

The Ethics and Environmental Consequences of Gamebird Keeping and Shooting in the UK

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Introduction

Since the 1800s, some have postulated that shooting game birds is a historic British tradition and sport (Riveria, 2018). Pheasants (*Phasianus colchicus*), red grouse (*Lagopus lagopus scotica*), and red-legged partridges (*Alectoris rufa*) are among the most commodified gamebirds. Notably, the numbers of birds released for shooting over the past half century is increasing, with approximately 9 times the amount released in 2011 compared to 1961 (Robertson et al, 2017). Consequently, gamebirds constitute around 23% of the British bird breeding population (Eaton et al. 2012), impacting British ecosystems (Mustin et al., 2018, Roos et al., 2018). The discussion of the ethics of gamebird breeding, rearing, and killing is reinvigorated in line with increased awareness of our climate and ecological crises. This essay will consider the environmental and ethical concerns of gamebird shooting against the arguments made by proponents of the 'tradition'. It argues that due to ecological and ethical concerns stronger legislation and attitudinal shifts are required to protect both gamebirds and local ecosystems, wildlife, and biodiversity.

Destruction of wildlife

61 million gamebirds are estimated to be released annually (Aebischer, 2019), impacting surrounding habitats and causing concern for conservationists. This is reflected in Section 1.4 of the RSPB 2020 study, where gamebird shooting received a negative rating in 5 of the 6 primary areas investigated (see Figure 1) (Mason et al., 2020).

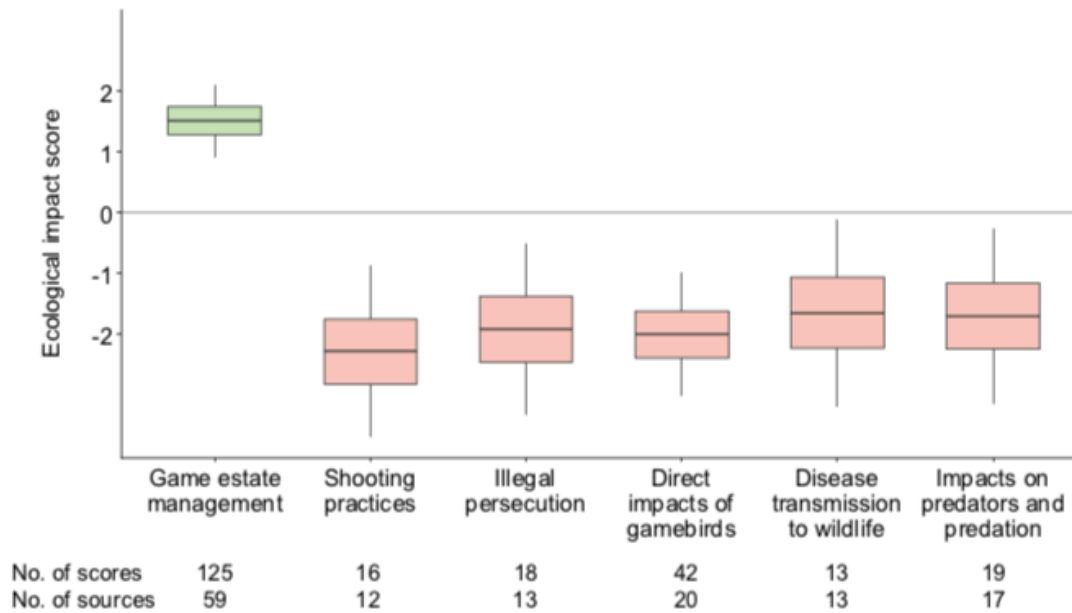


Figure 1) shows results in which shooting received a negative rating for 5 out of 6 of the primary factors (Mason et al., 2020 p.14).

Gamebird estates scored positive *only* in estate management. Generally, this was due to actions taken to successfully rear gamebirds including the supplementation of food and predator mitigation (Mason et al.,2020). However, these environmental benefits are overshadowed by certain costs. Current shooting techniques (notably the use of lead ammunition which is banned in other countries due to its toxicity), unsanctioned persecution of wildlife, disease transmission, and the significant impact the gamebirds had on the land (due to foraging) were all identified to have negative repercussions, many going beyond the estate’s inhabitants and affecting local biodiversity (Mason et al.,2020).

This demonstrates the harmful impact that gamebird rearing, has on native taxa and ecosystems, with native species being less protected in favour of gamebirds. Gamekeepers kill protected species either deliberately or accidentally with traps installed for predators to gamebirds. Gamekeeper Alan Wilson pled guilty to killing and capturing badgers, otters, goshawks, and buzzards in a recent case. He confessed to constructing 23 unauthorized snares and possessing carbofuran, an illegal chemical used to kill birds of prey, in addition to trapping and killing protected animals (Carrell, 2019). Unfortunately, inadequate monitoring means many individuals can get away with breaking such law (Gougeon,

2020). Improved monitoring and tougher punishments could ensure estates better comply with regulations stipulated by legislation.

For example, grouse moor management strategies were recently reviewed, with the result that licences should be implemented to minimise the environmental damage caused by murrumburn and the use of medicated grit. Minister Mairi Gougeon stated that the government needs to “act sooner” (Gougeon, 2020 p.16), and begin developing licenses immediately. They added that they believe gamekeepers' self-regulation is inadequate to protect other native taxa, particularly birds of prey (Gougeon, 2020). This demonstrates gamekeepers' lack of respect for local ecosystems and the need for attitudinal shifts towards respecting wildlife rather than treating them as collateral damage in game-keeping.

Shooting

According to The League Against Cruel Sports (LACS), it is unclear how many gamebirds suffer for extended durations, although it is believed to be approximately 40%. LACS cite a 2015 industry survey in which 76% of respondents 'were unable to accurately gauge distance' (League.org.uk, u/d p.7) between themselves and the gamebird target. If this is the case, many shooters are likely not delivering a swift death, leaving birds to fall from the sky, alive, at speeds of up to 70mph, and die slowly if not retrieved by beaters or hounds. This survey, although sought and not obtained, is corroborated by Packham (2016). Unfortunately, gamebirds are not protected under Section 3 of The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations (1995). Consequently, gamebirds do not need to be killed in a way that minimises suffering. Improved legislation could close the gap between ethics and legislation and better protect the avian victims of shooting. It may also engender attitudinal shifts that recognise the birds as more than 'game' to be killed for 'sport', which could be supported by rescinding the speciesist (Ryder,2004) name 'gamebirds'.

Sporting chance

Shooters reject the notion that it is unethical to kill gamebirds, since the birds have a *sporting chance*. Legislation prohibits shooting gamebirds during particular seasons; therefore, shooters argue the ecosystem and the birds have a chance to recover (Basc.org.uk. u/d), despite scientific reviews suggesting otherwise (Mason et al.,2020: Mustin et al., 2018: Roos et al.,2018: Sage et al.,. 2005). However, the belief in a *sporting chance*, can be evaluated to see if it is a valid logical justification for gamebird shooting.

Sports are generally defined as "a freely chosen voluntary activity that is rule governed and requires bodily excellence, which is highlighted in competition' (Sheridan, 2004, p.109). BASC's codes of practice make no mention of any competitive ethos (Basc.org.uk.,2021), and unlike clay shooting, there is no accurate count of birds killed or officially recognised prize. Additionally, in the nature of sport, fairness with voluntary participation is frequently mentioned but gamebirds cannot express consent (Humphreys n/d). In fact, they are reared solely for the purpose of being shot and manipulated through the supply of food to remain within the area designated for shooting. Consequently, it can be asserted that gamebirds do not have a *sporting chance*, and that gamebird shooting does not match the definition of a sport at all. It is excessively one-sided with gamebirds involuntarily facing serious injury and/or death (Maundrell, 2020). This calls for the re-thinking of gamebirds not as feeling-less objects voluntarily participating in shooting, but rather victims of a one-sided 'sport' that privileges short-lived enjoyment over the lives of individuals.

Conclusion

Gamebird shooting presents various environmental and ethical concerns (Packham, 2016; Maundrell, 2020). Due to a lack of adequate monitoring, estates can kill and catch protected species with little or no repercussions (Gougeon, 2020). Meanwhile the rearing and release of gamebirds impacts local ecosystems and has welfare consequences for the birds shot (Mason et al.,2020: Mustin et al., 2018: : Packham, 2016: Roos et al.,2018: Sage et al., 2005). Moreover, the ethical justification for shooting as giving birds a 'sporting chance' is poor. The requirement for licences is a positive step forward whilst further legislative changes could include caps on the quantities of gamebirds reared and released each year. Meanwhile, the promotion of better management techniques, informed by science, could reduce impacts to local ecosystems. Harsher penalties on law breaches could encourage compliance whilst fostering attitudinal shifts that not only benefit gamebirds but also local ecosystems, wildlife, and biodiversity. Recognising birds reared for shooting as individuals and changing the terminology used to describe them could help foster such changes whilst bridging the gap between ethics and law and, in time, perhaps precipitating the end of killing in the name of a one-sided and violent 'sport'.

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