

## GROUSE SHOOTING – THE FACTS

### 10 KEY QUESTIONS ANSWERED

July 2016



There is a lot of misunderstanding about grouse shooting and its associated moorland management. The questions and answers below provide a factual response to the most common concerns.

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#### 1. Is grouse moor management necessary?

Grouse moor management plays a key role in producing upland landscapes that are both rich in wildlife and biodiversity. Home to the red grouse, a species that is unique to the United Kingdom, and one which is only found in areas of heather moorland.

Heather moorland is rarer than tropical rainforest and threatened globally, with 75 percent of remaining habitat found in Britain. It is a habitat of international importance, and supports a rich variety of flora and fauna. Whilst heather moorland may look wild, in reality it is carefully managed and it is often thanks to its management for grouse shooting that this unique landscape has been conserved or restored, where elsewhere it has been lost. In the last 30 years, grouse moor managers in England have been responsible for the regeneration and recovery of over 217,000 acres of heather moorland. It is also because of their management that more than 70 percent of England's upland Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) are managed grouse moors, and over 40 percent are also designated as Special Protection Areas for rare birds and Special Areas of Conservation for rare vegetation under European wildlife directives.

Whilst bracken has its place, it can be a problem on open moorland where it kills off heather. Its spores are poisonous, and it is also the preferred habitat of the sheep tick which can lead to high levels of mortality in grouse. Bracken control, and the dipping and vaccination of sheep, are therefore essential. Over the past ten years grouse moor managers in England have treated approximately 65 square miles of invasive bracken to stop it swamping and killing other moorland plants and providing a breeding ground for ticks.

Seasonal workers employed during the shooting season also help with vital conservation work such as spraying ragwort and removing saplings and invasive shrubs to prevent their encroachment. This labour intensive work is carried out because grouse shooting provides a

financial incentive to conserve heather moorland despite economic pressures and the attractiveness of government subsidies for other activities such as forestry and farming.

Without grouse moor management, the landscape of many upland areas, and the communities they support, would be severely threatened.

## **2. Does grouse shooting receive subsidy money?**

Some grouse moors are eligible to receive funding from the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy. Rural payments are provided to support the farming activity that often takes place on these moors and additional grants support conservation and habitat management.

At present, farmers and land managers can apply for payments under the [Basic Payment Scheme \(BPS\)](#). Only agricultural land is eligible for BPS payments as determined by Defra's Rural Payments Agency (RPA) which administers the Scheme in England. The RPA guidelines make it clear that moorland used primarily for shooting purposes is not eligible for BPS payments and there is also an 'active farmer' test for claimants along with a range of other criteria to prove that the land is in agricultural use.

The primary land use on many moors managed for grouse shooting is low intensity grazing, often leased to a tenant farmer, and it is the farming side of the business which benefits from BPS payments, not grouse shooting. Farming that takes place on moorland is usually eligible for the lowest category of BPS payment, known as 'Upland SDA (Severely Disadvantaged Areas) Moorland'.

In addition to BPS payments, some grouse moors also receive grants through [Countryside Stewardship Schemes \(CSS\)](#), which provide funding to farmers and land managers to farm in a way that supports biodiversity, enhances the landscape, and improves the quality of water, air and soil. The fact that many moorlands used for grouse shooting are eligible for these schemes shows how grouse moor management benefits conservation and habitat management. Funding under these schemes is often provided in the form of capital grants for particular projects such as woodland improvement and river management, and does not directly benefit grouse shooting.

All farmers and land managers who claim funding under the Basic Payment Scheme or Countryside Stewardship Schemes, whether on moorland or any other type of agricultural land, must follow [cross compliance rules](#). These rules include minimising soil erosion, keeping public rights of way accessible, preserving habitats and species and protecting water sources.

Until negotiations conclude and the UK leaves the EU, all existing arrangements remain in place, including rural payments and grants. Defra are having ongoing discussions with the Treasury to ensure that there is continuity, particularly for agri-environment schemes, without prejudice to future decisions.

## **3. Does grouse moor management contribute to flooding?**

The accusation that grouse shooting contributes to flooding shows a lack of understanding about the work of grouse moor managers and the role they play in conserving heather and peatland across the uplands, which is some of the country's most valuable habitat.

There is no proven link between grouse moor management and flooding. What is clear, is that the concerted efforts of grouse moor managers to re-vegetate bare peat, and block agricultural drains to raise water tables across the uplands contributes to slowing the flow of water through the catchment area, and this should be seen as part of any flood prevention strategy rather than a causal factor.

The drainage of peatland with agricultural drains, or 'grips' was once widespread in the uplands, and in the 1960s and 1970s successive governments offered farmers and landowners grants for draining their land; grants that were aimed at increasing agricultural productivity, not the number of grouse. This practice has since been discredited and grouse moor managers, working in conjunction with government and other organisations, are actively working on a number of projects which include re-vegetation of bare peat and blocking government-incentivised drains in order to restore damaged peatland and encourage the growth of sphagnum moss which slows the flow of surface water and filters out discolouration.

Peat Restoration Partnerships have proved highly effective and are an example of stakeholders working together to restore peatland. In 2013 the [Yorkshire Peat Partnership](#), which receives support from grouse moor owners, farmers and the Environment Agency, reached a milestone with the successful restoration of just over 24,700 acres of peatland. In the North Pennines, the work that has been undertaken to block moorland drainage ditches has resulted in the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Peatland Programme being awarded the Climate Change Award at the Durham Environment Awards 2015.

Our full brief on grouse shooting – heather and peatland management, is available [here](#).

#### **4. Is grouse moor management bad for water quality?**

Approximately 70 percent of the UK's drinking water comes from the uplands and all land managers, not just those responsible for grouse moors, need to be aware of the valuable role of the uplands in the hydrological cycle.

The considerable amount of work that is being undertaken by grouse moor managers to preserve and maintain peatland is helping to improve the ability of the uplands to store water and carbon, and should be recognised as playing a valuable role in improving water quality.

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## **5. Is heather burning damaging to the environment?**

Grouse depend almost entirely on heather moorland and grouse moor managers understand that a healthy population of grouse relies upon a healthy heather habitat.

Part of grouse moor management involves rotational heather burning, otherwise known as muirburn, which is undertaken to increase the diversity of heather age and structure to provide a healthy habitat for the grouse which benefits other ground nesting birds.

Burning takes place in patches on a rotational basis, the frequency of which is dependent on the speed at which heather grows in a particular area. This ensures that there is a mixture of older heather for protection and nesting, younger heather for feeding, and a fresh burn where regrowth is just starting. The aim is to create lots of micro habitats so that within one hectare of moorland red grouse and other ground nesting birds have the full range of habitats they require. Controlled heather burning does not involve burning the peat beneath the vegetation, indeed great care is taken to avoid this as burning the peat would delay the regrowth of the heather.

Burning is also beneficial for sheep as the patches of fresh burn provide space for grass varieties and young heather to grow which helps to spread grazing out across the moor.

Controlled, rotational burning also helps reduce the risk of damaging wildfires and the carbon loss caused by these. Large stands of rank and woody heather pose a major fire risk due to a significant build-up of fuel loads. Uncontrolled wildfires are damaging as they burn with greater intensity and are likely to burn the peat beneath the vegetation, causing considerable damage to the ability of the peatland to store water and carbon. This view is supported by research into [Heather Burning](#) by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust.

In 2003, a wildfire which severely damaged 730 hectares of Bleaklow Moor in the Peak District burned for a week before it was extinguished. The cost of restoring 430 hectares of the moor was £1.235 million, or £2,900 per hectare. If the costs for suppression (£550,000) and to the local economy (£500,000) are added, the total cost of the fire came to £2.5 million (Buckler, Moors for the Future Partnership, 2010).

The statutory Code of practice for heather burning, [The Heather and Grass Burning Code](#) (Defra, 2007), was developed in association with key stakeholders under the last Labour Government and acknowledges that *“Fire has been used by land managers for many thousands of years. When used with skill and understanding, it can benefit agriculture, game birds and wildlife.”*

The Code states that burning can only take place during the ‘burning season’ which runs from 1 October – 15 April in upland areas (Severely Disadvantaged Areas). In order to burn in [environmentally protected areas](#), such as a SSSI, consent is required from Natural England. More than 70 percent of England’s upland SSSIs are managed grouse moors. A licence is also required to burn in sensitive locations such as on a slope or near a

watercourse and there are strict limits on the amount of heather than can be burned at any one time.

The RSPB also recognise the value of rotational heather burning and there is a burning programme in place on their reserves at Loch Garten and Hobbister in order to *“increase the suitability of the reserve[s] for key breeding birds such as hen harriers, short-eared owls, merlins and curlews.”*

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## **6. Is predator control necessary?**

As ground-nesting birds, the eggs and chicks of grouse are vulnerable to predation, and along with poor weather during the nesting season, this can often lead to fluctuating population numbers. The lawful control of predators such as foxes, carrion crows, stoats and weasels, is therefore essential, and benefits not just the grouse, but also the many other species of ground nesting birds which share the moorland habitat. These include red listed species of the highest conservation concern, such as black grouse, lapwing, skylark, curlew, grey partridge, and the UK’s smallest bird of prey, the merlin, whose numbers have doubled on grouse moors in the last 20 years, compared to elsewhere where their numbers have more than halved.

[Peer reviewed scientific research by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust](#) has shown that on moors managed for grouse shooting, ground nesting birds such as curlew and lapwing, which are amongst our species of the highest conservation concern, are 3.5 times more likely to successfully raise chicks. A survey of upland breeding birds in parts of England and Scotland also found that the densities of golden plover, curlew, redshank and lapwing were up to five times greater on managed grouse moors compared to unmanaged moorland.

Black grouse, a species of the highest conservation concern, also benefits from this management. With a population that has declined 50 percent nationally, 96 percent of the surviving male black grouse in the North of England are found adjacent to moorland that is managed for red grouse, thanks to the management of predators.

Moorland managed for grouse shooting covers just one fifth of the uplands in England, with over 40 percent of grouse moors designated as Special Protection Areas for rare birds and Special Areas of Conservation for rare vegetation under European wildlife directives.

## **7. Does illegal persecution of birds of prey take place?**

The illegal persecution of birds of prey can never be justified, and any incident of illegal persecution is one too many.

All wild bird species, their eggs and nests are protected by law. The main law applying to the management of wild birds is the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 which transposes the requirements of the EU Birds Directive. The 1981 Act protects all wild birds and states that they cannot be killed or taken except in certain circumstances, for example, during the open seasons for game species or under the authority of a licence. Some wild birds, known as [‘Schedule 1 birds’](#) which include birds of prey, have extra legal protection.



The United Kingdom has some of the most robust wildlife and animal welfare legislation in the world. Incidents of illegal persecution of birds of prey on grouse moors are rare, but prosecutions and penalties are rightly imposed where any incident of illegality is proven, and these are taken extremely seriously by the shooting community.

The theory and practice of modern gamekeeping is centred on conservation and a respect for biodiversity. Gamekeepers need to understand the natural history of the habitats they manage, be able to use firearms and approved traps safely, legally, and with great field craft. These skills were once passed from father to son but the modern gamekeeper is increasingly expected and, often required by their employers, to undertake formal apprenticeships or college courses, gain practical qualifications or attend best-practice courses on subjects such as snaring, rodenticide use and rodent control.

Besides legal protection and best-practice guidance, the interests of grouse moor management and birds of prey are more interdependent than opponents of grouse shooting would like to admit. [The Joint Raptor Study](#) on Langholm Moor measured the impact of hen harriers breeding on a grouse moor. The predation by hen harriers limited grouse productivity, and reduced shooting bags to the extent that grouse shooting was no longer viable, with the result that traditional moorland management could no longer be financed. At the end of the Study in 1999, grouse moor management stopped on Langholm Moor, and the decline of not only waders, but also hen harriers, started. A subsequent study carried by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust at Langholm between 1999 and 2006 found that numbers of golden plover, curlew, red grouse, and skylark were two to three times lower than when the moor had been managed for grouse shooting, and that lapwings had been virtually lost. Hen harrier numbers also went from a high of 20 in 1997, when the moor was managed by gamekeepers, to only 4 in 2006, due to increasing fox predation, and dwindling food supply. In contrast, the number of carrion crow, a common predator species culled on most grouse moors, increased four-fold following the end of gamekeeper management. To remain at high density the hen harriers needed the gamekeeper just as much as the grouse.

Figures released by Defra last year revealed that out of the six successful hen harrier nests in 2015, four were on, or immediately adjacent to, moors managed for grouse shooting, which is no coincidence as grouse moor managers played a significant role in monitoring and protecting those nests. The total number of breeding attempts in 2015 (12) was a marked 300% increase on 2014 when there were just four breeding attempts, all of which were also situated on, or adjacent to, grouse moors. This improvement in hen harrier numbers is to be welcomed, but more needs to be done, and the implementation of the [Hen Harrier Joint Recovery Plan](#) has an extremely important role in this.

[A report carried out by the Scottish Moorland Group](#) has also found that birds in serious decline in other parts of the country are thriving on moorland managed for grouse shooting. The Report, which is based on wildlife audits carried out on three shooting estates, found 81 different species of bird including golden plover, black grouse, ring ouzel, golden and white-tailed eagles, peregrines and hen harriers.

## **8. Is lead ammunition safe to use?**

There are potential environmental risks from lead shot ammunition. However, it is possible to manage and control those risks and reduce them to acceptable levels through enforcement of the existing restrictions and careful monitoring, without the need for a complete ban or further restrictions.

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.

It is well known that owing to the unique way that certain waterbirds feed, some species are susceptible to ingesting lead if it is deposited in their feeding area. This has led to international agreements and the introduction of legislation in all parts of the UK in order to restrict the exposure of waterbirds to lead shot.

The majority of the evidence used to justify increasing restrictions, or a complete ban on lead ammunition, is outdated and heavily reliant on research undertaken in other countries which does not bare comparison to the situation in this country. Further, unscientific, restrictions could potentially have serious implications for the gun trade, the rural economy and the natural environment. Without lead many shooting activities could be substantially curtailed.

Lead can be found in all food types at a variety of levels. The most comprehensive report on the effects of lead on public health, undertaken by the [European Food Standards Agency 2012](#) concluded that lead from game meat represents 0.1 percent of average total dietary lead exposure. The report shows that the average European consumer is exposed to 62 percent more lead from “beer and substitutes” compared to “game meat”.

The opportunities for reducing the lead in game meat by improving game handling is just one mitigation measure that could be implemented to reduce the level of risk to an acceptable level. Cutting out the bruised meat and any bullet channels has the benefit of removing any excess lead that has broken away from the pellet, and is the current given advice in Sweden.

On 12 July 2016, the Secretary of State responded to the report on lead ammunition that had been submitted by the remaining members of the Lead Ammunition Group. Following receipt of the report, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) was consulted about the human health risk and they concluded that the evidence provided in the report did not affect their [current advice](#) which has been in place since 2012. With regard to the impact of lead ammunition on wildlife, it was found that the report did not provide evidence of causation linking possible impacts of lead ammunition with sizes of bird populations in England. In both instances, human health and wildlife, the report did not show that the impacts of lead ammunition were significant enough to justify changing current policy, and the report’s recommendation to ban the use of lead ammunition was therefore not accepted. The Secretary of State’s letter is available [here](#).

Our full brief on lead ammunition, is available [here](#).

## **9. Is grouse shooting elitist?**

Grouse moors are sustainably managed, largely through the private investment of their owners, and they offer the most cost effective model of upland management to the tax payer.

With the right conditions and management, grouse populations can flourish, and produce a surplus that can enable shooting to take place. It is the sale of grouse shooting that helps fund the work of the gamekeepers which protects the unique upland habitat and the wildlife it supports. Grouse moor owners in England spend approximately £52.5 million every year on moorland management.

For many upland areas shooting also plays a central role in the local economy. [A recent report by PACEC](#) estimated that grouse shooting in England creates 42,500 work days a year, and over 1,500 full-time jobs. 700 jobs are directly involved with grouse moor management and a further 820 jobs in related services and industries. Grouse shooting is worth in excess of £15 million which benefits a wide range of rural businesses. These include game dealers, accommodation providers, equipment suppliers, catering establishments and transport operators, many of whom are often based in our most remote rural locations and for whom shooting can be the main economic driver.

Grouse shooting also brings the rural community together in areas that can struggle with social isolation and lack of employment. In addition to the people shooting, a day's grouse shooting involves a large number of participants, bringing together up to 50 members of the local community of all ages and backgrounds. These include beaters, pickers-up, flankers, loaders and catering staff. Beaters are often local students or school leavers looking for additional income, or retirees with decades of experience of the countryside. Pickers-up and dog handlers devote hours of time to the training and care of their working dogs, and they are a vital part of grouse shooting. All gather together to enjoy the community and camaraderie that each day's shooting brings.

#### **10. Is grouse shooting 'canned hunting'?**

A 'canned hunt' is one in which an animal is kept within a fenced-in area and killed at close range in order to obtain a trophy. It is a controversial practice in Africa and North America, but opponents of shooting have attempted to link the phrase to grouse shooting, despite it having no relevance to game shooting in the UK whatsoever.

Grouse are in no way 'canned', they are truly wild birds, living and breeding on the moor. As wild birds, the numbers of grouse can fluctuate dramatically from one year to the next, and from one part of the country to another, with the height of a moor, weather conditions, and disease all playing a part. The habitat management and predator control undertaken by gamekeepers is essential, but even this is not enough to guarantee a sustainable surplus of grouse to allow shooting to take place, Grouse counts therefore take place in July ahead of the season to determine how many shooting days are likely to be possible. When grouse numbers are low, shoot days may either be limited in number, or completely cancelled if grouse moor managers consider there to be insufficient birds to maintain a healthy breeding population for the next season.

It is precisely because this is not 'canned hunting' that grouse shooting can be so unpredictable, but it is important to note that management continues regardless of whether shooting is possible in any given season. This can only happen due to the income derived from shooting, and without this management it is entirely possible that grouse would themselves be endangered and the red-listed species with which they share their habitat would certainly suffer a precipitous decline, as they have wherever management for grouse has ceased.