



It is estimated that around 500,000 wild red grouse are shot every year

RED GROUSE: BEN HALL/NATUREPL.COM



## OPINION

“Why should wildlife lose to businesses underpinned by criminal activity?”

# MARK CARWARDINE

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE THAT, AFTER decades of campaigning, driven grouse shooting – and all the affiliated wildlife slaughter and habitat desecration – continues on a truly industrial scale. It's not cheap. People pay thousands of pounds a day for the privilege of killing as many red grouse as possible.

Inevitably, shooting estates are obsessed with producing artificially high numbers of grouse to meet the demands of their clients and maximise profits, and annihilating all the predators is central to their entire operation.

Quite simply, predators aren't tolerated on most grouse moors. Foxes, weasels, stoats, crows and all sorts of other wildlife are mercilessly trapped, snared, shot and sometimes poisoned. Some of this is legal (albeit inhumane – few of the animals are killed instantly) but much of it is against the law. The scale of the illegal killing of golden eagles, white-tailed eagles, peregrine falcons, short-eared owls, badgers, hedgehogs and, of course, hen harriers (a red-listed species whose future prospects rely almost entirely on the proper management of their moorland home) is shocking.

Managers of driven grouse shoots argue that curlew, golden plover and some other ground-nesting waders benefit from this intensive predator control. Maybe they do. But they also thrive on numerous nature reserves without predator control – and there's no denying that most wildlife faces decimation on grouse moors.

Let's not forget the red grouse themselves. It's estimated that more than 500,000 of them are shot in an average year (although, disgracefully, there is no statutory

requirement to count – let alone record – the annual tally). According to a report by the League Against Cruel Sports, 40 per cent are wounded, rather than killed outright, so it's a humane issue as well as a conservation one.

The shooting takes place on upland heather moorland. Rich in wildlife, and critical for climate control and flood prevention, this habitat is predominantly found in Britain (we harbour 75 per cent of the world total). There are around 310 estates engaged in grouse moor management, managing as much as 1.8m hectares of this internationally important land.

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But it's being 'managed' to produce a monoculture for red grouse shooting. It is no different to over-managed farmland – except it is being used for 'sport' instead of food. It is being drained, overgrazed and burned, causing a mixed bag of additional problems. Burning kills rare snakes and amphibians, for example, and – according to the Climate Change Committee – on grouse moors it emits 260,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide every year.

Proponents of driven grouse shooting argue that it provides 1,500 jobs for everyone from gamekeepers and beaters to people in tourism and hospitality. Assuming the figure is correct (it came from a 2021 parliamentary debate on the subject) it makes the industry a surprisingly small employer given the vast areas of land involved.

Studies by Rewilding Britain, the RSPB and others show that the benefits of a change in land management could potentially dwarf the local and limited economic benefits of driven grouse shooting through wildlife and outdoor tourism (not to mention the

## → AT A GLANCE

- Red grouse are shot by a small minority of people, who regard it as a sport, on upland heather moorland mostly in Scotland and northern England.
- Attempts to rear red grouse have failed – they can't be bred to order like pheasants – so it is wild birds that are being hunted.
- There are no official figures as to how many red grouse are shot per year, but an estimate of 500,000 is the most widely accepted figure from work by the likes of Wild Justice and Animal Aid.
- Driven grouse shooting involves a line of 'beaters' with dogs flushing the grouse towards hunters, who lie in wait ready to shoot as the birds fly overhead.
- It's seen as controversial because driven grouse shooting estates have a long history of killing vast numbers of local wildlife – including protected birds of prey – and severely damaging the important heathland habitat.

economic benefits of fewer greenhouse gases and improved flood management).

Some conservation groups are arguing for a licensing system and, indeed, one has just been introduced in Scotland. Some hope it will become a blueprint for the rest of the UK. But with so little enforcement few estates will ever get caught – and it just hands them an unjustified stamp of legitimacy.

My view is that driven grouse moors cause so much ecological damage – and always will, licence or no licence – that they must be banned altogether. Why should wildlife lose to businesses, many of which are underpinned by criminal activity, prioritising profit above all else, for a repugnant 'sport' pursued by a tiny elite? It doesn't make sense. 🐾

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