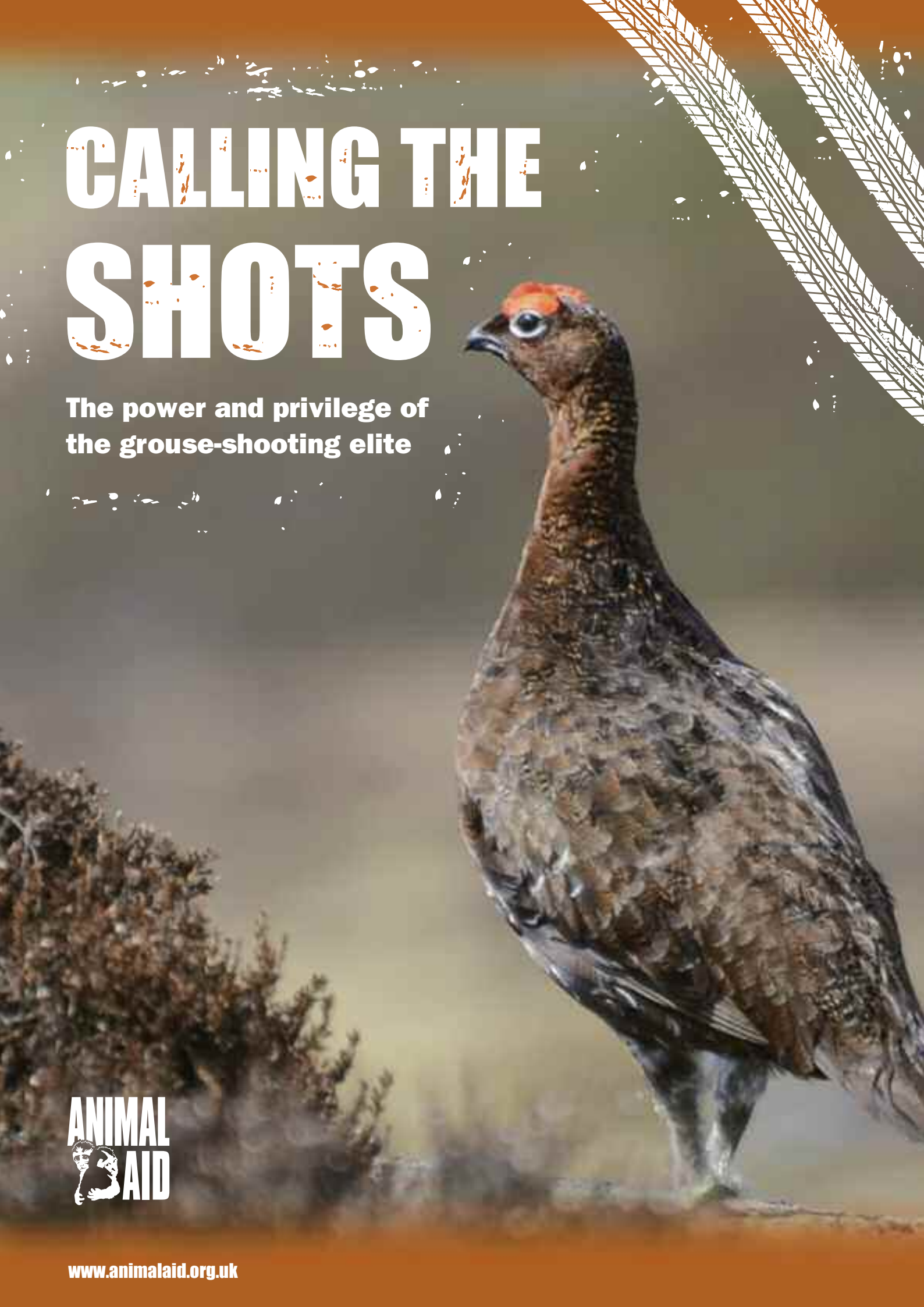
CALLING THE SHOTS

The power and privilege of the grouse-shooting elite



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most people have heard of the Glorious 12th – the day in August when the four-month long grouse shooting season starts on Britain's moorlands. But they know little else about a 'sport' that is staged and undertaken by some of the wealthiest and most influential individuals in the land – bankers, government ministers, landowners, heads of industry and royalty. A single day of driven grouse shooting is likely to cost a group of eight or nine 'guns' between £20,000 and £40,000.

Calling the Shots is aimed at alerting the public to the truth about an activity that has so far enjoyed a benign reputation, even though it is based on extensive wildlife and environmental destruction. Burning is carried out to encourage the growth of fresh heather on which the grouse feed. Roads are dug and car parks built for visiting guns. Moorland wildlife perceived to threaten the birds is typically slaughtered. And large quantities of poisonous leadshot are discharged on to the ground from shotguns.

Public subsidies

Despite the great wealth of those involved, the public is forced to subsidise this activity. The two principal sources of public money are what are known as the Single Payment Scheme and the Environmental Stewardship programme (ES). Assessing precisely what shoot operators receive via these two routes is virtually impossible because the payment agencies do not keep sufficiently detailed records. However, in response to an Animal Aid Freedom of Information request, Natural England acknowledged that, in the financial year 2012-13, ES subsidies paid out in relation to land on which grouse shooting takes place totalled £17,308,297. This is up from just £89,848 in 2008-09. The massive increase is explained, claims NE, by the tap being turned off on other schemes and the money being rechannelled via ES. In addition, research undertaken by a national newspaper journalist (unpublished as this report goes to press) indicates that a further roughly £20m is paid out, in relation to England alone, through the Single Payment Scheme. An unknown proportion of the money from both these subsidy programmes goes to moorland graziers who are often tenants of the shoot operators.

Single Farm Payments are distributed under the Common Agricultural Policy to more than 100,000 farmers. Under the ES scheme, moor operators around the country can claim for various 'maintenance', 'restoration' and capital works projects. Included are burning and herbicide use. The money is tied to government-approved management plans that are supposed to guarantee good environmental practices – but often don't.

Such plans even permit burning on areas of critically important, peat-rich blanket bog.

Ecologist Dr Adrian Yallop suggests that, in terms of carbon storage, Britain's peat moorlands perform the same function as Amazonian rainforests.[1] But instead of conserving this precious habitat as required under European law, his research shows that gamekeepers are burning it at an unprecedented rate to encourage the growth of new heather.[2] This burning leads to increased loss of carbon from blanket peats,[3] so that rather than 'absorbing' carbon dioxide, as they have over thousands of years, they are now releasing it.[4]

Moor damage

The Committee on Climate Change, an independent government advisory body, has recently put a figure on the damage. It noted that some 260,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide each year are emitted from upland peat in England, from areas that are burnt, in the main, on grouse moors.[5] This is the equivalent of the carbon dioxide discharged annually by 88,000 average-sized saloon cars.[6] But the 260,000 tonnes figure relates only to England, where there are around 140 grouse moors. Scotland has 150[7] and because they are usually larger, burning is likely to be more extensive. The 88,000 car-equivalent figure can therefore reasonably be doubled.

'*It's true that in many areas there's no good upland management plan in place,*' the Country Land and Business Association's Head of Environment admitted to the BBC in July 2013, '*but grouse shooting brings a lot of benefit to the rural economy*'.[8] His solution was to give grouse shoot operators public money not to burn peat. Incredibly, the Committee on Climate Change made precisely that recommendation.

That we have got to such a position, it can be argued, underlines the ability of an extraordinarily privileged landowning clique to subvert natural justice, wreak damage and kill and inflict suffering on animals with impunity.

The Battle of Walshaw Moor

Calling the Shots tells the story of the Walshaw Moor Estate in the South Pennines, owned by retail tycoon Richard Bannister. Accused by government agency Natural England (NE) of multiple environmental offences, Walshaw faced prosecution on 43 grounds of alleged 'un-consented activities', relating to the building of tracks, paths, car parks, grips (bog drainage ditches), ponds and shooting butts.

Luckily for Bannister, he had the immensely well-connected Moorland Association in his corner. And it was no handicap either that the Defra Minister with special responsibility for grouse moors was Richard Benyon – a man who owns his own grouse moor, as well as a pheasant shoot.

On April 1, 2011, Bannister sent a letter to NE Chief Executive, Helen Phillips, in which he insisted that his moor was recently much improved environmentally and wondered why the two sides were in dispute. He ended his letter with a warning. NE would be responsible for costs of up to £1 million if the agency was to be unsuccessful in its dispute with his estate. If NE succeeded, on the other hand, '*Walshaw Moor Estate will submit a compensation claim in excess of £26 million*'.[9]

Natural England's prosecution was unexpectedly dropped on March 13 2012, and Walshaw and NE reached a 25-year agreement that left the estate with a public subsidy of £2.5m over ten years – or around £250,000 a year. This is half the estate's reported running costs.[10,11] Walshaw was also given permission to continue burning areas of blanket bog.

Crushed, snared, shot and poisoned

For many people, the cruelty associated with grouse shooting will be more distressing than any dubious deal-making.

Grouse moor operators pursue with a brutal totalitarian zeal any wild animal (crows, rats, rabbits, foxes, stoats, weasels, etc.) judged to interfere with the profitability or smooth running of a shoot. The methods commonly resorted to include spring traps (in which wild animals are crushed), snares (that can cause severe and prolonged suffering) and cage traps into which animals are lured before being shot. There is also evidence of some grouse moor gamekeepers illegally poisoning animals, for instance, with a highly toxic pesticide called carbofuran.

Forced dosing

The boost in grouse numbers caused by these predator 'control' programmes and by the creation of optimum feeding and nesting conditions has been followed by population crashes. This is because where there are abnormally high grouse numbers, the birds are susceptible to various parasitic and other diseases. These include the stongyle worm that infests the birds' guts.

In an attempt to control worm infestation, medicated grit is laid down in trays. The birds readily ingest the grit, which they need to grind food in their gizzards. An alternative to the trays is direct dosing. All-terrain vehicles, fixed with powerful spotlights, are driven onto the moor at night. The grouse are transfixed by the lights, netted, and force-fed with medication by a tube down their throats.

Day of the shoot

The gun lobby makes great play of 'shooting etiquette', boasting of its various Codes of Practice. In fact, those Codes offer an insight into all that can go wrong. They plead for guns to gain basic shooting skills before tackling live targets, noting how difficult it is to judge range and to cleanly hit fast, low-flying grouse. The result is often a wounded bird who plummets to the ground and then scrambles away to await a drawn-out agonising death.

End note

As part of the preparation of this report, Animal Aid investigators made visits to grouse moors in the South Pennines and the Peak District. The lasting impression was the great gap between the violent, intrusive reality of grouse shooting and the way in which it is presented to the public as the selfless nurturing of a precious landscape, for which the reward is a little harmless sport.

Incredibly, all of the activity – the burning, draining, wildlife slaughter, the dosing of stressed, disease-prone grouse – is to provide a few days of 'sport' and high-level networking for a coterie of wealthy and powerful individuals. Never was a sporting activity so ill-named as the Glorious 12th.

The grouse season runs from August 12 to December 10.

Action

The government must ensure that grouse shoot operators receive no more public subsidies for moor 'management', 'maintenance', capital works programmes or any other purpose.

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A DEAD RABBIT STRANGLED IN A FOX SNARE

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Published by Animal Aid October 2013 | ISBN 978-1-905327-34-8

THE BATTLE OF WALSHAW MOOR

A case that points to the power and privilege of the grouse-shooting elite is that of Natural England (NE) versus Walshaw Moor Estate.

The first is a government-funded quango, whose job is to '*conserve and enhance the natural environment*'. Walshaw Moor is a grouse shoot in the South Pennines owned by the retail tycoon Richard Bannister, whose draining and burning on an environmentally sensitive landscape has been described by an RSPB expert as '*at the extreme end of grouse moor management*'.[12]

Under Bannister's robust stewardship, the estate has gone from producing 100 brace of grouse a season in 2002 (when he purchased the business) to 3,000 a decade later.[13]

Legal actions

The means to this end greatly displeased NE. From 2010, it undertook various legal actions against Walshaw Moor Estate aimed at ensuring '*appropriate conservation management*', not least the protection and restoration of damaged blanket bog.[14] One line of attack by NE was to seek to modify historic '*consents*'

RICHARD BANNISTER MARKS THE YEAR HE BOUGHT WALSHAW MOOR

under which the estate had been granted permission to burn bog in order to encourage new heather growth for grouse to eat – and to carry out other intrusive activities on what is a legally protected, environmentally sensitive landscape. Natural England also launched a prosecution on 43 grounds of alleged '*unconsented damage*' caused by the building of tracks, paths, car parks, grips (bog drainage ditches), ponds and shooting butts.

Court hearings and a public inquiry followed. As they unfolded, the immensely well-connected Moorland Association – mouthpiece for grouse moor owners and operators – rallied support for Walshaw and poured scorn on Natural England. Happily for Bannister, the Defra Minister with special responsibility for grouse moors, Richard Benyon, also owns his own grouse moor as well as a pheasant shoot.

More pressure was piled on when, on April 1 2011, Richard Bannister sent a letter to Natural England Chief Executive, Helen Phillips, in which he insisted that his moor was recently much improved environmentally and he was therefore puzzled as to '*why we are having such an expensive dispute*'. He rounded off with a chilling warning for a financially stretched, government-funded agency: '*… if Natural England is unsuccessful [in the dispute] it will be responsible for costs of up to £1 million, and if it is successful Walshaw Moor Estate will submit a compensation claim in excess of £26 million.*'[15]

Natural England capitulates

Despite its confident opening gambits, Natural England capitulated. On March 13 2012, it abandoned its attempts to stop the burning of peatland on Bannister's estate. The prosecutions were dropped and the public inquiry abandoned. A new management plan was agreed between the two hitherto warring parties that allows Walshaw to continue burning areas of blanket bog (which covers 70 per cent of his estate),[16] as well as giving him unrestricted vehicular use. In addition, unapproved new roads, car parks and gun butts can remain.[17]

According to a formal complaint to the European Commission by the RSPB, the agreement fails to remedy alleged damage caused in the past and that is likely to be caused in the future – and which the abandoned Natural England prosecution had sought to address.[18]

£2.5m subsidy

Most galling of all, the Walshaw Estate will be handed £2.5m of public money over the next ten years to carry out the new 'management' plan. Most of that money has been awarded under a subsidy known as the Higher Level Stewardship scheme. Averaging out at £250,000 a year, this amounts to half of Bannister's reported annual running costs.[19,20] Bannister also claimed, in 2012, Common Agricultural Policy subsidies of more than £45,000. In addition, he is receiving 'staged payments' – the details of which are being kept secret – because his original contract with NE was terminated and a new one entered into.

Natural England's capitulation had been signalled a month before the announcement of the new deal, when NE chairman, Poul Christensen, told a meeting of the National Farmers' Union that his agency should never have published, in 2009, a modest report called *Vital Uplands: A 2060 Vision*. The vision related to less aggressive, more sustainable management of grouse moors and other uplands areas: it was asking for a few more trees, a little less burning, a little more wildlife and such like.

Shooting intersts made clear they detested the plan. In April 2012, *Vital Uplands* was withdrawn, and all signs of it purged from the agency's website.

Gopher for the landed classes

Environmental author and *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot saw the *Vital Uplands* debacle as demonstrating that '*Natural England has become a gopher for the landed classes… An agency which should be protecting the natural world appears to have identified and aligned itself with people damaging it.*' His view of the Walshaw Moor Estate deal was no less scathing: '*The agreement represents total capitulation to a large landowner, who will be allowed to carry on damaging a place which is both a site of special scientific interest and a special area of conservation, a capitulation which is now being spun by the agency as some kind of success.*'[21]

Natural England's take on the new 25-year agreement was indeed upbeat. '*It provides improved environmental protection for the moors and also allows the estate to conduct its business activities... For the first time burning activities will be subject to specific controls.*'[22]

Critical battle

The Walshaw Moor battle was a critical one for grouse moor owners, because they saw Natural England's attempt to ban burning on blanket bog as a threat to the future of grouse shooting itself.[23]

Martin Gillibrand, the Moorland Association secretary, told the *Daily Telegraph*: '*I fear they [Natural England] are using this as a test case: burning of blanket bog on each moor could be knocked out turn by turn. It would have a severe impact. Moors would be greatly reduced in productivity. I suspect many people would give up, because the birds would be missing.*'[24]

'Cool burning'

The Association argues that burning on bogs can take place and damage to these vital carbon sinks avoided by practising a system – much trumpeted in grouse moor-owning circles – called 'cool burning'. This involves following the flames and spraying water, thereby supposedly preventing damage to peat and moss.[25]

But evidence that grouse moor owners are practising responsible burning is hard to find. A recent report by government advisers, the Committee on Climate Change, revealed that, of the total area of upland deep peat, only 4 per cent is in a '*favourable ecological condition*' whereby mosses are still forming peat. This has declined from 6 per cent in 2003*.[26]

AN AREA OF ROTOVATED LAND ON WALSHAW MOOR

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More public money called for

'*It's true that in many areas there's no good upland management plan in place,'* the Country Land and Business Association's Head of Environment admitted to the BBC in July 2013, *'but grouse shooting brings a lot of benefit to the rural economy*'.[27] His solution was to give grouse shoot owners public money not to burn peat. Incredibly, the Committee on Climate Change made precisely that recommendation.

And so, enormously wealthy individuals, running extreme land management and wildlife slaughtering programmes designed to produce lots of grouse to be shot for sport, are not only currently rewarded with public subsidies, but powerful voices are now calling for them to be given additional taxpayers' money to stop them further damaging legally protected blanket bogs.

'Resurgent aristocracy'

The battle of Walshaw Moor has left the government-appointed agency charged with protecting the natural environment vanquished. The Moorland Association and its Ministerial cheerleaders, by contrast, must be feeling contented. One notable commentator described such developments as evidence of a '*resurgent aristocracy*'.[28]

But the battle is not over. The RSPB, as previously noted, has submitted a complaint to the European Commission about the agreement Natural England struck with Walshaw. The deal, it argues, '*has set a damaging precedent for the protection and management of upland sites of European importance, and raises grave concerns regarding the position of NE as an independent regulator…*'.[29]

Hebden Bridge residents involved in the 'Ban the Burn' campaign have also petitioned the EC – asking it to investigate 'the possible misallocation' of £2.5m in public subsidy to Bannister's company. Hebden Bridge, which lies beneath Walshaw Moor, has in recent years suffered catastrophic flooding, which some have attributed to burning on the moors.

So can those much derided *meddling Brussels bureaucrats* be persuaded to call to account Britain's resurgent aristocracy? Certainly, the message should go out to Brussels, Whitehall and Westminster that the cruelty, slaughter and environmental damage that are integral to grouse shooting are bad enough, without taxpayers being forced to subsidise them.

** As well as land management on grouse moors, the Committee pointed to various historical and contemporary causes of damage to peatlands. These include atmospheric pollution, sheep grazing and land modification for agriculture.*

VEHICLE DAMAGE ON WALSHAW MOOR

VISIT TO WALSHAW MOOR 2013

During a visit in May 2013 to Walshaw grouse moor, Animal Aid investigators were reminded of the extraordinary lengths to which shoot operators will go in order to reshape the landscape to create the ideal conditions for 'sporting guns'.

Wuthering Heights

There is no Walshaw Moor marked on the OS map of the South Pennines but vast areas of the Wadsworth and Widdop Moors – approaching 16,000 acres – belong to the Walshaw Moor Estate, a private limited company with one director: Richard Bannister. These beautiful wild regions occupy the high ground over the steep valleys above the former mill towns in the Calderdale region. This is where, it is said, Charlotte Brontë was inspired to write *Wuthering Heights*. The River Calder is trickle-fed by natural dykes and tributaries from the moors, and the cotton mills were sited to harness the hydraulic power from the hills.

The moor is notable for its undulating plateau of false ridges atop steep ascents on all sides. It is heavily covered with low vegetation of mainly heather but there are large areas of blanket bog. Seventy per cent of the Walshaw Moor is blanket bog. These ecologically important landscapes provide habitats for all manner of wildlife, including scarce breeding wading birds, such as the golden plover and dunlin. Undamaged bog is wet and cloying, making walking difficult and tiring. Historically, even packhorses stuck to established routes away from difficult ground. Today, special multi-wheel low-pressure-tyre, all-terrain vehicles cope with the heather, the wetness and the natural dykes and rivulets.

A land to be cherished

The Walshaw Estate moors have been marked out by key bureaucracies as a land to be cherished. In addition to being a Site of Special Scientific Interest, they are also a Special Area of Conservation and Special Protection Area under both the *Habitats Directive* and the *Birds Directive*.

Animal Aid investigators visited the moors in May 2013. The areas we covered lay immediately to the east and west of the three Walshaw Dean reservoirs, and we were shocked to see the extent to which the landscape was altered to favour one species. The moor has been cut with artificial drainage ditches (known as grips). This is to dry it out so that grouse can nest and feed on the heather. The dried-up, dead appearance was especially noticeable in areas where gun butts – inside which shooters take up position – have been installed. The moor has also been extensively burnt to encourage the growth of new heather – the principal food source for grouse. Additionally, purpose-built access roads have scarred and significantly changed the appearance of the moor. Vigorous predator control is in place. Charlotte Brontë would not recognise the Wuthering Heights today.

Heavy excavations

In fact, anyone walking the moors is likely to be taken aback by the scale of alterations and wonder how they could be afforded by what amounts to a private shooting club.

The roads are used to deliver the grouse shooters, loaders, beaters and gamekeepers to the grouse beats and butts. Shooters who can afford a day out on the moor, are not obliged to walk great distances. The shoot coach or wagon doubles as transport and as a venue for lunch.

Gun butts

We quickly arrived at a neat line of sunken gun butts near the end of an access road. They were very different from the traditional model. Older butts, sighted on other moorland, are constructed without the help of the JCB. They are formed as small elbow-high, semi-circular walls made from local stone. The walls are covered in camouflaging vegetation or turf. The new Walshaw butts have been machinery-sunk. They were fashioned from patio decking and all were dry – suggesting some further drainage being in place. Typically, these butts will accommodate a single shooter and a loader.

Drainage ditches

The most clearly identifiable man-made feature on the Walshaw Estate Moors is the elaborate herringbone pattern of grips – purposely dug drainage ditches. They are ploughed in parallel lines approximately 10 metres apart, running from high to lower ground. At various junctures, they drain into nearby watercourses.

The grips are a massive alteration to the nature of the moor and its appearance. On the Wadhurst Moor to the west of the three Walshaw Dean reservoirs, the grips follow a distinct pattern and appear to drain into the reservoir.

Control of parasites

Every possible intervention is made to maximise the number of surviving grouse, whether by killing

DRAINAGE DITCHES AT WALSHAW MOOR

A MARK IV FENN TRAP AND (INSET) CLOSE-UP

predator species or administering veterinary drugs. It is a strategy that leads to the moor becoming overburdened with this one species and, as with all intensive 'monoculture' farming systems, high levels of disease take root. In particular, there is the problem of gut infestation caused by the strongyle worm (see page 18). In an attempt to control strongylosis outbreaks, medicated grit is laid down. The birds readily ingest the grit, which makes its way to their gizzards, where it helps grind food into particles that are easy to absorb.

GRIT FOR THE GROUSE AND (INSET) GROUSE DROPPINGS IN THE GRIT

On Walshaw, white breeze blocks that stood out well against the ochre landscape were in use. They were numerous, were situated in burnt areas and each block could be seen from the ones located before and after it. At all these sites were two hollow blocks. One was filled with grit that was available to the birds. The other was covered with a small length of kerbing. It can be assumed that the uncovered tray contained medicated grit, while the contents of the other one was un-medicated. The latter is used closer to the shooting season in order to avoid pharmaceutical products getting into the human food chain.

Evidence of activity around and within the grit trays showed that they were well used by the grouse, and many of the Walshaw trays we discovered were contaminated with grouse stools. In fact, there is a concern within shooting circles that the trays themselves are a rich source of disease – if not strongylosis, then disease-causing pathogens such as mycoplasma or cryptosporidium.[30]

Predator control

The conspicuous predator control device on the Walshaw moor was the Mark IV Fenn trap. They were positioned on planks across natural dykes or excavated grips. The plank was an obvious attraction for stoats, rats or any other tunnel-sized grouse predator who wished to cross the gulf. The footplate of the Fenn was unavoidable because the traps have no floor around them. Any attempt to skirt round the contraption would result in the animal falling into the water.

Most of the Fenn trap poles we encountered on Walshaw were new, purpose-made devices. The poles were sawn and routed to provide a flat surface for the trap, which was contained in a wire-cage tunnel. We found a ready-to-use pile of prepared poles near a car park.


READY-MADE FENN TRAP POLES

Some foxes may live on the Walshaw moors but they are more likely to favour the sizeable wooded plantations on the edges and approaches. We did not enter the woods and we therefore saw no snaring or trapping evidence. In a whole day we did not see a single bird of prey.

Grouse population

Through ruthless destruction of predators and burning, drainage and disease control measures, grouse numbers are now reported to be substantial on Walshaw moor. Estate operator, Richard Bannister, claimed in 2012 that he had already increased grouse production from 100 brace in 2002 to 3,000 brace.[31] Evidence of the grouse was all around. Birds fluttered up and sped away from locations well in advance of our arrival. The ground between heather was sprinkled abundantly with grouse droppings.

Systematic destruction

The lasting impression of our visit to the Pennine moor was the great gap between the reality of grouse shooting and the way in which it is presented to the public. Rather than an impressively bleak, sensitively stewarded landscape, we saw evidence of systematic wildlife destruction and industrial scale incursions.


A TRAP ACROSS A DITCH

GROUSE SHOOTING

Around 500,000 grouse are shot each year in the UK.[32] Driven grouse shooting (see below) operates on a rarefied plain – the participants being a network of chums, old boys and well-connected decision makers, who move in and out of organistions like the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Country Land and Business Association and the Moorland Association.

Who goes shooting?

'Guns' are investment bankers, stockbrokers, landowners and members of the peerage. There is more than a sprinkling of royalty and those related to royalty. They are people who enjoy each other's company for the purpose of pecuniary as well as social advancement.

Key members of governments past and present are also members of this magic circle. A contemporary example is Defra minister Richard Benyon, the millionaire owner of both a pheasant shoot and a grouse moor.[33]

The cost of shooting

A single day of driven grouse shooting is likely to cost a group of eight or nine 'guns' between £20,000 and £40,000.[34]

Types of grouse shooting

The two main forms of grouse shooting are 'driven' and 'walked up'. The expensive shoots are of the first type. Eight to ten guns position themselves in butts (wooden or stone structures around 35 yards apart), and have at their disposal a pair of guns, and a loader to help fire them in quick succession. The keeper organises for the birds to be delivered into the path of the guns so that they can be picked off. Beaters walk, maybe for miles, waving their flags, scaring the birds out of their havens. Flankers direct the birds towards the butts.

In walked up shooting, the guns form a line, often with beaters between them, and walk across the moorland where the grouse are to be found. When birds are flushed out of their hiding places by the beaters, the line halts and shots are fired. The dead are gathered and the walk resumes.

Shooting season

The grouse shooting starts on August 12 (the Glorious Twelfth) and ends on December 10 on the mainland, and November 30 in Northern Ireland. If August 12 falls on a Sunday, when game shooting is illegal, the season is delayed until August 13.

THE MOORS

The extent to which the moors were shaped by people is still disputed, but there is evidence that many were once afforested. Whether these now treeless spaces are the result of interference by our own species or of cyclical global climate change is unknown. Certainly, as a result of the edges of the moors being pushed back by enclosure and agricultural 'improvement', as well as by heavy (winter) grazing (which reduces dwarf shrub cover and gives way to grasses), the moors have been reduced. But, in the last 150 years, management of grouse shooting has been a major factor in the alteration of the moors' habitat for wildlife and natural flora. Other causes are afforestation, grazing, peat cutting and atmospheric pollution.

ROTATIONAL BURNING IS CARRIED OUT TO PROMOTE THE GROWTH OF NEW HEATHER

Vast carbon sinks

Moorland is amongst the most extensive natural vegetation in the British Isles. It is characterised by a peaty topsoil that forms when the vegetation – particularly sphagnum moss – becomes trapped in the waterlogged ground.[35]

In the absence of sufficient oxygen to provoke decay, the organic matter does not completely decompose. Instead, it accumulates as peat. On some moors the peat layer may be several metres thick and will have taken thousands of years to develop. The boggier areas of peatland, known as blanket bog, have locked within them great quantities of carbon, which is held secure due to the waterlogged conditions. In that respect, Britain's moorlands are vast 'carbon sinks' – so-called because they 'absorb' more carbon than they release. In terms of carbon storage, notes ecologist Dr Adrian Yallop, deep peat moorlands perform the same function as Amazonian rainforests.[36]

And, just as the Amazonian rainforests are being exploited and despoiled at a cost to the whole world, the vegetation covering Britain's moorlands is being drained and burnt by grouse shoot operators in order to create sufficient food (grouse thrive on young heather shoots) and habitat for the birds that are the target of their guns.

Industrial-scale fire management

According to Dr Yallop, gamekeepers are burning the moors at unprecedented rates to encourage the growth of new heather shoots as food for grouse.[37] Where this burning occurs on blanket peats it alters the hydrology so that decomposition of peat occurs more rapidly.[38] Water draining newly burned areas contains some 5-15 times more dissolved organic carbon than unburned areas.[39] This strips carbon as surely as setting fire to rainforest.

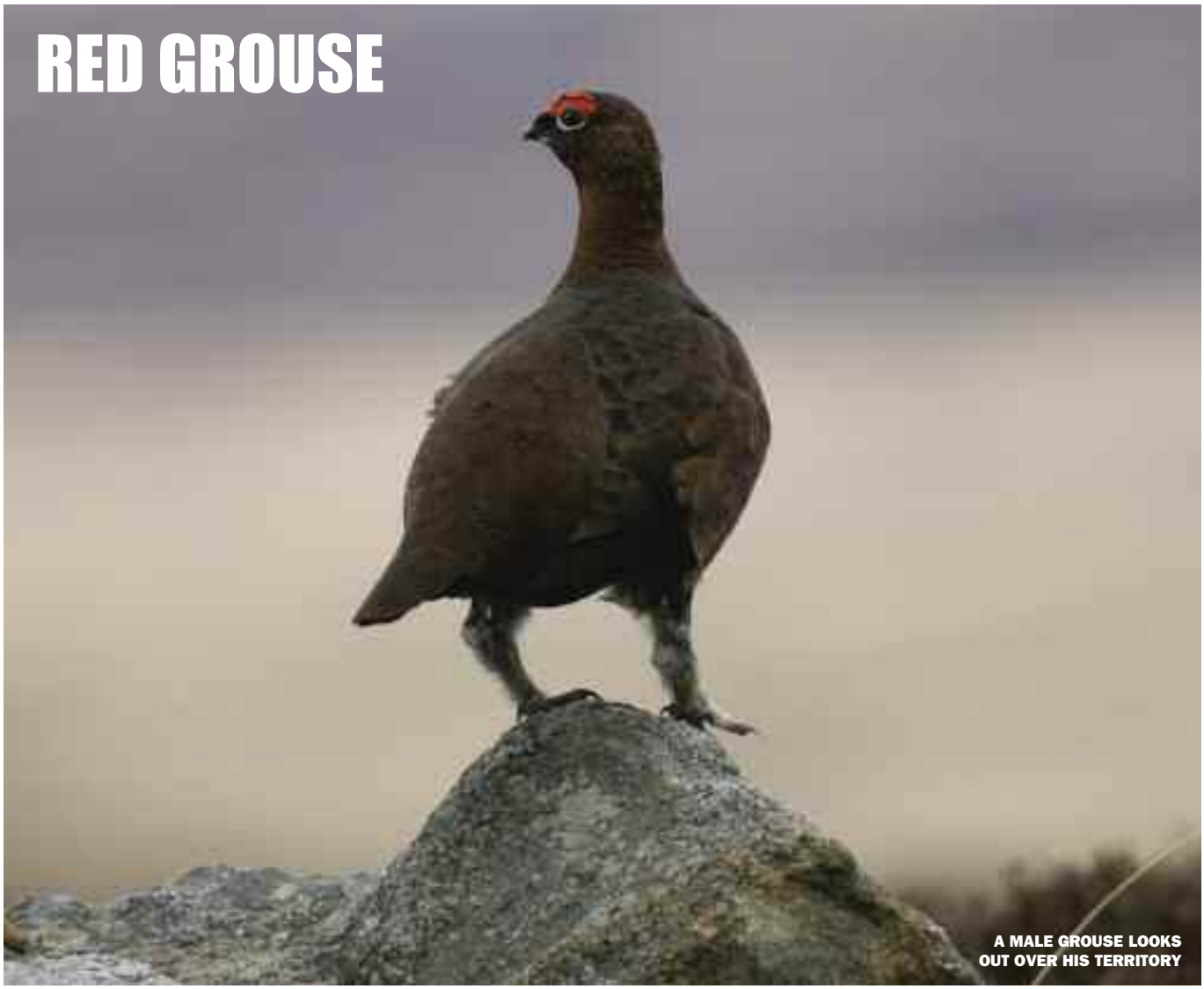
In other work, Yallop has shown that moorland burning is not exactly an uncommon activity. Some 114 square kilometres of new burns were occurring annually across England in the year 2000, a level that in most places had doubled in 30 years.[40] This 114 km^2 figure refers not to the whole area of grouse moor, but to areas of new burns. What is more, there is no reason to suppose 2000 was anything like a peak year. Subsequent work by Yallop has shown that the amount of burning has increased markedly since then. Fire management in the uplands is now almost ubiquitous; it is on an industrial scale.[41] It is hard to imagine fires of this scale elsewhere in the world being unreported in this country, yet virtually nothing is said.

The draining of the bogs – to create dry territories for the grouse to build their nests – is undertaken by digging drainage ditches, known as grips. This draining (which is followed by burning to promote young heather growth) exposes the bare, dried-out peat. The surface peat is then easily washed away by rain, increasing the fear of flooding in towns and valleys downstream. When the dislodged surface peat gets into the streams, it turns the water brown, which has to be cleaned up at a cost to water users. In the process, yet more climate-changing carbon is released into the atmosphere. It is the flooding issue that is high on the list of objections to grouse moor management.

The Committee on Climate Change has recently put a figure on the damage. Some 350,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide each year are emitted from upland peat in England, the majority of which (260,000 tonnes) is from areas that are being burnt, in the main, by grouse shoot operators.[42]

EVIDENCE OF VEHICLE DAMAGE ON A PEAK DISTRICT MOOR

RED GROUSE



A MALE GROUSE LOOKS OUT OVER HIS TERRITORY

Red Grouse are unique to the British and Irish moorlands, with a mainland population averaging around 155,000 pairs.[43] They are a subspecies of Willow Grouse (*Lagopus lagopus*), found across northern Europe, Siberia and North America. Red grouse prefer to spend their whole lives in the same area. Being reluctant to fly, they rely for protection on the camouflage potential of their reddish brown plumage (the male being redder than the female and adorned with a flaming red comb above each eye).[44]

When escaping predators, grouse fly fast and low, in an explosive release of jinking energy, accompanied by a whirring sound of wings.

Males will claim and stand guard over territory while the hen lays, on average, a single clutch of eight eggs during a breeding season that lasts from the beginning of April to the end of June. Her nest is a shallow depression in the ground (a 'scrape') under dense heather. The eggs hatch in three weeks, with the chicks able to feed themselves soon after birth. They begin with insects and then, a few weeks later, switch to the adult diet of mostly heather, but also seeds, berries and insects.[45]

Gut parasites

The oldest recorded Red Grouse is eight years old, but the majority would not live as long as this. For the grouse population to remain stable, each adult pair must reproduce itself. This means that two of however many eggs a hen produces in her lifetime must hatch, the chicks must grow to reproductive age and then, themselves, begin breeding. But the severe disruption of natural forces by shoot operators means that populations of red grouse are anything but stable. Whereas predation and limits on territory and food sources would normally keep a bird population in balance, gamekeepers kill predators and create an optimum feeding and nesting environment. The result

TRAY OF MEDICATED GRIT

is a grouse population that soars, but can then crash when the grouse overburden the landscape and, thereafter, fall prey to the parasitic strongyle worm that infests their gut. Affected birds are weak, predator-prone and, to the dismay of gamekeepers, poor flyers.

A common 'remedy', as we have seen (see page 11), is the laying down of medicated grit in trays. Another approach is direct dosing. Eight-wheel all-terrain vehicles, fixed with powerful spotlights, are driven onto the moor at night. The grouse are transfixed by the lights, netted, and then force-fed with the drug by a tube down their throats.

These elaborate manoeuvres, however, provide considerably less than a total remedy. According to the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT): '*Currently, the most commonly used drug is Levamisole hydrochloride, which kills the worms in the grouse, allowing the grouse to regain body condition. However, its effects are very short term and re-infection occurs within 48 hours.*'[46]

We can see from the above that the gamekeeper's task is not to seek balance – whereby grouse numbers match available land and food. Instead, they strive for a substantial 'surplus' of birds, who can then serve as targets for wealthy 'guns'.

Louping

Louping Ill is a disease transmitted by sheep ticks, which became more prevalent on upland areas when those parts were exploited for sheep farming. The virus, according to the GWCT, is responsible for high levels of mortality, with 79 per cent of infected grouse chicks dying from the virus in laboratory and field conditions.'[47] According to the Moorland Association, the disease is managed by sheep dipping, vaccination for sheep and bracken control.[48]

SUFFERING OF THE GROUSE DURING A SHOOT

The gun lobby makes great play of 'shooting etiquette', boasting of its various Codes of Practice. But on a grouse shoot, the reality for the birds is that they are targets for 'guns' who might have little or no competence and who are keen to down as many birds as possible – out of vanity, and in order to satisfy themselves that their enormous financial outlay was worth it.

Shooting codes

In fact, those Codes (such as are found on the British Association for Shooting and Conservation website) offer a perfect insight into all that can go wrong on a shoot and the price paid by the grouse. The codes plead, for instance, for 'guns' to gain some basic shooting skills before tackling live targets.

Knowing that a rush of blood leads shooters to aim at birds out of range, the codes urge restraint.'*It is notoriously difficult to judge range well, especially for birds against an open sky... If we cannot place the "pattern" accurately* [properly direct the numerous pellets that burst from a cartridge], *the quarry is likely to be wounded rather than killed.*'[49] Shooting low-flying birds is also frowned upon – for practical as much as ethical reasons. '*...you may blast them to pieces rendering them unfit for the table.*'[50]

A particular hazard is shooting at 'departing' birds. The gizzard in a grouse – being a large, dense digestive organ, usually packed with grit – can protect vital organs from pellets fired from behind and below.

'*The gizzard will be damaged and the bird only wounded, often to be lost and die later.*'[51]

Equally, shooters are asked not to use the second barrel on another target before making sure the first bird fired at was cleanly killed. Birds are often 'pricked' and carry on flying wounded. When they plummet from the sky, they frequently are not killed outright but scramble away and hide beyond reach of the dogs. Where wounded birds are retrievable, and it is judged safe to do so, the codes urge that this is done promptly. Often it isn't, because the shooter is more concerned with his or her next kill. '*Consider the image that much current retrieval practice creates for the non-shooting public,*' one code chastises.[52]

Dispatching wounded birds

Injured birds, it is advised, should be held by both wings near the body, making them extend their neck. They are then given a 'sharp tap' on the back of the head with a 'priest', which is a length of heavy wood or brass on a wrist cord. Some shooters prefer to use a beater's stick or a flag stick.[53]

DEAD MOUNTAIN HARES IN A 'STINK PIT' (SEE PAGE 24)

PREDATOR CONTROL

Grouse moor operators brand as 'vermin' wild animals perceived to interfere with the profitability or smooth running of a shoot and, thereafter, pursue them with a brutal totalitarian zeal. Animals are commonly crushed in spring traps, snared by the neck with wire nooses, or lured into cages and shot.

Poison

There is also evidence of some grouse moor owners illegally poisoning animals with a banned, highly toxic pesticide called carbofuran, possession of which Defra Minister Richard Benyon has refused to make an offence. Outlawing possession, he declared in 2012, '*may not be a proportionate course of action*'.[54] Birds of prey are the usual victims of carbofuran – species ranging from golden and white-tailed eagles to peregrine falcons and hen harriers.

So toxic is carbofuran that a single grain would kill a large bird of prey. A gamekeeper who was convicted of poisoning such birds in Scotland, in 2011, was found to possess 10 kilos of the substance – sufficient to kill every bird of prey in the UK.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds looked at the profession of people convicted of crimes against birds of prey in the 20-year period from 1990. Of 141 people convicted, 98 (70 per cent) were involved in game bird management (95 gamekeepers, two shooters, one 'game bird' dealer).[55]

Loathing of birds of prey

The intense loathing many shoot operators have for 'non-productive' wildlife is rooted in the economics of their enterprises. A group of eight to nine 'guns' might pay, on a top-drawer shoot, around £30,000 for one day's 'sport'.[56] For that sum, they will want satisfaction. A sufficient number of birds to shoot is one requirement. Another is the smooth running of the day itself. Against this background, any grouse or grouse egg taken by a weasel, stoat, fox, crow, gull, or (ostensibly protected) badger, instead of by a paying gun, represents a serious loss to the operator. But it is birds of prey who are detested most of all.

According to one keen observer of grouse shooting: '*Grouse are more frightened of birds of prey than they are of the beaters, so if the beaters are beating the birds towards the guns and a hen harrier flies in between the beaters and the guns, the grouse will go over the beaters' heads to escape the hen harrier. Which means the beaters will have to come off the moor, and start all the way over again. This gives an awful lot of dead time in a day, which people regard as very precious, if you've paid that much money for shooting birds. So it's not just the fact that birds of prey take grouse, which mean that there's fewer to shoot, it's the fact they can upset a shoot day which is what, as far as the eye can see in every direction, all of this land is managed for – just a few days of it a year. I don't think driven grouse shooting could actually operate without breaking the law.*'

A SNARED BADGER

A DEAD RABBIT STRANGLED IN A FOX SNARE

Snares

Death by carbofuran is an agonising end but snares are no less savage. The National Anti-Snaring Campaign reports on an incident in Scotland. '*A female badger was almost cut in two by a snare – but was still alive when found by a doctor. When the doctor touched the badger, her heart fell out, still beating, before she died.*'[57]

An Independent Working Group on Snares, reporting to Defra in 2005, identified a long list of harms caused to animals caught in snares. They included: anxiety, rage and fear of predation whilst held in the noose; injury whilst struggling against or fighting it; pain, thirst, hunger and exposure when restrained for long periods; stress of capture and handling before being killed by the snare operator; and pain and injury associated with killing if unconsciousness is not immediate.

These findings are borne out by the experience of animal protection organisations that have catalogued, over the years, snared animals suffering appalling

A DISCARDED SNARE IN WOODLAND NEAR A PEAK DISTRICT MOOR


A DEAD RAT IN A FENN TRAP

head, neck and body injuries. Often, these injuries will kill them, after a period of many hours, or even days, after being caught in a device.

Meanwhile, RSPCA inspectorate surveys show that only a third of the animals caught in snares are actually the 'target' species.[58]

Spring and cage traps

Traps also cause fear, injury and stress. Cage traps lure and capture animals, prior to the them being shot. Spring traps, such as the Fenn or Kania, are designed to kill by breaking backs or crushing necks.

An example of a spring trap is the Mark IV Fenn. It is a spring-driven device designed to break small animals' backs and kill them instantly. However, victims are often caught by the leg and suffer grievously. The law demands that they are set only in tunnels and burrow entrances. The targets are rats, weasels, stoats and rabbits. It is illegal to place them on top of fence posts – though there are cases where these traps have been placed deliberately in such locations to catch birds of prey.

Cage traps come in various sizes, depending on the target species. All are basically a box constructed of wire mesh with one or two open ends. An example is the Larsen. These use a decoy bird and eggs,


A LADDER TRAP

and, legally, must be deployed to catch only corvids – namely, crow, magpie, jackdaw, jay or rook. The decoy is kept in an enclosed cage and the lured bird will enter a separate compartment via a spring door.

Another type is the Ladder trap, which is a large cage with a V-shaped roof. At the base of the V are horizontal openings that resemble a ladder. Once again, birds, lured into entering by bait or a decoy bird, cannot get out. Gamekeepers have used them to catch protected raptors as well as crows and magpies.

Several gamekeepers have been convicted of baiting these traps with pigeons, pheasants or sparrows to catch and kill birds of prey deliberately .

All such traps are supposed to be adequately supplied with food, water, a perch and shade for the decoy birds. And they should be inspected once every 24 hours. But investigations by Animal Aid and other animal advocacy groups demonstrate that these requirements are often not met.

Positioning of traps and snares

In the woods on the perimeter of moors can be found snares, Larsen and ladder traps. 'Stink pits' filled with rotting animal carcases draw the target species to those traps.

On the moor itself, weasels, stoats and rats are caught with Fenns. Typically, they are set on artificial bridges placed across watercourses or gullies (see page 11).

Lamping

Lamping is another means of eliminating 'vermin' – usually foxes or rabbits.[59]

As with night-time forced dosing of disease-prone grouse, a powerful light transfixes animals in the beam, rendering them immobile so that they can be shot, or have dogs set on them.

Lapwings and golden plovers

Grouse moor operators are keen to claim that their activities benefit ground nesting species such as the golden plover and lapwing. In reality, there is far more food on a pristine blanket bog to support a proper balance of nature than on areas of burnt, drained and 'predator controlled' moorland tailored for one species. In fact, there is one wader who is severely disadvantaged by moor management. The dunlin is a little ground-nesting wading bird who migrates every year from Greenland and Iceland to the estuaries of Western Britain, and a population also breeds on blanket bogs in northern Britain. Dunlins feed on the invertebrates of the blanket bog. But these tiny invertebrates, at the bottom of the food chain, are destroyed not only by the pesticide in the medicated grit but through the elimination of their habitat by draining. So, by extension, dunlins also pay the price of grouse moor operations.

A MALE DUNLIN, SINGING

ECONOMICS AND SUBSIDIES

Because of the costs involved in preparing a moor for shooting, 'guns' end up being charged around £200 for every brace of grouse they shoot. The shoot arrives at the £200 figure by calculating the costs it incurs through factors such as payment of keepers' wages, road construction and repairs, vehicle purchases, heather burning and gritting.

There are thought to be 150 grouse moors in Scotland, 140 in England and nine in Wales. Their owners will readily acknowledge that running an upland shoot is a rich man's indulgence. '*Securing a quality grouse moor may require setting aside £5-10 million,*' according to one authority, but turning a profit is very rare.[60] Groups like the Countryside Alliance (CA) imply that the outlay involved amounts to a heroic financial sacrifice, especially because of the attendant environmental benefits that the CA claims moor owners deliver.[61]


A GROUSE BUTT

Publicly subsidised

In reality, while owning a grouse shoot does require deep pockets, there are public subsidies to be had.

They come primarily in the form of the EU's Single Payment Scheme and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) payments (or the Scottish or Welsh equivalents). Incredibly, HLS rewards some moor owners for burning heather and even, on occasion, burning on environmentally precious blanket bog (see page 16).

Moor operators across the country can claim for all manner of maintenance and restoration activities through the HLS – up to the value of £60 per hectare. They include burning, herbicide treatment, control of grasses, maintenance of rough grazing for birds, the introduction of grazing cattle and sheep, and the creation of upland heathland. Capital items, such as fencing or grip (drain) blocking can be funded by a separate capital works plan.

Though management agreements linked to subsidy payments are supposed to limit the damage to blanket bog and encourage environmentally sound burning of heathland, a report submitted to Natural England in 2012, found: '*There is ... effectively no difference between the intensity of burning on bog or deep peat habitat and upland heathland. From this it is apparent that the voluntary code, Natural England management agreements and site designation are having little demonstrable effect in protecting either bog or blanket peat areas from fire use.*'[62]

Conclusion

Those involved in grouse shooting try to cultivate an air of selfless and astute stewardship of the natural environment. Birds are harvested, pests and vermin are controlled ... and a civilised day out is had by all.

In reality, the shooting of grouse and all that goes with it is part of the long tradition of vicious country 'sports' that includes badger baiting and dog and cock fighting – activities that society at large has made unlawful because it regards them as uncivilised. Grouse shooting, for now, resists public opposition; it even receives tax payers' subsidies. But the day cannot be too far off when it too will be consigned to history.

A RING OUZEL CAUGHT IN A FENN TRAP

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Published by Animal Aid October 2013 | ISBN 978-1-905327-34-8

Incorporated under the name Animal Abuse Injustice and Defence Society, a company limited by guarantee.
Registered in the UK no. 1787309

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