

## **Gamebird Releases and Wild Birds WOS Position Statement Final Version – March 2026**

### **Background**

In the UK, gamebirds are released primarily in the lowlands between July and August. Numbers released annually are estimated at 31.5 million Pheasants and 9.1 million Red-legged partridges. There are also releases of Mallard; estimates of their numbers are particularly variable but are likely to be in the range of 2 to 3 million UK-wide annually. Most of the gamebird industry, perhaps 85%, is England based; consequently, the numbers of all three species released in the Welsh countryside annually is substantially lower, possibly a maximum of 2 million birds.

There are widespread but anecdotal claims that the gamebird rearing and shooting industry does not have a good record of adherence to legal requirements. All businesses releasing birds in the outdoors have to be registered on the UK's Animal and Plant Health Agency poultry register but many appear not to be registered. Consequently, determining the total number of rearing operations is impossible.

Studies of the impact on the ecology of habitats that gamebirds are released into are often partial, often not scientifically thorough and sometimes contradictory. Opinions are divided strongly between the views of conservationists and those of the shooting industry. Arguably, the most thorough analysis of the effects of released gamebirds is a literature review of 128 sources by Sage *et al* published in 2020 in *Wildlife Biology*. Many of their sources were peer reviewed scientific papers.

They concluded that, of 25 ecological consequences of gamebird releases identified, 10 are potentially positive, 3 neutral and 12 potentially negative although this balance was affected by the scale of the releases.

Management of habitats for releases in and around woodlands, planting game crops and copses, provision of gamebird food in intensive farmland otherwise unattractive to wild birds, and maintaining field margins, improves those habitats for a range of native wildlife. Released birds tend to cause negative effects on local ground flora, soils and some invertebrates, especially where pheasant releases take place in woodlands.

Their research also highlighted more complicated indirect issues such as the potential effect of gamebird releases on predator populations such as fox numbers and illegal killing of birds of prey to protect released birds. Circumstantially, the RSPB claims that the incidents of illegal killing of birds of prey in Wales are three times more likely to occur in areas where gamebird shooting takes place.

Smaller shoots, that release fewer birds, are much less likely to impact on wild bird populations. And well managed shoots can help create habitats for native wildlife and

control predators in places where intensive agriculture would otherwise drive declines.

Concern about lead shotgun ammunition in the countryside and its potential impact on ground feeding birds should be dispelled by the UK Government's proposed ban on lead ammunition which is intended to come fully into force in 2029 after a three-year transition period. However, the necessary legislation will not be tabled until later in 2026.

The Sage *et al* review pre-dates major epidemics of Highly Pathogenic Avian Flu (HPAI) in wild bird populations which are now a major concern. A veterinary report commissioned in 2024 by Natural England concluded that there is a very high likelihood of major consequences to populations of wild birds associated with Mallard releases in particular and that, once infected, Mallards are likely to shed higher viral loads and for longer durations than other species of waterfowl.

In May 2025 there was an outbreak of HPAI in released Pheasants in North Berwyn. Further gamebird releases were stopped for several months.

### **Policies of Involved Agencies**

Natural England requires a specific license for releasing Pheasants and Red-legged partridges on or within 500 meters of a Special Protection Area (SPA) or Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Licences can limit the numbers of birds reared and released. Permission from Natural England might also be required on Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) depending upon what each SSSI's list of potentially damaging operations includes.

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) advised Welsh Government in October 2023 that a similar licensing scheme should be introduced in Wales but this has been delayed repeatedly by Welsh Government. RSPB is strongly in favour of a licensing scheme and has been critical of the delays in launching it.

The RSPCA advocates for stronger regulation of gamebird releases, particularly in large-scale shoots, due to concerns over the welfare of released birds, about negative impacts on native wildlife and the potential for disease transmission. They believe specific licenses are needed to collect data on release numbers, locations, and mortality which is crucial for monitoring and complying with new regulations.

The British Association of Shooting and Conservation (BASC) advocates for sustainable gamebird releasing, provided it adheres to Code of Good Shooting Practice standards (which are voluntary) and is supported by robust, evidence-based licensing systems. However, BASC has also initiated legal action against Natural England because of its concerns over the legality, transparency, and workability of current licensing regimes which they believe are economically damaging and ecologically incoherent. BASC also campaigns against proposals for blanket gamebird release bans or licensing in Wales, emphasizing the negative impact on rural economies and positive conservation efforts.

## **WOS's Position**

- Is supportive of NRW's proposals for a gamebird release licensing system in Wales to regulate the industry.
- Considers that NRW should include conditions in such licenses and the criteria under which licenses can be withdrawn.
- Calls for enforcement of the legal requirement that all gamebird businesses with birds having outdoor access are included in the poultry register.
- Is seriously concerned about the risks of HPAF spread facilitated by gamebird releases, especially the release of Mallard, and seeks assurance from Welsh Government that action to contain any such outbreak is implemented immediately.
- Acknowledges the benefits of broadleaved woodland and hedgerow planting being carried out by some shoots and the probable gain for wild birds from gamebird food being distributed on intensively managed farmland.
- Believes that more research is needed on the impact of gamebird releases on predator control and how this might impact on wild birds and supports any investigations and legal action taken against incidences of illegal raptor killing.
- Encourages research on the impact of large-scale gamebird releases on native species including invertebrates, amphibians and reptiles.