pheasants and partridges to take to the air



Wounded birds are clubbed to death.



Only around one third of the birds released each year are shot. The remainder can die through exposure, starvation, disease, predation or being hit on the roads.¹²

The shooting lobby says that pheasants are killed for food, but this is clearly not true. Economic studies show that it costs more than £30 to produce each bird shot, but that the cost of each carcass is around £4 retail - evidence that the birds are bred for 'sport', not food.¹³ There have also been discoveries of dead birds being dumped or buried in pits, because of insufficient demand for their meat.^{14 15}

Grouse

An estimated 700,000 red grouse¹⁶ are shot every year in Britain.¹⁷ Unlike pheasants or partridges, grouse are not purpose-bred and reared; instead gamekeepers keep their numbers unnaturally high by 'controlling' predator species and artificially maintaining the moorland habitat.



Wildfowling

Every year in Britain around a million ducks are shot for sport.^{18 19} Most will have been purpose-bred in sheds and sold to the shoot. The wildfowlingers hide under cover on wetlands and shoot the birds when they come into land at dusk, or take off at dawn. Plastic decoy ducks may be set out to entice the birds to land. In addition, around 110,000 geese, 160,000 woodcock and 110,000 snipe and other wading birds are shot each year for sport.²⁰



Wildlife slaughter

Large numbers of game birds such as pheasants, partridges and grouse inevitably attract predator species such as stoats, weasels, foxes, magpies and crows. To ensure that the maximum number of birds are available for the shooters, gamekeepers snare, trap and shoot these wild animals whom they call 'vermin'. Millions of animals are slaughtered every year in these 'predator control' programmes.

The indiscriminate nature of the cruel traps and snares that they use can mean that cats and dogs as well as species such as badgers, otters and hedgehogs may also be killed.

Some gamekeepers deliberately kill protected birds of prey, including hen harriers, peregrine falcons, red kites, goshawks, buzzards and barn owls.²¹



A pine martin killed in a Fenn trap set by a game keeper.



A fox killed in a game keeper's wire snare.



Peregrine falcon.

It is thought that the near extinction of the hen harrier in England is a direct result of persecution by gamekeepers. Recent research shows that hen harriers are ten times more likely to die or disappear in areas covered by grouse moor.^{22,23} Peregrine falcons nesting on grouse moors in England are also widely persecuted.²⁴ On Scottish grouse moors, golden eagles, white-tailed eagles and hen harriers all suffer persecution.^{25,26} A police inspector for North Yorkshire's Rural Crime Team told Channel 4 News in 2020: "All the shooting investigations that we've got going on at the moment are involving gamekeepers on grouse moors."²⁷

The mass release of over 60 million pheasants and partridges each autumn also causes problems for native wildlife who have to compete with them for food and cover.²⁸

Polluting the environment

Shooters discharge between 2,500 and 6,700 tonnes of toxic lead shot in the cartridges that they fire at birds every year.²⁹ This contaminates soils and waterways.³⁰

The use of lead shot sentences hundreds of thousands of wildfowl and other birds to suffering and death. It is estimated that 50,000-100,000 wildfowl in the UK die each year as a direct result of lead poisoning because they accidentally ingest (eat) spent gunshot.³¹ The same research estimates that up to around 350,000 birds suffer negative welfare effects from lead shot every winter in the UK.³²

In 2020, the European Parliament voted for an EU-wide ban on the use of lead shot in wetlands.^{33,34} However, it isn't clear whether the UK will follow the forthcoming EU ban.³⁵

Public opinion

An opinion poll in 2018 found that 69% of people think that shooting birds for sport should be banned. It also revealed that 80% of people were against the use of battery cages for breeding game birds.³⁶



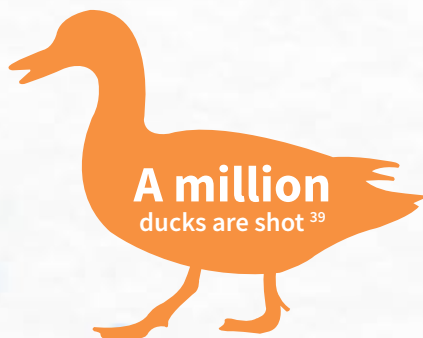


Each year:



60 million

More than 60 million pheasants and partridges are bred for the shooting industry³⁷



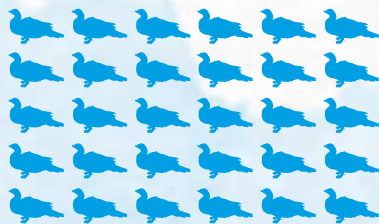
A million ducks are shot³⁹



Around **110,000** geese, **160,000** woodcock, and **110,000** snipe and other wading birds are shot⁴⁰



700,000
grouse are shot³⁸



50,000-100,000 wildfowl die from lead poisoning⁴² with up to **350,000** suffering ill effects⁴³

2,500 to 6,700



tonnes of toxic lead shot rain down on the countryside⁴¹

What you can do to make a difference:

- Order a free *Game bird shooting* action pack at animalaid.org.uk/youth
- Join Animal Aid and help to campaign against game bird shooting
- Ask your teacher to invite someone from Animal Aid to give a talk in a lesson on game bird shooting or animal rights.

Glossary

Beaters: People who form a line and scare the birds out of cover and drive them towards the guns.

Drive: The process of scaring birds so that they take off and fly in front of the guns.

Driven shoot: A shoot where the guns are positioned in a line and birds are driven towards the line of guns.

Gun: Person who is shooting on a shoot.

For more information on animal issues, please contact: Animal Aid, The Old Chapel, Bradford St, Tonbridge, TN9 1AW
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For the references, see the *Game bird shooting* factsheet on our website.