Driven grouse shooting in the uplands

Management for driven grouse shooting began around the 1850s, with large areas devoted to this land use by the early 1880s when this type of shooting became fashionable.

Overview

Driven red grouse shooting is a form of gamebird shooting unique to the British Isles and involves a row of people (beaters) walking and flushing grouse in front of them over a line of shooters concealed in grouse butts. It involves shooting large numbers of grouse (bags). There is another form of grouse shooting practiced in the UK, known as “walked up”. This form involves smaller numbers of shooters, working with their dogs, to locate and flush the grouse to shoot. In contrast to driven shooting where large numbers of grouse are typically shot, smaller numbers of grouse are shot in walked-up shoots. This latter form of grouse shooting is widely regarded as environmentally sustainable, and the RSPB concerns relate to the more intensive driven form of grouse shooting.

Driven-grouse shooting is unique in global terms in the way it is practiced. The big numbers of grouse required for driven-shooting are the product of intensive management practices involving the employment of gamekeepers, whose main role is to kill predators that otherwise kill grouse, as well as burning heather and carrying out other land management activities that improve both the populations and food supplies for grouse. In contrast to most other similar countries in Europe where gamebird shooting is regulated by statutory organisations, gamebird shooting in the UK is weakly regulated. For further information, see a recent report on the biodiversity impacts of game bird hunting and associated management practices in Europe and North America.

It is true that fewer grouse are shot today than in the late 1800s, and the area managed for grouse has contracted since the early 1900s; however, this land use still represents a large proportion of our upland landscapes. For example, about 15% of the land area of Scotland is managed for grouse shooting.

Throughout the first half of the 20th Century (excluding two periods of war), management produced good numbers of grouse. Following the Second World War, when grouse moor management recommenced, grouse numbers rose but then underwent a sustained decline during the 1970s. In response to the decline, large areas of grouse moor were sold off for commercial forestry, and to support the country’s need for timber. Whilst grouse moor interests protected some of the best areas of upland bog and heath from afforestation, particularly in England and parts of Scotland, large areas were lost to forestry.
Following a major campaign, extensive parts of the remaining open habitats in England, and to a lesser extent in Scotland, were designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (under the Wildlife & Countryside Act) and later as Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas.

Since the 1990s grouse moor management has undergone a resurgence with the management intensity increasing markedly in some places, (e.g. Central and East Highlands of Scotland and the Pennines) with significant environmental impacts. Today, large areas of blanket bog and heath (including on specially protected sites), are managed, in places intensively, to maximise the number of grouse available for shooting across parts of the English and Scottish uplands.

The economics of grouse shooting

The RSPB acknowledges that some grouse moor owners and sporting tenants invest significantly in management practices and infrastructure in support of their shooting activity. The true economics of grouse shooting are often hard to disaggregate from other motivations associated with this land use, including landowner prestige, and many grouse moors operate at a financial loss to their owners.

The management is undertaken by gamekeepers supported by other estate workers, some of whom may be employed on a part-time and/or seasonal basis. On the day, shooting activity is further supported by a wide range of seasonal/day employment activity. More widely, grouse shooting supports a range of jobs in the local economy and beyond.

More critically, we hear less about the associated environmental and economic costs of grouse moor management practices (e.g. the environmental cost of burning on peat and associated economic cost of water treatment to remove colour) and even less about the potential economic benefits of alternative forms of land use, including other grouse shooting styles less reliant on producing big numbers of grouse. Many grouse moors may also be cross subsidised by other estate operations including farming and forestry, benefitting from a range of public subsidies.

It is often stated that high-input driven-grouse shooting is the only economically viable shooting style. In good years, the income generated may cover management costs. In bad years, where no shooting is possible, most moors operate at a significant loss.

Whilst other styles of shooting may shoot fewer grouse and realise less income, we believe the management costs and the costs to the environment are considerably less.

We are unclear about the annual returns (from shooting incomes) from moors under different management regimes, and the overall return on investment made both annually and across the full range of moors and the amount of public funding committed to grouse moor interests.
Management practices

The production of the numbers of grouse required for driven shooting is reliant on a range of intensive management practices.

These include vegetation burning and cutting, drainage, legal (and illegal) predator control, livestock grazing (mainly sheep), grouse medication, the construction of butts and hill tracks, and in Scotland the mass culling of mountain hares and deer (in the mistaken belief that this prevents grouse diseases).

Vegetation burning is subject to a number of legal requirements, promoted via voluntary codes of best practice in England and Wales (the Heather and Grass Burning Code) and Scotland (the Muirburn Code). This activity is weakly monitored and enforced.

Gamekeepers control grouse predators. The legal control of generalist predators such as foxes, weasels, stoats and crows is routine. However, the illegal control of birds of prey, including hen harriers, golden eagles and peregrines is also widespread on grouse moors. Data gathered by the RSPB’s Investigation Team and the results of research (e.g. satellite tagging) and monitoring (e.g. national species surveys) reveal that some species have lower survival than expected and are missing from otherwise suitable habitats.

The RSPB acknowledges there is growing evidence that legal generalist predator control plays an important role in the conservation of ground-nesting upland birds. That said, we identify an urgent need to better understand why the numbers of some generalist predators (e.g. crows, foxes) are increasing to the detriment of other species.

To find out more, please read our Viewpoint article (Environmental impacts of high-output driven shooting of Red Grouse) published in the journal Ibis - https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ibi.12356

Our position

The RSPB has legitimate grounds to question how management for grouse shooting is conducted in the UK’s uplands, especially when it involves illegal and environmentally unsustainable land management practices; and to advocate for legal compliance with current laws and to call for new regulations when required. We believe we should consider grouse shooting as we do any other land use. We do not oppose gamebird shooting provided it is carried out legally and on an environmentally sustainable basis. The RSPB fully acknowledges that some aspects of management for grouse shooting, such as legal predator control and habitat management (e.g. restoration/management of heath habitats, restoration of blanket bog) confer some environmental benefits, and we stand ready to work with
progressive elements of the grouse shooting industry to further environmental goals in the UK uplands.

However, in the absence of effective self-regulation, where the criminal killing of birds of prey continues unabated, and land management practices are becoming increasingly environmentally unsustainable (e.g., vegetation burning on peatland habitats), we believe that driven grouse shooting and associated land management practices must be regulated to protect the public interest. For example, we are calling on governments to end vegetation burning on peatland habitats in the uplands.

The Scottish Government is considering licensing grouse shooting following a recommendation of the independent Grouse Moor Review Group Report (the so-called “Werritty Review”). We support the licensing of driven grouse shooting, however this must also be accompanied by effective monitoring and enforcement, with the ultimate sanction to remove the facility to shoot grouse over an area of land where there is strong evidence of wildlife crimes occurring, and to act as a genuine deterrent. We hope that similar licensing arrangements will be introduced in England. Those responsible grouse moor managers who wish to work within the law and deliver sustainable land management should have nothing to fear from this approach.

Failing the introduction of effective licensing of driven grouse shooting in Scotland and England by 2025; as well as other measures to stop other unsustainable management practices (e.g., vegetation burning on peatland habitats and the use of lead ammunition); and responsible engagement by the grouse moor sector in the licensing process and its implementation; the RSPB will call for a ban on driven grouse shooting.