

## **POSITION STATEMENT**

### **Gamebirds and Recreational Shooting**

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**Cumbria**  
Wildlife Trust

This document is Cumbria Wildlife Trust's position statement on gamebirds, shooting and their impact on the ecology of the county.

## **Introduction**

Gamebird shooting in Cumbria can be broadly divided into four types:

- Walked up rough shooting
- Traditional Wildfowling
- Driven Grouse Shooting
- Reared shooting of Pheasants, Partridge and Ducks

To take each in turn:

### **1. Walked up rough shooting**

This consists of walking over an area of land and shooting at quarry species as they are flushed from the area. It normally requires an extensive area of semi-natural habitat with areas of heath, grassland, wetland and open water in order for there to be sufficient quarry to target.

In Cumbria this type of shooting can occur anywhere where there is suitable habitat.

#### **1.1 Environmental and ecological impacts:**

This is a relatively low impact form of shooting, potential negative impacts result from the use of lead shot, the taking of non-target species, the taking of threatened quarry species e.g. Woodcock, Snipe and Golden Plover.

#### **1.2 Positive impacts:**

This type of shooting requires substantial areas of land to be maintained in a semi-natural state.

The legal control of ground predators may increase the breeding success of other ground nesting birds.

### **2. Traditional Wildfowling**

This consists of the shooting of wild ducks and geese. It is normally carried out across saltmarshes, inter-tidal areas and extensive freshwater wetlands. In Cumbria this type of shooting is focused around the major estuaries.

#### **2.1 Environmental and ecological impacts:**

Potential impacts result from:

- the taking of non-target species (this type of shooting often takes place in low light conditions).

- The use of lead shot over wetlands (the use of lead shot over wetlands is prohibited, but compliance with the regulations is believed to be low) and the risk of ingestion by feeding wildfowl which can poison these birds and their predators. This impact may be significant.
- Excessive disturbance to roosting/feeding wildfowl and other birds.
- Hindrance of the recovery of species. Of the 9 duck species on the quarry list, 5 have negative Wetland Bird Survey indices as do Coot and Moorhen.
- Welfare. Wildfowl are long-lived birds with complex family structures. There is evidence that loss of a breeding partner can effectively remove the remaining bird from the breeding population, in perpetuity.

### **3. Driven Grouse Shooting**

This consists of beaters driving (primarily) red grouse towards a line of guns. The grouse are wild bred, but their population is maintained at an artificially high number via a variety of moorland management practices. In the UK approximately 700,000 grouse are shot every year. In Cumbria this type of shooting is largely confined to the east of the county, especially in the Pennines and its fringes.

#### 3.1 Environmental and ecological impacts:

Driven grouse shooting depends on the management of upland habitats by burning. This has increased in frequency of rotation in recent years and is used to maintain heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) as the dominant vegetation (to create a mix of heather heights and to provide nutritious young heather shoots for the grouse to eat).

Where it occurs on peat, rotational burning has been shown to suppress Sphagnum growth and can burn / expose the peat to air, causing high levels of carbon loss to the atmosphere and to water courses.

Rotational burning tends to create expanses of heather-dominated moorland with low ecological diversity particularly for other flowering plants, lichens, bryophytes and soil fungi, which, in turn, can limit insect and small bird populations.

Driven grouse shooting is associated with the legal control of a wide range of predators (e.g. fox, crow, magpie, stoat, weasel) and the illegal persecution of certain raptors and other protected species (e.g. peregrine, hen harrier, raven) which are seen as reducing the productivity of grouse. For example, persecution by grouse shooting-related interests is believed to be responsible for the very low numbers of hen harrier breeding in England. Non-predators are regularly caught in inappropriate traps, e.g. ring ouzel and dipper.

Populations of red grouse go through cycles of growth and decline which are mostly driven by parasites and disease. These are managed by the provision of medicated grit for the grouse to consume. The impacts of these drugs and their persistence in the wider environment are not well understood.

The intensive nature of this type of shooting means that localised lead pollution is likely.

### 3.2 Positive impacts:

Legal control of predators, such as foxes and crows, is beneficial for the breeding success of other ground nesting birds. Short turf provided by the burning cycle may be utilised by certain breeding waders.

This activity required the retention of extensive areas of semi-natural open moorland with heather-based communities, (albeit managed) prior to the 1980s when large areas of heath were converted to extensive grassy sheepwalks or coniferous forestry. This is now much less of a *post-hoc* justification.

## **4. Reared Shooting of Pheasants, Partridge and Ducks**

This consists of the artificial rearing and release of quarry species. These are usually pheasants, red-legged partridge, quail and sometimes mallards. Pheasants and partridges are normally driven towards a line of guns, while the rearing of mallards enables wildfowling to occur on smaller wetlands. In Cumbria this is primarily a lowland or upland fringe activity.

### 4.1 Impacts:

This activity requires the intensive rearing of the quarry species. This leads to localised eutrophication around rearing pens, which are often situated within woodland.

Extensive feeding of grain is required to maintain a high population of the quarry species which may lead to local eutrophication, and artificially high populations of predators.

Mason et al. (2020) report that the numbers of birds released is very large, estimated to be in excess of 57 million birds each year, with a biomass believed to be higher than all wild birds put together. This consists of 47 million pheasants and 10 million partridges. Of the 47 million pheasants released each year, only about 15 million are shot. The rest are unaccounted for. Of this unaccounted for surplus, many end up as road-kill or die from other causes. This creates a large amount of carrion. The ecological impact of the increased availability of both live and dead non-native food species has not been assessed, but may lead to increased populations of predators/scavengers such as foxes and crows, which then switch to wild species as the supply declines through the winter.

Pheasants in particular may directly impact populations of other ground nesting birds, reptiles and invertebrates.

Diseases in gamebirds may pass into wild bird populations.

The intensive nature of this type of shooting means that localised lead pollution is likely.

Raptor persecution may be associated with this type of shooting (especially of buzzards).

### 4.2 Positive impacts:

This activity required the retention of extensive areas of woodland prior to the 1980s when woodland was threatened by conversion to agriculture or coniferous forestry.

Game 'cover crops' can be of value to small birds and invertebrates.

## **5. Discussion**

The various forms of shooting together constitute a major land-use in Cumbria, with some parts of the county very heavily managed for gamebird shooting (examples include Pennine moorlands and estate woodlands around Morecambe Bay and the lower Eden valley). Some aspects of the impacts of management for shooting are relatively well researched, while others are poorly understood. However, the impacts of burning, lead poisoning, raptor persecution and eutrophication are well understood and can be significant.

## **6. Cumbria Wildlife Trust will therefore continue to:**

- 6.1 Prohibit recreational shooting on land where the Trust controls the shooting rights.
- 6.2 Promote actions which protect existing carbon reserves and reduce carbon emissions, including supporting calls for a ban on the burning of vegetation over peatlands and organic soils.
- 6.3 Work locally to develop forms of land management more sympathetic to nature and the wider environment.

## **7. and will support other conservation organisations to**

- 7.1 Continue to highlight the issue of raptor persecution.
- 7.2 Support calls for a complete ban on the use of lead ammunition within an urgent timeframe.
- 7.3 Seek the better regulation of shooting in general, including monitoring and policing.
- 7.4 Support campaigns for the licensing of pheasant and grouse shooting including as a requirement the recording and reporting of the number of birds bought, released and shot by each shoot.
- 7.5 Support initiatives for the better management of shoots to improve release efficiency and so reduce the need to release such a surplus of birds to those shot. e.g. release locations further away from roads and protected wildlife sites, and the use of better non-lethal methods of reducing losses to wild predators.