

Driven grouse shooting

RSPB Council updated our previous policy on driven grouse shooting in October 2020. Our policy is to support licensing of driven grouse shooting across the UK, following expected progress on this issue in Scotland in 2020. Unless substantial progress (including effective licensing, stopping raptor killing, cessation of burning on peat soils, and banning use of lead ammunition) is made in reforming driven grouse shooting by 2025 in line with RSPB principles for sustainable gamebird shooting, we will consequently call on governments to introduce a specific ban on driven grouse shooting.

Background

Driven grouse shooting is defined as where shooters sit in lines of grouse butts on open moorland, and red grouse are then driven by beaters and dogs over the guns to shoot. The activity usually involves shooting large grouse “bags” (where large numbers of grouse are shot in a day). It is a unique hunting type to the UK (mainly England and Scotland) and shooters will pay large sums of money for a day’s shooting. Typically, gamekeepers are employed to kill predators that eat grouse; heather is burned to create young heather (the main foodplant of red grouse); and other additional management techniques are employed to produce as many red grouse as possible for shooting. The red grouse shooting season opens on the 12 August (“the Glorious Twelfth”).

The alternative walked up grouse shooting involves a small number of shooters accompanied by dogs. They generally take small and sustainable numbers of grouse, as walked up shooting is more about the hunting experience. This is much less of a conservation issue for us.

In 2020 RSPB Centre for Conservation Science updated our evidence on the environmental impacts of driven grouse shooting. We then developed seven principles of sustainable gamebird shooting, which cover regulation; impacts on quarry species; non-quarry species; the wider environment; as well as satisfactory oversight by government systems and processes. We then consulted our members, staff and organisational stakeholders on these principles. In combination this work informed our eventual policy.

Main points

- Our evidence review by the RSPB Centre for Conservation Science shows growing environmental impacts of driven grouse shooting on our conservation interests. Between 2004 and 2016 the number of grouse shot has increased across the UK by 62%. There is strong evidence that illegal killing of birds of prey continues; there is more burning of heather to create the right conditions for red grouse on peatland soils, which are important carbon stores for tackling climate change; there is mass culling of declining mountain hares (in Scotland) misguidedly intended to prevent grouse diseases; widespread use of medicated grit (to prevent grouse diseases) with largely unknown wider environmental consequences; and use of lead ammunition toxic to both humans and wildlife.
- In most other countries in Europe, gamebird shooting is regulated by government conservation agencies. In the UK, we argue that after many decades, the grouse shooting industry has failed to self-regulate and meet 21st-century public environmental standards.

- In 2013, updated in 2017, RSPB Council agreed that we should pursue a policy of licensing for driven grouse shooting. In Scotland significant progress has been made towards achieving this objective. In 2017 the Scottish Government commissioned an independent review of grouse moor management, the so called “Werritty Review”. This review has recommended licensing grouse shooting within five years unless the grouse moor industry stops killing birds of prey, as well as regulation of heather and grass burning (“muirburn”) and the killing of mountain hares, and tighter controls on the use of medicated grit. The Scottish Government is considering its formal response to the “Werritty Review” (expected November 2020), and there are strong indications already that licensing will be introduced earlier than five years.
- The RSPB Investigations team has collected data on the illegal killing of birds of prey for many years and this information is published annually in our Birdcrime Report. There is a strong association between the illegal killing of birds of prey and land managed for “driven” grouse shooting. The birds of prey that are most routinely killed and their populations suppressed, include hen harrier, golden eagle (Scotland), peregrine and red kite. Peer-reviewed science has been published which shows the impacts of illegal killing on the populations of all of these raptor species.
- The RSPB has held dialogue with the grouse shooting industry for many decades and they have failed to address systemic illegal and unsustainable behaviours. These events include the Langholm Moor Demonstration Project, the English Environment Council, and Defra Hen Harrier Action Plan.