

AGM statement on review of our gamebird shooting policy

A year ago, I announced the RSPB's intention to review our policy on gamebird shooting and associated land management.

As part of our conservation strategy, the RSPB seeks to improve many types of land and marine management, particularly those with a significant impact on biodiversity such as agriculture, forestry, fisheries, built infrastructure and minerals extraction.

The review I am reporting on today covers the environmental impacts of two very specific land-uses: driven grouse shooting and the release of millions of non-native pheasants and partridges, as well as the land management associated with these two activities. At the outset I want to stress that this review was not about the ethics of shooting, on which the RSPB remains neutral. Rather, it is about the environmental impact of the most intensive forms of gamebird shooting.

Following requests from members and in light of the increasing intensification of both types of shooting, it was time to update our policies.

What I outline today will guide the RSPB's future advocacy and communications and is consistent with action needed to address the climate and ecological emergency. It respects our charitable objectives as a nature conservation organisation which seeks to keep common species common and prevent threatened species from becoming extinct. We believe that these policies will also maintain the confidence and support of our members.

This review took time and involved many strands of work.

We carried out extensive reviews of the available scientific literature on the effects of driven grouse shooting and high-density gamebird releases.

We also consulted members, supporters, staff and volunteers as well as organisations and individuals with an interest and expertise in the subject and we took their views into account. This helped us adopt seven conservation principles to guide our thinking about how to improve the environmental performance of gamebird shooting and the associated land management. You can read more about the results from the consultations and the evidence reviews on a new section on our website where you will also find the conservation principles.

It is clear that many gamebird shoots already respect some of the principles that we have developed. Land well managed for shooting can have considerable wildlife benefits, for example by providing habitat that can benefit species other than gamebirds. We have common ground with many who run these shoots and already work together in partnership projects to improve the conservation prospects of threatened species and habitats. We want this collaboration to continue.

However, in some places there has been a trend towards intensification of land management coupled with ever increasing numbers of birds being released and, in the case of grouse, shot. This is to the detriment of the environment and includes the ongoing and systematic illegal persecution of birds of prey; the continuing use of lead ammunition; the ecological impact of high numbers of gamebirds released into the countryside; and the burning of vegetation on peatlands.

The evidence suggests that self-regulation by the shooting community has failed to address the environmental impacts anywhere near adequately and for this reason we are calling on governments to intervene. We recognise that there are different shooting intensities and cultural practices across the UK and urgency for action varies across the four countries.

Reform is urgently needed, and we are determined to work with governments, members of the shooting community, and other conservation organisations to bring this about across the UK. In short, we want to see an end to environmentally unsustainable gamebird shooting, and I am now going to outline how this can be achieved.

First, we believe that new laws backed up by tougher enforcement will be needed to end the illegal killing of birds of prey, to end the use of lead ammunition, and to end vegetation burning on peatlands. These practices are entirely incompatible with the imperative to address the climate and ecological emergency and there are perfectly practical alternatives.

Second, we believe that all intensive gamebird shooting should be regulated to reduce the negative environmental impacts. I now want to explain what we mean.

For “driven” grouse shooting, where beaters drive the birds towards the guns, we believe that the intensification of land management practices over the last two decades is unsustainable and damaging. Between 2004 and 2016 there was a 62 per cent increase in the number of grouse shot. We have concluded that reform leading to an improvement in the environmental condition of our uplands will most effectively be achieved through the introduction of licences for “driven” grouse shoots. These would set minimum environmental standards which, if breached, would result in losing the right to shoot. The RSPB has today set out the principles for how this system could operate.

Our focus is not on “walked up” grouse shooting, but we will re-double our efforts to secure effective licensing for “driven” grouse shooting, and we will learn from the developments anticipated soon on this issue in Scotland. We will provide an annual assessment of progress and review our position within five years. Failure to deliver effective reform will result in the RSPB calling for a ban on driven grouse shooting.

For the release of non-native pheasants and red-legged partridges, we propose a different approach. From the data available, the number of birds released annually is estimated to have grown to at least 57 million. Our evidence review shows that habitats created by land managed for these birds can provide benefits for wildlife. Nevertheless, it also shows that there are substantial negative environmental consequences from the industrialised form of this shooting, including the direct and indirect impacts that released birds can have on other wildlife. This situation is recognised by some in the shooting community. A recent review of evidence published by Natural England and the shooting organisation, BASC, reached similar conclusions.

We are keen to work with public bodies and the shooting sector to help address the issues with urgency. Important first steps would be to ensure a reduction in the number of gamebirds being released and full compliance with existing reporting rules.

Ultimately, we believe that further regulation will be necessary to drive up environmental standards. We will call for this within 18 months if significant progress is not secured.

There will be those who dismiss our findings out of hand. Recent attacks on the RSPB and its staff have only strengthened our resolve to seek change and we will willingly work with those who seek it too.

Many shooters recognise that things aren't right and are keen to end environmentally damaging activities. They clearly see that intensity of management from some shoots has created an uncertain future for the industry because of growing public concern about the consequences of their actions. We want these people to be allies at the forefront of change and we are ready to work with them to bring it about.

And finally, a huge thank you to our members that helped us with this review. I hope and trust you will support our efforts to reform intensive gamebird shooting and associated land management.

Kevin Cox, Chair of RSPB Council, RSPB AGM, 10 October 2020