

## The game bird shooting industry

### Campaign aim: a ban on the use of battery cages for pheasant and partridge production

More than 60 million game birds are bred for shooting and released into the environment in Britain every year. Around 50 million are pheasants and 11 million are red-legged partridges. This is the largest mass release of game birds anywhere in the world.

#### Animal welfare

Industrial game bird farms confine egg-laying birds in metal battery cages. Their eggs are incubated and hatched, and the resulting chicks are reared in huge sheds – which can each hold as many as 10,000 birds – before being transferred to large release pens.

Each pheasant breeding cage holds one male and between eight and ten females. The units have a wire mesh sloping floor so that the eggs can roll through for easy collection. The roof is also largely made from wire netting, which means the birds are exposed to the elements and have little respite from the wind, rain, cold and burning sun. Our undercover investigators have recorded temperatures as high as 41C in summer and -4C in winter inside the cages. With the UK experiencing increasingly extreme temperatures due to climate change, these birds will suffer greater exposure to heat stress. Our undercover evidence demonstrates that the caged birds suffer stress, feather loss and back and head wounds from stress-induced aggression. Many of the pheasants lunge repeatedly at their cage roofs in a futile attempt to escape, damaging their heads in the process.



Partridges are confined in breeding pairs in enclosed metal boxes that are smaller and just as bleak and claustrophobic as the pheasant units. Animal Aid's undercover team has filmed cages holding pheasants and partridges used for breeding purposes that breach the official Welfare Code, because they are utterly barren. In an effort to eliminate aggression between birds caused by the crowded conditions in breeding cages (as well as in rearing sheds and release pens), game farmers fit restraining devices ('bits') over the birds' beaks to prevent them pecking their cagemates. However, this does nothing to reduce their stress from being caged.

A few weeks before the start of the partridge and pheasant shooting seasons (1 September for partridges, 1 October for pheasants, both ending 1 February), the birds are mass-released. Cage-reared game birds are ill-suited for life in the wild. Around two-thirds die before they can be shot. Many will starve, be run over or succumb to predators.

On shoot days, surviving birds are 'beaten' up into the sky to serve as feathered targets. Shooters can pay thousands of pounds a day to kill up to 800 birds.

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## Slaughter of wildlife, and other damage to the environment

Astonishingly, pheasants released into the wild every year have a greater biomass than all of the UK's wild bird population put together. This has huge impacts on wildlife and habitats. Large numbers of pheasants and partridges attract or boost the populations of predators such as stoats, weasels, foxes and members of the crow family. Gamekeepers kill them with guns, traps and snares. Dogs, cats, sheep and other non-target animals are also inadvertently killed. Even protected birds, including red kites, buzzards, owls and ravens, as well as badgers, are deliberately killed. Certain species, including ground-nesting birds, do not impact on game bird production and are, therefore, not persecuted by gamekeepers. This allows the shooting industry to promote its slaughter of wildlife as a vital conservation effort. But in reality, the impact on wildlife and the environment is overwhelmingly harmful. Research has directly linked areas of mass game bird releases with large and growing numbers of avian predators. This can only increase local pressure on many species, including ground-nesting birds. A 2020 review study found game bird releases caused significant direct impacts on certain plants, insects, reptiles and amphibians, largely from being eaten by pheasants. It found entirely negative impacts on reptile and amphibian numbers, with local declines and disappearances of some species. Separate Belgian research has linked mass pheasant releases to severe declines in lizards and snakes.

Game shooting discharges up to 4,700 tonnes of toxic lead shot into the environment every year, where it is consumed by swans, ducks, geese and other birds. Lead can concentrate in earthworms and is then passed up through the food chain to birds and mammals. Two years after the shooting industry promised to voluntarily reduce lead shot use, little has changed. A recent study found that 99% of pheasants shot for game meat were still shot with lead.

### Economics

The mass breeding, release and shooting of game birds is done for sport not for food, as the vast majority of these birds never reach the human food chain. Studies show that it costs more than £40 to produce each bird shot, and average shoots operate at a loss of more than £2 per bird shot. They often cannot sell their game, with 46% of shoots supplying game dealers free of charge and 12% paying them to remove dead birds.

A 2014 report by Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC), which was commissioned by a number of pro-shooting organisations, claimed that shooting is worth £2 billion to the UK economy. However, economic experts from Sheffield University and Cormack Economics, commissioned by the League Against Cruel Sports, reanalysed the data. On this analysis, the GDP contribution amounts to £267 million, probably less when taking

account of subsidies. The Sheffield economists stated that the PACEC report had many shortcomings, such as failing to follow Office for National Statistics Guidelines, double counting by including the output of other industries, combining data on live 'quarry' and clay shooting and a failure to discuss subsidies given to the shooting sector.

### Defra Study and failure to act

Defra initiated a study in 2009 into the cages and the welfare needs of game birds used for breeding. Astonishingly, the report was not published until 2015. Instead of looking at whether cages could be justified at all, or comparing the lives of caged birds with their wild counterparts, the study compared different cage sizes and 'enrichments'. These 'enrichments' were determined by a stakeholder group, mostly from representative bodies of the game farming and shooting industries.

Enriched cages were found to offer little welfare improvement compared to barren cages. This was to be expected because, as Animal Aid has long argued, and as even one of the study's stakeholders, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC), also stated, it is the cages themselves that are the problem. In 2010, BASC called for an outright ban because, 'enriched or not', the units did not meet the five freedoms which are the basis of UK animal welfare law.

The Defra study omitted certain vital data on bird deaths and the effect of 'thermal stress' on caged birds exposed to all-year-round weather. However, it did reveal caged birds suffering significant injuries. Feather damage caused by pecking was the main cause of early death. 91% of partridges and 84% of pheasants were free of such injury at the start but, by the end, 39% of partridges and 69% of pheasants had suffered injuries.

### Opposition

A 2018 YouGov poll of over 2000 people across Great Britain on behalf of Animal Aid and the League Against Cruel Sports revealed that 80% oppose the use of cages to confine breeding birds (only 11% disagreed). 69% of people thought that shooting birds for sport should be illegal (only 18% thought it should be legal, with 13% not having an opinion). A 2021 YouGov poll in Wales found that the vast majority (72%) of people were in favour of banning game bird breeding cages.

In the Netherlands, the production of birds for 'sport shooting' was curbed in 1986 and outlawed entirely in 2002. The action was taken largely because of environmental damage caused by the mass releases of pheasants.

Clearly, game bird shooting is cruel, environmentally damaging, unpopular and unnecessary. Animal Aid calls for a complete ban, and, until that is implemented, a ban on the caging of the breeding birds.

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