

## Rear and release of gamebirds

The rear and release of gamebirds in the UK involves pheasants and red-legged partridges for sport shooting. These gamebirds are both non-native species. In 2020 RSPB Council agreed a new policy covering the large scale and intensive rear and release of gamebirds. Our policy is that we support further regulation for medium and large-scale gamebird shoots (releases of over 3000 birds) unless a public plan for substantial environmental improvements, and implementation of that plan on the ground, can be delivered within the next 18 months by shooting organisations working with the public authorities and the RSPB. We aim to help address these issues, and this work needs to happen with urgency. Important first steps will be to ensure both compliance with existing rules regarding reporting, and a reduction in the number of gamebirds released.

### Background

The rear and release of non-native gamebirds (pheasants and red-legged partridges) is widespread across all parts of the UK, but in varying degrees of intensity. When it is carried out at a low level (usually fewer than 3000 birds released) it can be environmentally sustainable and create benefits for other wildlife. Typically, these low intensity pheasant shoots plant game cover crops, have wide field margins, and retain woodland/scrub and wetland areas.

Between 2004-16 the number of gamebirds released across the UK has increased as follows: pheasants, 35 to 47 million; red-legged partridges, 6.3 million to 10 million. This is the equivalent of twice the biomass of all of our other native breeding birds combined!

In 2020 RSPB Centre for Conservation Science updated our evidence on the environmental impacts of large-scale gamebird releases. We then developed seven principles of sustainable gamebird shooting, which cover regulation; impacts on quarry species; non-quarry species; and 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. This work informed our eventual policy.

### Main points

- Our 2020 evidence review by the RSPB Centre for Conservation Science shows a clear trend of intensification of gamebird releases since the publication of an earlier review in 2010 (Bicknell et al). The number of gamebirds being released has increased markedly (although shooting effort remains stable), and there is growing evidence of negative ecological impacts, as well as unknown (but potentially significant) consequences on other biodiversity such as from increased generalist predator population effects. BASC and Natural England have carried out a similar evidence review and come to largely the same conclusions.
- In most other similar European countries, released gamebird shooting is regulated usually by statutory nature conservation authorities. In the UK, the main legal requirement is only that details of number of gamebirds held in release pens is registered with the Animal and Plant Health Poultry Register (APHPR). However, compliance with this legal requirement is low and therefore accurate data on the scale and location of releases is difficult to obtain. We will be pressing in future for full compliance with gamebird registration with the APHPR.

- Following assessment against the RSPB's sustainable shooting principles we have agreed that we will advocate for further regulation of large and medium scale releases of gamebirds unless the number of gamebirds released is reduced and within 18 months of 2020 there is a clear plan of action to meet higher environmental standards. To this end we will carry out a critique of existing voluntary standards used in the rear and release game sector including the British Game Alliance, Code of Good Shooting Practice, and Wildlife Estates Scotland, to make recommendations on essential improvements. We plan to discuss these issues with BASC and other key industry stakeholders and hopefully come up with some sensible changes to current rear and release practices, and to deliver higher environmental standards.
- We will continue to press for other required changes in rear and release gamebird shooting, including a complete ban as soon as possible on the use of lead ammunition, which is toxic to both humans and wildlife, as well as the use of environmental impact and habitat impact assessments.