

Guidelines

for sustainable gamebird releasing



Game & Wildlife
CONSERVATION TRUST
Advisory Service

Introduction

Released gamebirds underpin most lowland game shooting in Britain. The process of releasing and all the management activities that surround it are described in detail in [The Releasing Report](#) and in other GWCT publications.

These guidelines expand on the [principles of sustainable game management](#) where they apply to releasing pheasants and red-legged partridges. Grey partridges are occasionally released for shooting but these guidelines do not refer to that species. [Guidelines for re-establishing grey partridges](#) through releasing for conservation purposes are available on the GWCT website.

Our advice in this area is guided by a programme of research undertaken by the GWCT and others over the last 20 years, which is summarised in several scientific reviews on the ecological consequences of releasing published in 2020 and the Releasing Report.

Of these review papers, one was [published by the GWCT](#) and this describes an approximate balance of potentially positive and negative ecological consequences of releasing for shooting. In general, habitat management activities tend to be positive while the birds themselves tend to have negative effects.

Sustainable gamebird releasing is based on the principle of minimising negative effects and maximising positive ones so that the overall balance of effects on habitats and biodiversity is neutral or positive. It is also fundamental that all management activities associated with releasing and shooting work within the law, are transparent, and can withstand any scrutiny.

Our guidelines advise shoot practitioners that to maximise the sustainability credentials of their shoot, **all** releases, regardless of their proximity to EU or any other designated sites (e.g. SSSIs), should adhere to these guidelines.

Some of our guidelines may require an expert view or a survey. GWCT or other conservation advisors should be consulted, especially where potentially sensitive situations might occur. The GWCT Advisory service has significant experience in this area.

In EU designated sites (e.g. SPAs and SACs) and within a 500m buffer around them, game managers must comply with the conditions of Defra's [Gamebird Releasing Licence \(GL43\)](#). The conditions of this licence are closely aligned with GWCT sustainable releasing guidelines.

Woodland release pens

- We recommend that no more than 1,000 pheasants should be released into each hectare of woodland release pen (400 per acre). GWCT studies show that this is the point at which undesirable plants become prevalent in pens and where effects on some woodland plants become apparent. Some other wildlife in and near to release pens may also be affected more at [higher release densities](#).
- In sensitive woods, e.g. ancient semi-natural woods or those with a rich bryophyte and lichen flora, the maximum release should be 700 birds per hectare of pen (280 per acre). This will minimise the effect of releasing on sensitive native woodland plants and potentially other wildlife.
- Avoid placing release pens directly onto or close to particularly sensitive locations, e.g. patches of woodland that have a notable ground flora, insect fauna or reptile populations. Take expert advice if unsure.
- Pheasant release pens should not take up more than one-third of the total woodland area on a shoot. This is to allow sufficient scope for benefits. The total area should include any woodland whether or not it has existing nature conservation interest.
- The 'total woodland area' used in this calculation includes scrub patches, substantial hedgerows with trees, shelter belts and new woodland plantings, but not the central part of large woodland blocks where there is no game interest.
- There is some evidence that ground flora and soils in release pen sites that are no longer used will revert towards their original state over many years. We recommend moving release pens only if there are clear conservation benefits to be gained (or if there are overriding husbandry reasons).
- Pheasants released into woodland pens should always be encouraged to leave the pen for at least part of the day once they are used to roosting in shrubs or trees i.e. release pens should not be used to hold birds once they are fully grown.
- Keep release pen areas tidy and rubbish free.
- Delaying the time of release can avoid some potential conflicts. For example some reptile and butterfly colonies may be vulnerable in mid-to-late summer but less so if the gamebirds are released later. If in doubt take expert advice.
- In certain situations it might be appropriate to have part of a woodland pen extending onto an adjacent field with a game crop.



Farmland release pens

- Red-legged partridge release pens should, wherever possible, be placed in game cover planted on arable or improved grassland, rather than on semi-natural or unimproved grassland sites. There is no evidence that red-legged partridges released onto improved land have a significant effect on nearby unimproved grassland habitats.
- Avoid placing release pens or partridge feeders next to high conservation value hedgerows. Allow a buffer zone of game crop or other cover to keep concentrations of birds away from the hedge.
- Don't allow releases of more than 1,500 partridges or pheasants to funnel through one main hedgerow linking releasing areas and game crops or other feed areas, particularly if that hedgerow contains a good ground flora and is home to valuable wildlife. For larger releases use several linking hedgerows, or plant cover crop 'lead-in' strips to widen linking habitats.
- Keep release areas tidy and free from rubbish.
- Avoid placing release pens directly onto or close to particularly sensitive locations, for example hedges with a notable ground flora or on heathland with reptile populations. Take expert advice if unsure.

Woodland habitat management

- It has been shown that the majority of woodland habitat management practices for released pheasants improve those habitats for a wide range of wildlife.
- This includes thinning, shrub planting, coppicing, skylighting, ride maintenance, and new woodland planting amongst others.
- Game managers should undertake or encourage any of these kinds of habitat management activities using a conservation orientated approach (for example if planting shrubs use locally appropriate species) with the broad aim of offsetting any negative effects of the released pheasants. Refer to guidance from GWCT, Forestry Commission, Woodland Trust and others on woodland management best practice.
- In some circumstances, especially in some woodlands there may be very particular conservation objectives, for example woodland specialist plants that require dense shade. These will need to be identified and taken into account before implementing game habitat management.





Farmland habitat management

- It has been shown that the majority of game related management practices on arable or improved grass farmland improves those habitats for wildlife. This includes hedgerow planting, retention and management, planting game cover crops and field margin habitats on improved grass or cultivated ground.
- Game crops provide valuable cover and food for many farmland and woodland birds in winter. In general, seed bearing crops such as kale, quinoa and cereal mixtures offer the greatest value to these birds compared with game crops like maize.
- The value of game crops to wild birds in winter is greatly enhanced if game feeders in these crops are kept topped up throughout the late winter and into spring.
- Larger game crop plots have been shown to retain seed and cover resources into the late winter period when wild birds often struggle. Any sized game crop plot in arable or grassland farmland is a benefit but plots of 0.5 ha or larger are particularly beneficial.
- Long-term game cover plots can sometimes spoil adjacent woodland edges and hedgerows, especially if maize is grown regularly. It is best to move or rotate them if this appears to be happening. Rats must be controlled effectively if maize is grown.
- Remember to protect valuable hedgerows from crop sprays, livestock browsing and cultivation. There is no point in worrying about pheasant damage if conservation



measures are undone by, for example, access by livestock.

Other considerations

- Comply with other GWCT guidelines on feeding away from release sites. Apply some of the same principles relating to release pens, e.g. avoiding sensitive spots, when using feeders in woodland or alongside hedgerows. See [guidelines](#) to prevent rats becoming an issue at feed sites.
- Keep feeders topped up after shooting and into spring.
- Keeping gamebirds healthy reduces the numbers released and hence unwanted effects.
- Conduct predation control when needed to protect releases from abundant generalist predators. Minimising predation, in particular by foxes, reduces the number of released birds required and protects other wildlife.
- Dispersal of releases. Actively discourage unwanted movements of released game away from the shoot area and into places that might be ecologically sensitive. Note that there is no evidence that released pheasants or partridges have significant direct effects on insect populations or other wildlife away from release or feed sites but straying birds are unpopular, and may still potentially congregate and hence have an effect.

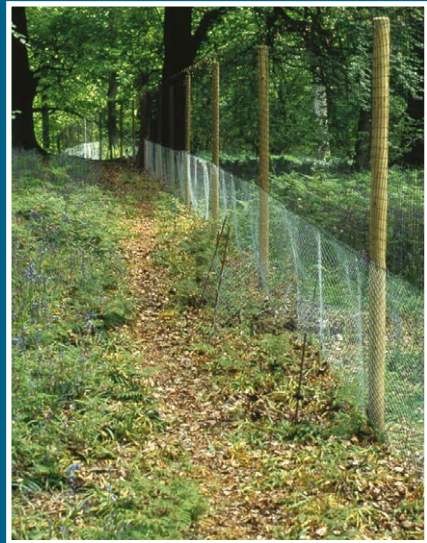
Pheasant releasing example

Woodland is the most abundant semi-natural habitat in lowland Britain. Game management can improve woodlands for wildlife but the presence of released pheasants has the potential to cause negative ecological effects. These can be minimised through good management as described in these guidelines. However, some effects are also related to the number or density of pheasants in and around a release pen.

Our recommendations relating to the total pheasant release pen area and to stocking densities allow each shoot to calculate a maximum overall limit on the numbers of pheasants that should be released. Note that this maximum may be further limited by other factors. In this example we calculate the maximum based on broad conservation issues alone.

On a theoretical 450 hectare (1,200 acre) estate with 30 hectares (75 acres) of woodland (typical for lowland England) we recommend that the total area of release pens should not exceed 10 hectares. Note that a small woodland can be mostly release pen as long as it is balanced by

unpenned woodland elsewhere on the holding. Depending on the conservation value of the woods, it would then be appropriate to release no more than between 7,000 and 10,000 pheasants into this 10 hectare of pen.



For more information and links to reports mentioned in this document, please visit www.gwct.org.uk/sustainableleasing