

## **COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE**

### **Game Shooting – Key Questions Answered**

August 2024

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Shooting is a key element of the rural economy. It goes hand-in-hand with the conservation of the countryside, brings both mental and physical health benefits to participants, and provides a healthy and sustainable food source. It is as a result of shooting that habitat management and conservation are carried out on 7.6 million hectares, an area that is almost one third of the UK's land mass. Shooting is worth £3.3 billion (Gross Value Added) to the UK economy annually and generates the equivalent of 67,000 full-time jobs. The environmental, economic and social benefits are enormous but despite this, misinformation and bias are widely spread by its opponents. Based on science and evidence, this briefing note and its accompanying Question & Answer section establishes the facts.

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## Briefing

### 1. Introduction

#### Biodiversity & conservation

Game shooting has been part of the fabric of the British countryside for the past three centuries and its associated land management practices have played a major part in shaping our most iconic landscapes. Thanks to shooting, many species have been saved from the brink of extinction<sup>1</sup> and throughout the country, land has been diverted from intensive agriculture and managed in a way that provides habitat and protection for a myriad of species alongside game. The conservation work carried out by shooters, either as volunteers or paid for by shoot owners, has the cost in kind value of £500m annually, equivalent to 26,000 full time jobs<sup>2</sup>. Many of our Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) have these designations thanks to generations of management for game shooting. It is vital for our flora and fauna that this management continues.

#### Contribution to the rural economy

The most recent study into game shooting has shown that its annual value to the British economy is £3.3bn, generating the equivalent of 67,000 full time jobs<sup>3</sup>. These are compelling numbers in themselves, but it is the location of this investment that makes such a difference. This money is spent in some of our most deprived rural areas, often being the lifeblood of an otherwise fragile local economy. These areas, home to some of the most beautiful landscapes, may have an important and thriving tourist industry during Spring and Summer but it is shooting that is the main economic driver during the Autumn and Winter, filling hotel rooms and supporting local businesses. Shooting is not the cottage industry that some might imagine. It is a critical employer and economic pillar in many of the UK's more remote areas, with considerable social and economic benefits.

### 2. Game shooting as a source of food

Pheasant and partridge provide meat that is both versatile and delicious, and which is higher in protein and lower in fat and cholesterol than chicken.<sup>4</sup> The period from April 2023 to April 2024 saw a 15.2% increase in game sales in the UK, with consumers and nutritionists being increasingly aware its health benefits.<sup>5</sup> Living as primarily wild and organic, and harvested in their natural environment, there is a growing understanding that game presents a great alternative to intensively farmed livestock.

The harvesting of game takes place on shoot days. The most common method involves a team of 'beaters' driving birds towards waiting guns. This is known as 'driven shooting'. These guns are commonly well practised and able to dispatch the birds quickly. Trained dogs and handlers are always on hand to find any wounded birds to ensure they are dispatched as soon as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Ewald, J.A., Potts, G.R., & Aebischer, N.J. (2012). *Restoration of a wild grey partridge shoot: a major development in the Sussex study*, UK. *Animal Biodiversity and Conservation*, 35: 363-369.

<sup>2</sup> Cognisense (2024) *The Value of Shooting*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Cognisense (2024) *The Value of Shooting*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.eatwild.co/why-eat-wild/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://backbritishgame.co.uk/blogs/news/eat-wild-announces-an-annual-15-2-financial-increase-in-retail-game-sales>

Game is distributed to participants at the end of the day. Any surplus goes to game dealers who process the birds and sell them into the public food chain. There has been some press coverage in recent years about a surplus of game meat on the market leading to excess game birds being buried or incinerated. If this were true, it would be unacceptable and condemned by all countryside organisations. However, incidents reported in the press when further investigated have proven to be false, with no evidence of the disposal or dumping of birds suitable for processing.

The shooting industry has been proactive in raising standards and introducing rigorous self-regulation. British Game Assurance (BGA) was set up to promote, develop, and assure the consumption of game meat by creating a thriving game meat market both at home and abroad, underpinned by independent assurance from egg to plate. BGA has now developed into Eat Wild, which focusses on the marketing of game meat, and the assurance scheme now operates under the aegis of Aim to Sustain, an umbrella partnership of shooting and countryside organisations aligned for the protection of game shooting and its associated wildlife habitats. The [Aim to Sustain Game Assurance](#) scheme includes independent audits of shoots and game bird producers. These audits are carried out by the internationally accredited SAI Intertek Global to ensure that they comply with the highest standards, including shoots having a pre-arranged outlet for all game shot.

### **3. Game shooting as a driver of conservation**

Game shooting is one of the primary drivers of conservation throughout the UK. Shoot owners and managers spend £500 million of private investment on conservation schemes. Shoot participants contribute 14 million voluntary/paid work days each year to conservation projects.<sup>6</sup> This level of effort is by far the greatest contribution to our wildlife of any private group and comes at no cost to the taxpayer. Crucially, these contributions take place because they have an economic benefit in the form of shooting. A UK without game shooting is a UK with 18.8 million fewer acres with habitat management and conservation activity, such as the creation and maintenance of cover crops that provide vital food and shelter for a myriad of species.

The legal control of predators is an essential part of game management which is carried out by shoots to enable wild game which nest on the ground to rear young successfully. Predator control is also vital in helping maintain populations of rare species of other ground nesting birds and waders. These species, such as curlew, the UK's bird of highest conservation concern, lapwing and grey partridges, tend to flourish on kept ground, and the RSPB likewise undertakes predator control on their nature reserves. Peer reviewed research undertaken by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) has also shown that conducting predator control, by shooting, the use of humane restraints, and other methods, has a major impact on maintaining populations of ground nesting birds, without having an excessive impact on the population of predator species<sup>7</sup>.

In the UK, 93% of the total 24.5 million hectares of land are considered rural. Of this area, active shoot management – such as managing heather moorlands, and planting trees and hedgerows – is undertaken on nearly 7.6 million hectares, which represents 33% of the UK's rural land. This is more than ten times the total area of all national and local nature reserves.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cognisense (2024) The Value of Shooting, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Tapper, S.C., Potts, G.R., & Brockless, M.H. (1996). *The effect of an experimental reduction in predation pressure on the breeding success and population density of grey partridges *Perdix perdix**. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 33: 965-978

<sup>8</sup> Cognisense (2024) The Value of Shooting, 16.

Research by the GWCT found that in 2012/13 shoots managed 500,000 hectares of woodland and 100,000 hectares of copse that had been specifically planted to shelter game. Woodland managed for shooting, rather than that for commercial timber production, provides richer and more varied habitat and in the wide woodland rides required for shooting there can be four times as many butterflies as on woodland edge.

However, high concentrations of pheasants and red-legged partridges can reduce biodiversity in and sometimes around release pen sites. Sustainable gamebird management is based on minimising biodiversity loss and balancing it with improvements elsewhere, and the GWCT has therefore produced guidelines for sustainable gamebird releasing.<sup>9</sup> In line with the GWCT research Defra has set a maximum density of gamebirds that can be released in a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) or Special Protection Area (SPA) under a General Licence. This is currently 700 birds per hectare of release pen or release area. In the 500m buffer zone of an SAC or SPA the maximum density is 1,000 birds per hectare of release pen or release area. Acceptable stocking densities also form a key tenet of the Aim to Sustain Game Assurance scheme, which shoots must abide by if they are to be accredited.

#### **4. Game shooting and the rural economy**

Game shooting makes a vital contribution to some of the most marginal rural areas of the UK, at a time of year that is traditionally the most difficult. After Summer, when tourists have left many of our more remote rural regions, such as the South West and North East, shooting fills the void. The reality is clear: many of these remoter communities would struggle to exist if it were not for the employment provided by game shooting and the substantial expenditure of those coming to shoot during the season.

Overall, shooting contributes £3.3 billion (GVA) annually to the UK economy and supports the equivalent of 67,000 full-time jobs. Arguments that this could be replaced either by wildlife tourism or simulated shooting of clay pigeons are misleading. Both have a part to play, but shooters are willing to brave inclement conditions and tolerate surroundings that would not appeal to most other tourists. Ensuring the survival of these communities requires a diverse and pragmatic blend of businesses and game shooting, with its 643,000 participants, is a key ingredient.<sup>10</sup> Those calling for alternative land uses to game shooting must first ensure that any changes to the status quo would be at least as beneficial. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature has identified three dimensions to the core of mainstream sustainability - environmental, social, and economic - and all three need to be addressed by anyone proposing changes.

For example, a report into the sustainability of driven grouse shooting by the University of Northampton<sup>11</sup>, took these three dimensions at the core of mainstream sustainability and considered each one in detail. Studying all available evidence the authors of the report found that no alternative uses have been put forward for managing grouse moors that would deliver the same positive economic impact to some of the most remote parts of the UK and there is no evidence that the alternative uses for moorland that are commonly proposed will increase natural capital or add value to the ecosystems services currently provided. If people, both the public and governments, continue to value heather moorland landscapes, then they will need to be maintained. The current model of integrated moorland management is a sustainable approach to maintaining this unique habitat, and there is no evidence that other management

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<sup>9</sup>In line with the GWCT research <https://www.gwct.org.uk/advisory/guides/sustainable-gamebird-releasing>

<sup>10</sup> Cognisense (2024) The Value of Shooting, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Sustainable Driven Grouse Shooting. A summary of the evidence. University of Northampton July 2021.

regimes can deliver the same result. Current management also comes at no cost to the public purse.

## **5. The social impact of game shooting**

In addition to its enormous economic contribution, game shooting is also of significant social importance in rural areas.

With 4.3 million days spent game shooting<sup>12</sup> and some 643,000 participants, shooting is a fully-fledged community. In an age where mental health, isolation and creating connected communities are increasingly recognised as a vital part of any government policy, game shooting is an important asset.

A shoot day can involve in excess of 30 casual employees, many of whom will regularly contribute throughout the season to the running of a number of shoots in an area. Participants come from all walks of life and all ages. This small community provides important social links, especially given the often remote, rural location. Game shooting makes an important contribution to the social fabric of rural areas, and three quarters of participants consider it important to their personal wellbeing<sup>13</sup>. In lessening social isolation within rural areas it helps maintain good mental health and decreases levels of loneliness compared to the national average.

## **Question and Answer**

### **1. Does all shot game go into the food chain?**

95% of shot game goes into the human food chain<sup>14</sup>, with some 60% being exported. The 5% that does not relate to birds which are unfit for human consumption, either due to damage or sub-standard condition. Most of these birds end up in pet food. There is very little waste of game that is shot.

Demand for game meat increased by 15.2% between April 2023 and April 2024<sup>15</sup>. This is an increase in sales of £5 million year on year, in large part thanks to the marketing of Eat Wild. The Aim to Sustain Game Assurance scheme, like the Red Tractor mark, has helped to raise standards and grow confidence among consumers. To participate in the scheme, each shoot must ensure the highest management standards and a ready market for any shot game prior to the day's shooting.

### **2. Is it sustainable to rear pheasants and partridges?**

Between 35.4 and 46.2 million pheasants and partridges are reared each year for the purpose of game shooting<sup>16</sup>. Provided guidelines on stocking densities are adhered to, releasing pheasants in woodland leads to net biodiversity gain. This is thanks to the wider management

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<sup>12</sup> Cognisense (2024) The Value of Shooting, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Cognisense (2024) The Value of Shooting, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Cognisense (2024) The Value of Shooting, 22.

<sup>15</sup> <https://backbritishgame.co.uk/blogs/news/eat-wild-announces-an-annual-15-2-financial-increase-in-retail-game-sales>

<sup>16</sup> Madden, J.R. 2021. How many gamebirds are released in the UK each year? European Journal of Wildlife Research, 67: 72.

associated with managing woodland for shooting. This is supported by peer reviewed scientific studies.<sup>17</sup>

There are a number of concerns which are raised in relation to the releasing of pheasants and partridges. The most frequent are:

***Pheasants and red-legged partridges are non-native species and have a negative impact on our native flora and fauna.***

While pheasants and red-legged partridges are not native to Britain, they are very much part of our current eco-system, with large wild and unaided breeding populations. They have been present since at least the fourth century and common across the UK since the fourteenth. Most species that have been here that long are considered 'honorary' native species and are understood to be an important part of our wildlife. Pheasants have been in Britain longer than rabbits or fallow deer – both of which are widely accepted as native. Those who would equate pheasants and partridges with recently introduced non-native and invasive species are therefore being misleading and disingenuous.

***The quantities of game birds released contribute to artificially high predator numbers, which is the only reason predator control is necessary.***

The number of pheasants and partridges released has risen over the last two decades as the popularity of game shooting has increased. The numbers of most predators have also risen<sup>18</sup>, some to their highest levels since records began. While further studies about how these trends are linked are needed, there is no evidence to suggest that one is the cause of the other.

Furthermore, steps to control predators are required across Europe, irrespective of the number of gamebirds being released. This is because predators can have a devastating impact on the breeding success of threatened species.

***Game birds are reared in a manner akin to broiler chickens; cramped and cruel.***

Claims that pheasants and partridges are raised in small cages, conjuring images of intensive battery farming are misleading. No gamebirds are raised in small cages. Once hatched in incubators, chicks are reared in brooder sheds with access to netted outdoor runs as soon as they are old enough (2-3 weeks), thus progressively reducing the stocking density as the birds grow.

Raised Laying Units are only used for breeding birds for the laying season ( a matter of weeks). DEFRA's own research into raised laying units for game birds, published in 2015, concluded that laying birds were more "relaxed and content" in raised units compared to more extensive ground-based systems<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> [Tapper, S.C., Potts, G.R., & Brockless, M.H. \(1996\). The effect of an experimental reduction in predation pressure on the breeding success and population density of grey partridges \*Perdix perdix\*. \*Journal of Applied Ecology\*, 33: 965-978](#)

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/Predator%20Report\\_tcm9-177905.pdf](http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/Predator%20Report_tcm9-177905.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Defra. *Code of Practice for the Welfare of Gamebirds Reared for Sporting Purposes*. 2010

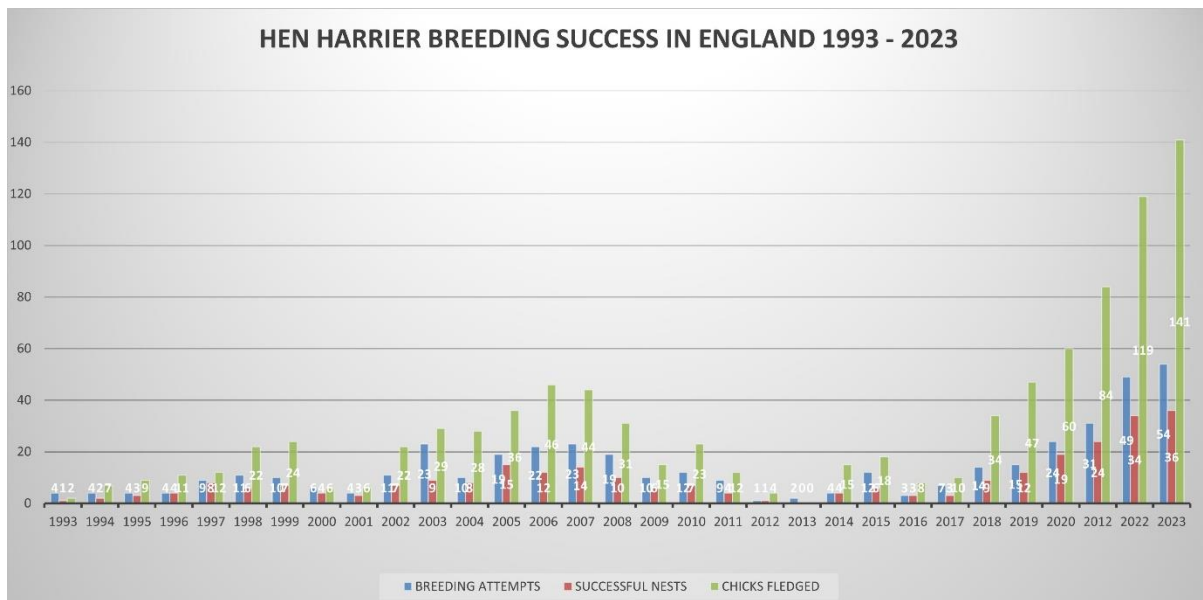
The rearing of game birds is governed by government guidelines under a statutory code of practice under the Animal Welfare Act 2006., and game farms can be inspected by the Animal and Plant Health Agency at will. The code requires that any raised laying units used must be enriched rather than barren. In an effort to continually raise standards across the shooting industry, the Aim to Sustain Game Assurance scheme and Trusted Game health and welfare scheme also cover game bird producers in addition to shoots. Their lists of required standards will further enhance the welfare of reared game birds, above and beyond the current legal requirements.

A full brief on game rearing can be found [here](#).

### 3. Is predator control necessary?

Predator control is a crucial part of any eco-system management. It is especially important in areas that have vulnerable red or amber listed species which can be significantly impacted by predation. Ground nesting birds are especially vulnerable, with up to 40% being predated in areas without predator control<sup>20</sup>. The management of species is essential, as the concept of 'just letting nature get on with it' would be deeply damaging to ecosystems and biodiversity. This is recognised by almost all scientists and evidenced by the fact that the RSPB undertake predator control on their nature reserves.

Game shooting is often unfairly tarnished by being associated with the illegal persecution of birds of prey. The Countryside Alliance, along with all shooting organisations, condemns any incidents of illegal killing of birds of prey, the instances of which have been declining, despite the numbers of buzzards and red kites being at their highest ever levels. In 2023 more hen harriers also fledged in England than since the 1960s<sup>21</sup>, with 141 chicks fledged from 36 successful nests out 54 total nests, spread across uplands in Northumberland, the Yorkshire Dales, Nidderdale, the North Pennines and the Forest of Bowland, areas managed for shooting. This was the seventh successive year of increases, as detailed in the following chart.



<sup>20</sup> Tapper, S.C., Potts, G.R., & Brockless, M.H. (1996). The effect of an experimental reduction in predation pressure on the breeding success and population density of grey partridges *Perdix perdix*. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 33: 965-978

<sup>21</sup> <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2023/09/16/further-increase-in-english-hen-harrier-numbers-recorded-in-2023/>



#### 4. Is lead ammunition safe to use?

Lead is a toxin and there are potential environmental and human health risks from using it in ammunition.

Restrictions on the use of lead shot are already in place across the UK to address proven environmental concerns about the impact of lead shot on waterbirds. [The Environmental Protection \(Restriction on Use of Lead Shot\) \(England\) Regulations 1999](#), amended [2002](#) and [2003](#), prohibits the use of lead shot for all wildfowl, with further restrictions below the high water mark of ordinary spring tides and over specific SSSIs. Similar restrictions on lead ammunition are in place in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

The Countryside Alliance, alongside all other leading countryside organisations, believes that in consideration of wildlife, the environment and to ensure a market for the healthiest game products, at home and abroad, there should now be an end to the use of both lead and single-use plastics in ammunition by those taking all live quarry with shotguns through a voluntary phased transition. This transition was initiated in February 2020.

There have been significant developments in recent years in the quality and availability of non-lead shotgun cartridges, and plastic cases which can now be recycled. Biodegradable shot cups for steel shot, with the necessary ballistics to ensure lethality, have also been developed by cartridge manufacturers in the UK and are now widely available. However, owing to numerous factors including covid-19, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and disruption to global supply chains, there is not currently sufficient supply to meet full market demand. These welcome advances are continuing at an ever-quickening pace in response to demand from a changing market. Such advances mean that a complete transition should be achievable without the need for a sudden ban on the use of lead, which in the current market would be premature and cause harm to shooting communities and threaten all the good work that they do. The shooting community recognises the importance of a transition to maintain its well-earned place at the forefront of wildlife conservation and protection, and ensure the sustainability of all shooting practices.

Subsequent to the initiation of the voluntary transition, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) made proposals for a formal restriction of the use of lead in ammunition. In October 2023 HSE published its draft opinion and response to the consultation on the restriction of lead, which had originally contained a proposed transition period of 18 months for shotgun cartridges and large calibre bullets. The main outcome was the proposal to ban the sale and use of lead shot for game and target shooting after a five-year transition period from the point of enforcement. HSE subsequently undertook a public consultation on the socio-economic impact, which considered whether the proposed transition period of five years should be reduced to just three years; a reduction that studies have shown would have serious impact on cartridge manufacturers.<sup>22,23</sup> It is expected that HSE will publish their final opinion at some point in Autumn 2024.

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<sup>22</sup> Cranfield School of Management, I. Abushaika, B. Ekren, N. Vu, *Transition to Lead-free Shotgun Cartridge Production: A Supply Chain Study*, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Blake International Ltd, P. J. Hurley, *Shotgun Cartridge Manufacturing – Transition to Lead Free Production*, 2022.



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