

THE SHOOTING INDUSTRY – KILLING OUR COUNTRYSIDE

Campaign Aim: a ban on the production, importation, rearing, releasing and shooting of birds

Every year, the shooting industry releases 40-60 million captive-bred pheasants and partridges into the British countryside. This massive scale of release negatively impacts Britain's wildlife and ecosystems, as other animals must compete for food and habitat. In August each year, the biomass of these birds exceeds that of all other British birds, and 1 in 12 woodlands in England contains a pheasant release pen.

Impacts from the mass release of pheasants and partridges

Release pens

Ahead of the shooting season, pheasants and partridges are transferred to huge release pens.

Once released, the birds browse the environment. Their feeding, pecking, digging and dust-bathing damages leaves, stems, flowers, seeds, roots and the soil itself. Studies have shown that woodland ground flora inside release pens suffer during the period in which pheasants are released, and that this environmental damage can last for many years.

The birds' faeces alter soil chemistry, increasing nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium levels, which affects which plant species can thrive. Some ancient woodland flora struggle to compete with species that prefer nutrient-rich soil, such as nettles, brambles and annual grasses.



Hedgerows

Pheasants use hedgerows as corridors leading from release pens to cover crops provided for the birds. This can negatively affect farmland birds and birds nesting in hedge banks or lower portions of hedges – for example, yellowhammer.

Invertebrates and vertebrates

Pheasants and red-legged partridges eat invertebrates, such as beetles, spiders, ants, caterpillars, slugs, snails, earthworms, flies and butterflies, as well as some vertebrates, such as reptiles, amphibians, small mammals and even young birds. This has a direct impact on the numbers and distribution of these creatures, who play essential roles in food chains, ecosystems and the diets of much native wildlife.

There is serious concern that pheasants are outcompeting other farmland birds, reducing the availability of essential food for their chicks, and pheasant-rearing has been specifically blamed for adder declines. Local populations of all six British reptiles could be affected by pheasant predation.



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Trapping and killing other wildlife

Countryside releases of pheasants and red-legged partridges also lead to increased numbers of predators. Gamekeepers trap and kill any animals, such as corvids and foxes, seen to be a threat to the released birds. Many shooting estates and their staff have been linked to illegal raptor persecution and killing of wildlife.

Rats are drawn to game bird feeders and cover crops planted by gamekeepers. The use of rat poisons (rodenticides) by gamekeepers not only kills rats but also affects wood mice, bank voles, field voles and shrews, causing local population declines. Poison residues can accumulate in the food chain, impacting predators and scavengers who consume these small mammals.

Lead ammunition

More than 7,000 tonnes of lead ammunition are discharged into the UK environment annually, posing a serious threat to birds, wildlife and ecosystems by contaminating soil and water. Other than being directly shot with lead ammunition, the biggest single cause of poisoning is ingestion of lead gunshot which many wild birds mistake for grit. Birds of prey and scavengers suffer secondary poisoning from consuming prey or carrion with lead, and other animals are affected as lead enters the food chain. In December 2024, the UK Health and Safety Executive recommended a lead ammunition ban, which is currently under consideration by the UK Government.

Avian flu

There is serious and widespread concern about the severe impacts of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) on many wild bird species. In the UK, at least 78 bird species have tested positive for avian flu. Between 2021 and 2023 there were 10 outbreaks of HPAI in British game bird rearing premises. A 2022 government risk assessment concluded that infected (released) game birds posed a high to very high transmission risk of HPAI for waterfowl, birds of prey, corvids, waders, gulls and wild pheasants; a high to medium risk for owls and passerines (finches and sparrows); and a medium risk for pigeons.



Antimicrobial resistance, antibiotics and human health

Resistance to common antibiotics, also known as antimicrobial resistance (AMR), is a serious global problem threatening human health by creating a new generation of 'superbugs' that cannot be treated with existing medicines. The misuse and overuse of antibiotics administered to humans, animals and plants is the main cause of the development of drug-resistant pathogens.

The use of antibiotics, such as Avatec, in the rearing of pheasants and partridges is widespread and routine, with the quantities used proportionally greater than is used in poultry farming.

The medication of gamebirds is largely unregulated. This means that heavily medicated pheasants and partridges are legally released into the wild in their millions. This puts antibiotics and other medicines into ecosystems, with the potential for resistance to be passed onto and by birds and mammals that prey upon and scavenge gamebirds.

The fact that gamebirds are released into the wild means that they have much greater contact with wild birds than other farmed birds do, and that they therefore have more opportunity to spread both disease and antibiotic resistance.

Conclusion

This Briefing, which is based on Animal Aid's groundbreaking report, *Killing Our Countryside*, has highlighted some of the various ways in which mass gamebird shooting is causing devastating harm to animals, the environment and human health.

The list is long and the effects are critical: local environmental pollution; water contamination; direct environmental damage caused by the pheasants and partridges themselves; changes to soil, hedgerows, plants and ecosystems; multiple impacts on birds, mammals, reptiles and invertebrates; threats to rare species; persecution of birds of prey; lead pollution; the spread of avian flu; and the strengthening of antimicrobial resistance, which threatens human health.

A tiny minority may take pleasure in shooting captive-reared birds and be prepared to pay for an industry to provide this service. But a much bigger price is being paid by nature, as well as by the millions of birds bred each year to suffer and be killed for sport. The way forward needs to be a ban on the mass release and shooting of captive-bred gamebirds.

Full references available online www.animalaid.org.uk/Environment