

The Case Against Bird Shooting





The League Against Cruel Sports is Britain's leading charity working to stop animals being killed or harmed for sport. The League was instrumental in helping bring about the landmark Hunting Act.

- We manage sanctuaries to protect wildlife from persecution, carry out investigations to expose illegal and cruel practices, and campaign for effective animal protection laws and standards.
- We also work in communities to change attitudes and behaviour, in order to make animal cruelty a thing of the past.

Our priorities include:

- Exposing the suffering endured by millions of birds bred for Britain's canned bird-shooting industry.
- Working to ban snares which indiscriminately kill and maim thousands of cats, dogs and other animals each year.
- Stopping efforts to turn back the clock on wildlife hunting, and strengthening measures which protect wildlife from persecution.
- Tackling the horror of dogfighting, which is taking place every day in Britain.

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Exposing the canned bird hunting industry in the UK

Shooting industry sham

The idyllic impression that many have of 'game' bird shooting, in which wild birds are skilfully plucked from the sky by marksmen then taken home for a feast, is nothing but a sham. New undercover filming, scientific research and economic analysis reveals that commercial shooting in the UK is nothing but a cynical industry which exploits loopholes in animal welfare laws, puts our landscape at risk and exaggerates any financial benefit to the economy.

Based on new and existing evidence, The League Against Cruel Sports is calling for an independent review of the commercial shooting industry, which it believes will expose massive animal welfare and environmental impacts including:

Factory farming – 35 million pheasants and partridges are factory farmed before being released simply to be shot. Conditions are often worse than allowed under the law for chickens, leading to injury, stress, mutilation and death.

Waste of life – Millions of these birds will die before they even get to the killing fields, falling victim to sickness and traffic accidents. Huge numbers of those actually shot will never make it to 'the pot', but are left where they fall, dumped in waste pits, or discarded by the side of the road.

Collateral damage – Millions of other animals, including birds of prey, hares, and even cats and dogs die or suffer due to the shooting industry. Industrial scale snaring to protect the 'game' birds leads to 1.7m animals being trapped each year, many dying or suffering hideously. Lead shot, still used widely, leads to the deaths of up to 100,000 wildfowl each year through poisoning.

Environmental impact – Shooting industry claims that the management of shooting estates and grouse moors leads to benefits both for the environment and wildlife are nothing but greenwash. Studies and recent reports of the potential link between grouse moors and urban flooding raise serious concerns about the damage single-focus industries can bring.

Overstated economics – Analysis of shooting industry claims that the 'sport' brings huge benefits to the UK economy shows massive discrepancies. Their figures include clay shooting, claims that the industry provides large numbers of jobs are dubious, and large tax-payer subsidies to shooting estates are included as benefits.

The League Against Cruel Sports is therefore calling for an independent inquiry into the commercial shooting industry to assess these problems. Nevertheless, on some issues raised in this report, the evidence is so overwhelming that Government should act now. We are also calling for:

- A ban on breeding cages for game birds
- A ban on the live transport of game birds
- A ban on the manufacture, sale and use of snares

Game Bird Suffering

Around 35 million pheasants and red-legged partridges, both non-native species in the UK, are released on UK shooting estates each year¹. These are not wild birds, they are factory farmed in much the same way as intensively reared chickens, yet are not protected by humane slaughter laws and many won't even end up on someone's plate. They are farmed and shot purely for sport, with many wounded and left to suffer.

Breeding birds

According to Defra, virtually all of the red-legged partridges released on UK shooting estates come from breeding birds confined in barren wire-mesh cages **with less space per bird than an A4 piece of paper**, often for their entire life². An increasing majority of breeding pheasants are now also confined in wire-mesh cages for at least three months a year³.

In the UK – via EU law – minimum standards exist for the protection of animals bred or kept for farming. However, it does not apply to 'animals intended for use in competitions, shows, cultural or sporting events or activities.'
This **denies birds farmed for shooting even the basic welfare protection given to birds farmed for food**, despite the similar rearing conditions⁴.

In fact, since January 2012, barren cages for egg-laying hens have been illegal in the EU. Enrichment including nest boxes, litter, perch space and claw-shortening devices must now be provided, along with slightly more room per bird⁵. Yet there are **no minimum legal space requirements for caged pheasants and partridges**, and enrichment is given only a cursory mention in Defra's voluntary Code of Practice for the Welfare of Gamebirds Reared for Sporting Purposes.

Defra's own research shows that **countless caged pheasants and partridges suffer from painful open sores on their feet caused by the wire mesh floor**, as well as wounds caused by aggressive pecking from cage-mates⁶ – a direct result of the overcrowded conditions. To reduce the injuries caused by pecking, breeding pheasants have various devices forced through their nostrils such as 'bits', which prevent the beak from closing fully⁷.





Long-distance transport

Many of the 35 million birds released on UK shooting estates actually start their lives on intensive farms abroad – at least 50% according to Defra⁸. In descending order of import numbers, these birds originate from France, Belgium, Portugal, Denmark, Spain, and Poland⁹. These young birds can spend 20 hours or more crammed inside a crate stacked in the back of a lorry travelling from farm to shoot¹⁰.

Rearing for slaughter

Shooting estates buy young birds from breeding farms and rear them in crowded sheds and pens, releasing them just a few weeks before shooting season begins. To try and ensure the maximum number of birds are available for paying shooters, gamekeepers wage a war on native predators such as foxes, magpies, crows and birds of prey.

According to the shooting industry, less than half of the birds released each year are killed by shooters¹¹. **Millions die on the roads surrounding shooting estates**, causing damage to vehicles and distress to motorists. Others die from exposure to the British weather – both species come from much warmer climates – or disease.

The natural, free-range image the shooting industry promotes is simply not true. Shooting farmed birds that are driven towards you is not a sport, it is canned hunting. The Netherlands recognised this in 2002 when it banned the farming and release of birds to be shot.

Canned hunting

What happens on the day of a shoot is little different to 'canned' hunting – where animals such as lions are tamed and confined in an enclosed area to make killing them easier. Pheasants and partridges which have been farmed, fed and 'protected' from predators are driven towards paying shooters by employees called beaters.

With so many guns firing quickly at so many birds, wounding is common. According to a 2015 shooting industry survey, 76% of shooters were unable to gauge distance, with 10% thinking the target was twice as far away¹². This inability to judge distance results in up to 40% of birds being wounded, rather than killed outright, according to a former training officer at the British Association for Shooting and Conservation¹³. **Some are left to die slowly where they fall¹⁴.**

Clovelly Shoot

" Although we were on a 200 bird day, the emphasis was very much on the quality and not about reaching the bag. As a result, we achieved [sic] 177 pheasants for 1700 shots! Needless to say, we're heading back. "¹⁵

Withycombe Shoot

" The Punchbowl, where guns have been known to fire 400 shells for a return of 12 pheasants. "¹⁶

Hollam Shoot

" Our signature drive is Carriage – where birds fly up to 40 metres above the guns. You are doing very well if you shoot one bird for six cartridges. "¹⁷

Hundreds of birds can be shot on one estate in one day. This is not one for the pot; it is using living animals merely for target practice.

Wildlife massacre

To ensure the maximum number of birds are available for paying shooters, gamekeepers routinely kill predators including foxes, magpies, crows, stoats, weasels and even endangered birds of prey. **Cruel and indiscriminate methods are often used**, including: snares, cage traps with live bait birds, and spring-loaded body traps.

Snares

Despite being outlawed in most of Europe, snares are routinely used by British gamekeepers to trap foxes. Numerous investigations by the League Against Cruel Sports^{18,19,20,21} have documented the suffering caused by legal free-running snares – millions of animals die from strangulation, but others from predation, exposure to the elements or dehydration.

Our findings are corroborated by testimony from experts in veterinary medicine and animal welfare science. The Government also acknowledged the welfare problems associated with snaring in 2005 when it introduced a voluntary Code of Practice on the Use of Snares. Even former Environment Secretary Owen Paterson has stated in the House of Commons²²:

"I am completely convinced that trapping and snaring are hideously cruel."

"It is commonplace for snares to lodge around the chest, abdomen or legs rather than the neck. In such instances, the stop restraint is ineffective and the wire cuts through skin and muscle and, eventually, bone. Badgers may be eviscerated when the abdominal wall is cut through. Amputation of the lower limb and foot by a snare is well documented in deer. These unfortunate animals suffer immensely."

Professor Ranald Munro, leading veterinary pathologist
in testimony to the Scottish Parliament²³

"Some pest control methods have such extreme effects on an animal's welfare that, regardless of the potential benefits, their use is never justified. Snaring is such a method."

Centre for Animal Welfare, University of Cambridge
in a 2010 report on the impacts of snaring²⁴

The number and diversity of animals that fall victim to snares are immense. Defra produced a report on snaring in England and Wales in 2012, data from which suggests that **up to 1.7 million animals are trapped in these primitive devices every year**. Moreover, because snares are indiscriminate, **less than 25% caught were the target species (foxes)**. The other three quarters included hares (33%), badgers (26%) and a further 14% described only as 'other'. Media reports and public testimony show that the 'other' species regularly caught in snares include cats, dogs, deer and even otters.

The UK is one of only five countries in the EU where snares are still allowed, along with Belgium, France, Ireland and Latvia. 77% of British people want to see snares banned²⁵. This includes 77% people in urban areas, and crucially 79% of people in rural locations.

Veterinary opinion is also firmly in support of a ban. A 2015 poll of UK veterinary surgeons and vet nurses found 87% believe snaring is not a humane method of pest control, and it was higher amongst those who had experience of treating snared animals (92%). 82% of respondents were in favour of a Government ban on snaring, and again this was higher amongst those with experience of snared animals (85%)²⁶.

Gamekeepers have shown themselves to be incapable of complying with Defra's recommended Code of Practice. In its 2012 report, Defra found that 95% of gamekeepers they surveyed were aware of the Code of Practice, **yet not a single fox snare operator was fully compliant with the Code** – a full seven years after it had been introduced. Furthermore, in a recent shooting industry study on snares²⁷, less than half of the gamekeepers involved had even read Defra's Code of Practice.

Victim of a Fenn Trap



Fenn traps

Fenn traps are a type of spring-loaded body trap used by gamekeepers to kill stoats, weasels, grey squirrels and rats as all of these small mammals can prey on bird chicks or eggs. They are currently legal in the UK providing the operator attempts to make the trap species specific by setting it inside a manmade tunnel of the appropriate size for the target animal.

These bone-crushing traps inflict such immense suffering that they are supposed to be made illegal in most Western countries in July 2016 under the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards. However, shooting organisations have been pressuring the UK Government to delay the implementation of the ban on these cruel traps until the industry has identified a suitable alternative²⁸. Should the Government cave in to this industry pressure, the UK would face financial penalties for violating the international agreement – paid for by the taxpayer.

Birds of prey

Efforts to conserve Britain's bird of prey species continue to be hampered by the illegal killing of raptors by gamekeepers^{29,30}. The near extinction of the hen harrier in England is a direct result of persecution on grouse moors. According to scientists, there should be 2600 pairs of hen harrier in the

UK (including around 330 in England), but there are just 600-800 (with only 4 pairs last year in England). Peregrine falcons nesting on grouse moors in England are also widely persecuted³¹, as are golden eagles on Scottish grouse moors³².

Corvids

Tens of thousands of magpies and crows are killed on shooting estates every year. Most are lured into cage traps using a live decoy bird which can be left in the trap for days or weeks in all weather; some decoy birds are even held captive permanently and reused in the traps year after year³³.

Mountain hares

Even herbivores aren't safe. Mountain hares face extinction in many upland areas because gamekeepers kill thousands of them every year, due to unwarranted fears that hares spread disease to grouse³⁴. Many hares are deliberately snared, others are shot. Wildlife charities have called for a three year moratorium on mountain hare killing until the population size can be evaluated, but the shooting industry refuses to halt the massacre³⁵.

This can only contribute to the significant decline in mountain hare population, which may have reduced by as much as 43% between 1995 and 2012³⁶.





Environmental destruction

Game bird shooting relies on many practices that cause environmental damage. The economic and social costs of this ecological destruction and degradation are felt by everyone.

Competition with native species

For economic reasons, pheasants and red-legged partridges are exempt from regulations governing the release of non-native species. Yet there is concern amongst conservationists that the annual mass release of these non-native birds, with a **total biomass greater than that of all our native birds combined**, has an adverse impact on native wildlife. Multiple studies suggest releasing game birds at this density reduces food available for native bird species and damages habitats vital for nesting birds³⁷. Endangered butterfly species, such as the Adonis blue³⁸ and pearl-bordered fritillary³⁹, are also negatively affected.

Climate change, pollution and flooding

Burning moors, to encourage heather growth for grouse, pollutes rivers and contributes to climate change, according to a 2014 report by the University of Leeds⁴⁰. The researchers found that rivers near burnt sites contained higher levels of heavy metals, such as manganese and iron. The authors concluded that the burning of moors lowers the water table, causing the deep peat covering to dry out and release pollutants into rivers and carbon into the atmosphere. It also inhibits the spread of sphagnum, a vital peat bog plant.⁴¹

The burning of heather on upland grouse moors contributes to flooding in towns and cities downhill as it reduces the soil's ability to absorb water. Researchers at the University of Exeter found that restoring upland peat bogs reduces water run-off by around one-third, yet burning by the grouse shooting industry takes place on around 25% of England's deep peat moorlands⁴².

In December 2015, when much of Yorkshire and Cumbria were affected by devastating floods, one of the Government's leading advisers on climate change called for some grouse moors to be closed and returned to peat bog to prevent further flooding. Daniel Johns, Head of Adaptation at the Committee on Climate Change, warned that grouse moors and sheep farming led water to run straight off hills into populated valleys .

He said: *"For too long landowners have been left to their own devices. We have to recognise there are some powerful vested interests involved. We have to decide what uplands are for in the context of climate change: grouse moors and marginal farmland or slowing down water"*⁴³.

Poisoning the environment with lead shot

The widespread use of toxic lead shot contaminates soils and waterways⁴⁴. Research has shown that driven shooting of partridges and pheasants produces significant accumulation of lead shot in the soil of intensively used estates⁴⁵. Animals are also poisoned by the direct ingestion of discharged lead ammunition, either as fragments consumed along with grit or seeds, or as pellets consumed while scavenging shot game⁴⁶.

According to a report released in 2015⁴⁷, the continued use of lead shot sentences hundreds of thousands of wildfowl and terrestrial birds to suffering and death. Estimates indicate that 50,000-100,000 wildfowl in the UK are likely to die each winter (i.e. during the shooting season) as a direct result of lead poisoning. Several hundred thousand more may suffer effects.

Lead negatively affects humans at the lowest measurable concentrations and has already been banned from most uses that could result in human exposure⁴⁸. However, a recent UK study found small lead fragments in 76% of 121 wild-shot game birds obtained from selected supermarkets, game dealers or game shoots⁴⁹.

Exposure in childhood to even slightly elevated levels of lead produces measurable and lasting neurological deficits in intelligence and behaviour. It is estimated that thousands of young children in the UK are consuming sufficient lead in game to risk health effects⁵⁰. Yet the UK shooting industry continues to defend the use of lead ammunition⁵¹.

Greenwashing the conservation benefits

The mass killing of native species by gamekeepers is often heralded as 'conservation' by the shooting industry because these animals can also prey on threatened bird species. **However, conservation and game bird management are not the same thing.** Conservation relies on *increasing the number of breeding adults* in a population, while game management is only interested in *maximizing the number available to shoot in the post-breeding season*. Killing predators during the breeding period can – but does not always^{52,53} – lead to an increase in prey species like pheasants, partridges and grouse; however, mainland bird populations of these birds are limited primarily by food and territory availability. Thus, **most chicks or fledglings of these prey species 'saved' by predator control still die before breeding, making no contribution to long-term populations**^{54,55}.



Overstated economics

The shooting industry claims to be worth £2bn to the UK economy and support 75,000 FTE jobs (PACEC 2014)⁵⁶. However, these figures deliberately obscure the nature of shooting sports and omit taxpayer subsidies and the negative financial impact on other businesses.

A closer look at the report underpinning these claims reveals that clay and target shooting account for a very large part of the shooting industry. Of the 70,000 shooting providers in the UK, 23,000 – effectively one-third – provide only clay and/or target shooting, no animal shooting.⁵⁷

Table 1. Annual figures for the UK shooting industry

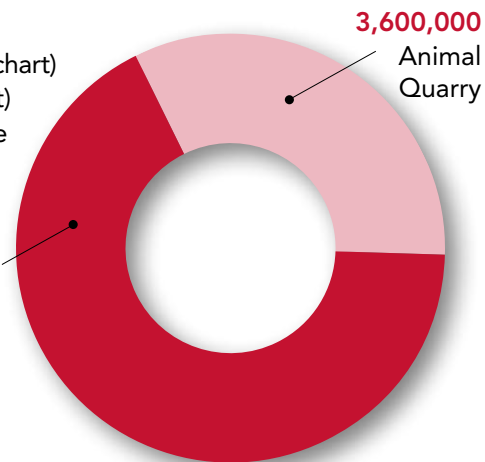
	Participants	Shooting Days	Participant Days
All animal quarry	380,000	820,000	3,600,000
Clay and target	400,000	870,000	7,400,000

Number of participant days

The forms of shooting where (see pie chart) no animals are harmed (clay and target) must therefore form the majority of the industry's £2bn valuation.



7,400,000
Clay and Target



Owners of game estates and grouse moors also receive large subsidies under agri-environment schemes, yet these public handouts are not deducted from the industry's estimated value. A Freedom of Information request made by Animal Aid to Natural England revealed that, in 2012/13, £17.3m in Environmental Stewardship subsidies was awarded in relation to land on which grouse shooting takes place⁵⁸. In 2014 the Government raised the money to which grouse moor owners are entitled by 84% - increasing their subsidy payment to £56 per hectare⁵⁹. As moorland managed for grouse shooting accounts for less than half of the land managed for shooting in the UK⁶⁰, the total amount of agri-environment subsidies awarded to the industry must be much higher.

Burden on the public purse

Shooters themselves also benefit from the public subsidy of firearms licences. The price of a shotgun licence has been frozen at £50 since 2001. According to the police, the licensing authority, it costs £200 to process each application. This means that taxpayers subsidise firearms licences at a cost of approximately £19m every year⁶¹.

Underpayment of tax by many in the shooting industry must also be considered a public subsidy. HMRC has been in discussions with the shooting industry for several years about the under-collection of National Insurance and income tax from casual staff such as beaters, as well as the avoidance of VAT and business rates by some shoot operators.

Shooting Times, writing on recent changes to tax collection from casual staff, highlights how little has actually changed: *'The good news is that the present system, whereby casual beaters are paid in cash without the deduction of tax, is to continue.'* This deal goes back to a special agreement struck nearly 30 years ago between HMRC and the Country Landowners Association. For it to apply, the work must be for one day or less; the beater must be paid at the end of the day; and there must be no contract for further employment. However, the fact that there is no

contract for further employment does not prevent the beater working for the same shoot on subsequent occasions during the season.

In 2006 HMRC announced a crackdown on widespread tax irregularities within the shooting industry, issuing a letter to all shooting providers outlining unacceptable ways to avoid VAT⁶². Shortly afterwards, when the standard rate of VAT increased to 20 per cent, there was a surge of interest in shoots converting to 'sports club' status because these entities are VAT exempt^{63,64}.

The cost of vehicle collisions with 1.8 million pheasants every year, as well as other damage caused by game birds released by shooting estates, should also be considered a public subsidy⁶⁵. Damage caused by pheasants imparts no liability on the owner, as they are classed as wild animals.

A living wage?

The industry's claim to support 75,000 FTE jobs is also unconvincing. **Figures in the 2014 PACEC report suggest an extremely low rate of pay for those employed directly in the shooting industry** – an average of £6,129 per annum (excluding tips and housing). In 2015, beaters were paid on average £28 and pickers-up £32⁶⁶ for a five to six hour day, i.e. less than minimum wage.

Displaced activities

Shooting does not take place in a vacuum; various outdoor pursuits may compete for access to land used for shooting. Yet industry estimates of its worth do not consider the economic value of activities displaced by shooting estates such as rambling, wildlife watching, cycling etc.

Research by the RSPB found that reintroduced white-tailed eagles bring £5million of tourist money into the Isle of Mull economy every year, supporting 110 full time jobs⁶⁷. Gamekeepers on Scottish shooting estates pose one of the greatest threats to this source of employment through their continued persecution of birds of prey. At least three confirmed poisonings of reintroduced white-tailed eagles were recorded between 2008 and 2012⁶⁸, while in 2014 a newly released eagle disappeared near a shooting estate shortly after being fitted with a satellite tracking device⁶⁹.

Research commissioned by the Scottish Government shows that wildlife tourism in Scotland is worth £276million a year⁷⁰. Yet the potential to

increase wildlife tourism in Scotland is seriously hampered by the destructive environmental practices and wildlife persecution associated with deer and grouse shooting. There is also an inherent conflict between wildlife tourism, which requires public access to land, and a dangerous activity such as shooting.

A similar lack of enthusiasm for shooting has been found in England. Of eighteen outdoor pursuits examined by Natural England in its 2015 national survey on people's engagement with the natural environment, participation in 'fieldsports' ranked 17th – a tiny fraction ahead of swimming outdoors⁷¹.

Clearly, shooting live animals for sport is not a widespread pastime in Britain and should not enjoy special tax breaks, subsidies and exemptions from environmental regulations. If the shooting industry still claims to have a positive economic impact with these privileges removed from the equation, then it must be considered in light of displaced activities and the enormous environmental damage caused.

Recommendations for Government

As this report sets out, there are multiple concerns regarding the impact of the commercial shooting industry, including the suffering of game birds through breeding conditions, live transport and wounding rates, the massacre of wildlife to 'protect' the birds before they are shot and the widespread environmental destruction that results from shooting. In addition, the economic benefit of shooting is significantly overstated.

We are calling for an independent inquiry into the commercial shooting industry to assess these problems. We are confident that a truly independent examination will lead to necessary reform:

- **A ban on breeding cages for game birds**
- **A ban on the live transport of game birds**
- **A ban on the manufacture, sale and use of snares**

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League Against Cruel Sports, New Sparling House, Holloway Hill, Godalming, Surrey, GU7 1QZ
Telephone 01483 524 250 Email info@league.org.uk www.league.org.uk

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