

The Game Drain



How millions of pounds are spent on producing a food product that is worth a fraction of its production cost

Dumped body parts of shot birds



For the 2008/9 shooting season, The Countryside Alliance (CA) has budgeted a quarter of a million pounds to convince the public of the merits of 'gamebirds' as a foodstuff.¹ Its *Game-to-Eat* campaign is a propaganda tool that complements the British Association for Shooting and Conservation's (BASC) *Game's On!* marketing initiative. Both of these pro-bloodsports organisations are desperate to justify the breeding, releasing and killing of birds for sport.

However, game is unpopular and sparsely stocked by British supermarkets. Tesco takes £1 of every £8 spent in British shops.² According to the *Shooting Gazette*, 'Tesco is just one of the

big supermarkets now selling game in abundance.'³ But, in a letter to Animal Aid, Tesco said, 'We stock very small amounts of game products in our stores and we do not sell game under our own brand.'⁴ While M&S and Sainsbury have both reported increases in game sales, the volumes are still too small to be counted by the Office of National Statistics, along with other meat products.

So why are the CA, the BASC and others in the shooting industry so anxious to increase

the sales of game to the public? Why is a succession of major and minor celebrity chefs repeatedly paraded to enhance the low esteem of game?

And why is game the only meat that is promoted and marketed not by butchers, farmers or trade federations, but by bloodsports groups?

Animal Aid has investigated the shooting industry over the past 10 years. We have taken a close look at its expensively sponsored marketing and 'scientific' research. If game shooting is about the production of food, as the bloodsports lobby insists, then it would be far more economical and practical to slaughter the farmed birds in an abattoir, rather than releasing them to be shot. But bloodsports enthusiasts do not want to do that.

The truth was expressed in crystal-clear terms by David Tomlinson in *Shooting Times* when discussing the loss of young gamebirds to raptors: **'... it's extremely naïve to expect sympathy from the general public. We shoot game for sport, not because we need the meat to survive the winter. Birds of prey kill to survive.'**⁶

'Extensive public relations by the Countryside Alliance showed by far and away the number one reason the public would support the shooting of live quarry was that the end product is used as food.'⁵

Fun with numbers

We do not agree that the expensively commissioned surveys and marketing strategies of shooting can be relied upon, but we have used the bloodsport industry's own figures relating to bird numbers and costs incurred to reveal the nonsense, the waste and the financial extravagance that is behind the Game Drain.

Even according to the most optimistic estimates, only 40 per cent of gamebirds, artificially bred and released for sport, are recovered after being shot.⁷ Around 35 million pheasants and 6.5 million partridges are released in Britain every year. Some 18 million will be shot and retrieved. A smaller number of mallard ducks are also released. But our research concentrates on the hapless pheasant, who is the most popular bloodsport shooting target.

In 2006, the shooting industry commissioned a report from the Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC).⁸ In addition to the CA and BASC, the *Shooting Facts* report was jointly financed by bloodsports lobby groups, the Country Landowners and Business

Battery breeding cages at Bettws Hall, Powys, Mid-Wales



Association (CLA), in association with the Game Conservancy Trust – now the Game & Wildlife Conservancy Trust (GWCT). In the PACEC study, the questionnaires were sent exclusively to respondents who had direct or indirect shooting interests.

Without questioning the obvious vested interests involved in the production of *Shooting Facts*, the government has taken to quoting from it in Parliamentary Answers. *Shooting Facts* calculated from

only 2,096 returned questionnaires from shooting supporters (1,128 of which were completed by actual shooting participants) that shooting was worth £1.6 billion to the British economy. It additionally claims that 480,000 people took part in the killing of live quarry. The government liked that. Preposterously for a New Labour majority that finally abolished the cruelty of wild mammal hunting with dogs in England and Wales, the government is committed to the support of gamebird shooting, a bloodsport that, in terms of volume of killing and injury, is far more cruel.

Most people outside of the shooting world and the government are prepared to recognise that there are major problems with questionnaires.

- Questionnaires suffer from low return rates possibly biasing results towards people who are affected by, or have strong views on, particular issues.
- Respondents have a potential for error in recalling events, e.g. they indulge in telescoping, whereby certain events are incorrectly brought into the reference period.



Foxes killed to 'protect' gamebirds

Caged pheasants with masks



Up goes a Guinea – Bang goes Sixpence – Down comes Half-a-Crown

This was the ironic Victorian saying that aptly described gamebird shooting. But, in the early years of the 21st century, a pheasant cannot fetch anywhere near an inflation-adjusted price of half-a-crown. Pheasant meat is dark brown, dry, tough and stringy. On average, the birds retail for just £2 each. Sometimes, even thoroughly unacclimatised old ex-layers are released for 'sport'.

Up Goes a Guinea

It's no longer a guinea – it's £29.50! Barney Stratton runs two shoots covering 12,000 acres in Wiltshire and has calculated the average cost of rearing a pheasant in 2008 to be £29.50.⁹ His arithmetic was published in the September 2008 edition of *Shooting Gazette*, for which he is a regular columnist. We have used his estimate and arithmetic in our Summary of Costs box above.



Summary of Costs:

Poults: The 2008 price for a pheasant poult is £3.50-£4. A critical part of the cost equation depends on the percentage of birds who can be shot and retrieved, because a number of them will be killed by cars, foxes or illness during the season. For example, if you are able to buy birds at £3.50 each and 40% are shot and recovered throughout the shooting season, then the actual cost of each bird is about £8.75. However, if you were buying birds at £4 each and only 33% of them are shot and recovered, then the cost would be £12 per bird.

Feed: Barney Stratton, *Shooting Gazette* columnist and shoot operator, guesses that a pheasant poult would consume £3-£5 of pellets and wheat during the season.

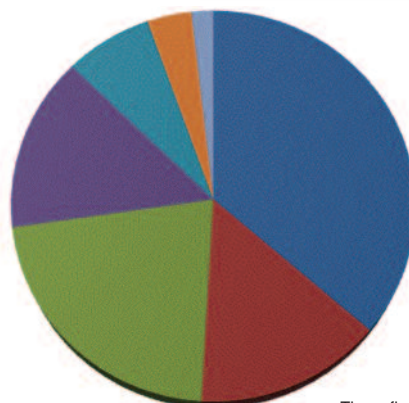
Gamekeeper: It is a rule of thumb that a gamekeeper costs £25,000 a year – before tips – in salary, housing, vehicle, clothing, etc. Stratton's assumption is that a single keeper can prepare 10,000 birds for release, of whom 40 per cent will be shot and retrieved. This recovers his costs over 4,000 birds at £6.25 a bird.

Beaters and Lunch: The cost assumption is £25 each for 15 beaters and £30 each for four pickers-up per day – making a wage bill of about £500. Food costs are usually around £200-£250, including lunch, elevenses, drinks and tea. This gives a total cost on the day of £700, which, on a 200-bird day, is £3.50 per bird. This doesn't include laying on transport for beaters and sometimes for Guns, taking the per bird cost to £4.

Game Crop: Barney Stratton estimates that the cost of growing the crop for the birds to use as cover is 50 pence to £1 per bird. This does not include land rent, which can be £300-£400 per acre. For a shoot needing 10 acres, the cost would be £4,000 or £1 per bird. For partridge shoots, the cost could easily be £3-£4 per bird because, whereas pheasants favour woodland edge, partridges are more dependent on cover crop.

Sundry Costs: There are sundry costs in all enterprises. The sale of dead game will not make much of an impact on these, so to assume about £1 per bird is reasonable.

It costs between £27 and £32 to breed, raise and kill a pheasant at a commercial shoot



These figures are pitched at the lower end of the costs range

Incarcerated, masked gamebirds



Bang Goes Sixpence

It's no longer sixpence (now 2.5p) – it's 80 pence! According to PACEC, shooting participants spend £20 million each year purchasing ammunition.¹⁰ But there are many other costs for the shooter to absorb, such as the capital costs of his gun and his shooting vehicle. PACEC also estimated that £570 million is annually spent on vehicles and £63 million is handed out in tips by shooting participants.

We have considered only the direct cost of killing a bird with shotgun cartridges. A shotgun cartridge costs only about 20 pence but it takes £20 million of ammunition to kill nearly 20 million gamebirds of all sorts. But 79 per cent of all gamebirds and wildfowl shot are pheasants. This is a PACEC statistic. We know that some shooters shoot only clay pigeons and that the police, armed forces, farmers, 'pest' controllers and criminals all use shotgun ammunition. But because PACEC ignored these uses, we have too. The cost per pheasant is not now 2.5 new pence (six old pence) but 80 new pence.

Down Comes Half-A-Crown

An amount can be calculated for the average retail price of

pheasants and partridges in the British market.

Mintel is a media, consumer and market research company that has produced reports on the sale of game meat. According to Mintel, game sales have gone up by 64 per cent since the Countryside Alliance started its *Game-to-Eat* campaign in 2002.¹¹

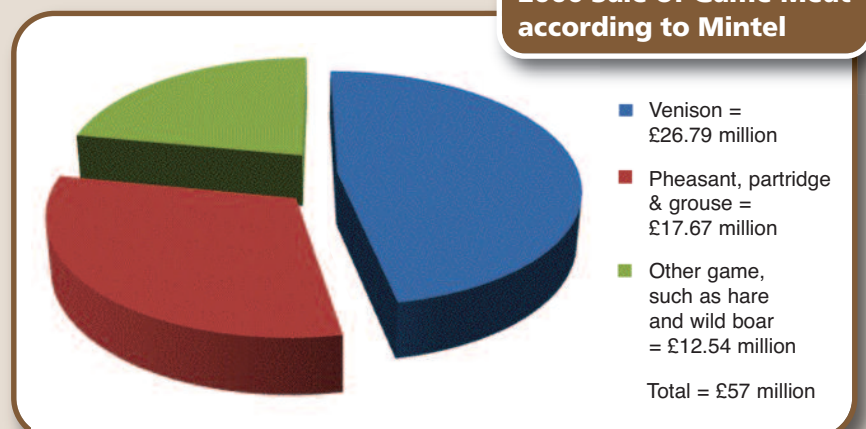
In 2006, Mintel estimated the game meat market was worth £57 million.¹² But nearly half of retailed game meat is venison (much of which is not hunted but purpose-reared in captivity). The feathered game sector was only 31 per cent. That means, according to Mintel's estimate, the annual retail turnover of all pheasant, partridge and grouse currently stands at £17.67 million. The vast majority of this is accounted for by pheasant and

partridges. Given that some 18 million pheasants, partridges and grouse are shot and retrieved each year (and that grouse in particular fetch a high price per bird in restaurants), the average unit price of all pheasant, partridge and grouse, is less than £1 – that is if all 18 million reached a retail outlet. This is not an impressive amount set against the £29.50 it costs to produce, shoot and retrieve one pheasant. Nor against the prohibitive cost, according to the shoot industry, of maintaining a grouse moor.

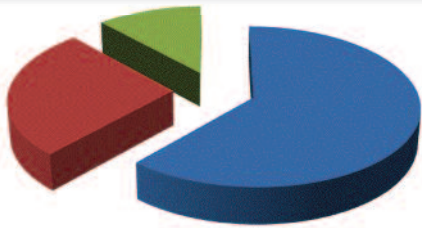
The meaningful income is accrued not from the sale of dead birds, but from charging wealthy individuals large sums of money to shoot them for pleasure.

Nearly 42 million birds are bred and released each year, and, as we have seen, 'only' 18 million are gunned down and retrieved. According to PACEC, of this 18 million, just 44 per cent are sold to game dealers – i.e. 7.92 million birds. The remaining 56 per cent are said to be consumed by the shoot operators or by shooters and their families. And of this 56 per cent (i.e. 10.08 million birds), PACEC reports that there was no wastage whatsoever – fully 99 per cent is eaten. The final 1 per cent is not fit for human consumption. PACEC arrived at this astonishing statistic from returned questionnaire answers given by only 55 respondents.¹³

2006 Sale of Game Meat according to Mintel



Sales of dead gamebirds compared with gamebird releases



- Pheasants & partridge released each year. (Grouse are not released) (41.5 million)
- Pheasants, partridge & grouse shot each year (18 million)
- Pheasants, partridge & grouse sold to game dealers each year (7.92 million)

If the bulk of the shot birds don't get sold but are instead taken home by the shooters, they don't enter the economy.

To reiterate, some 10 million dead gamebirds are taken home by shooters or 'consumed by the shoot operator' and, of these, around 8.4 million are pheasants.

'Consumed by the shoot operator' is a PACEC phrase. What does it mean? It is well documented that many shooters are not interested in taking their complimentary brace home. And it has been reported in the shooting media itself that dead pheasants are dumped in open pits or buried.¹⁴ We know that under the Game Hygiene Regulations only major shoots and those selling their game to Approved Game Handling Establishments (AGHE) must adhere to the Regulations. Those shoots selling dead birds locally are exempt from them. We know therefore that some of these 8.4 million dead pheasants must be entering the black economy.

Where do 8.4 million pheasants really go? The shooting industry is anxious to cover its tracks. 'Consumed by the shoot operator' is a cover all (ask no questions) phrase. The bold statement deduced from the answers of only 55 motivated respondents that 99 per cent of the 8.4 million are eaten, is simply not credible.

Is this value for money?

If the Countryside Alliance wants to convince the public that breeding, shooting and selling

game is the harvesting of the land, it is not succeeding.

We have already shown the average retail price of feathered game (if all 18 million birds were to reach a retail outlet) to be only 98 pence per bird.

In the calculations we set out below we have taken Barney Stratton's arithmetic for the cost of rearing and releasing pheasants – i.e. £29.50 per bird – as our starting point.

We have used Mintel's analysis of the value of the game meat market, but we have taken into account that, according to PACEC, only 44 per cent of all recovered game (18 million birds) is sold to game dealers and is thus officially accountable. We have not complicated the sum by including the sometimes higher cost of rearing a partridge and we have ignored the costs of running a grouse moor, all of which would make the operating costs even higher and the retail price even lower.

Cost of raising 18 million shot and retrieved birds: 18 million x £29.50 = £531 million

But only around 44 per cent or 7.92 million pheasants, partridge and grouse are sold to game dealers. Total revenue realised from pheasant, partridge and grouse retail (Mintel) = £17.67 million

Retail price per bird first sold to game dealers = £2.23

These costs prove that breeding and rearing pheasants for the shoot is aimed at producing feathered 'sporting' targets rather than a food product.

Conclusion

Much about the enormously cruel and expensive gamebird breeding, rearing and releasing programmes is concealed from the public. Most people would certainly not be content to discover that all this money and effort is spent purely to provide fun for people with too much disposable income.

The shooting industry is committed to encouraging the consumption of game not only to justify its bloody excess but to dilute the public shock and distaste that killing for pleasure engenders. It believes that by disguising itself as a food producer it can divert criticism. It believes that game sales can lay a smoke screen over the disgraceful caged breeding conditions for gamebirds and the inhumane and ugly death they suffer for sport.

References:

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- 2 www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/jun/29/tesco.supermarkets1
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- 4 Tesco, letter to Animal Aid. 2 September 2008
- 5 *Shooting Gazette*, July 2008. 'Greedy for Game', Joanna Gray
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- 8 PACEC, *Shooting Facts*, 2006
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