

Newsletter Spring 2020

I write this at a time when there is much uncertainty in the World, with unprecedented reaction by many governments around the world to the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic.

Winston Churchill once said, "A politician needs the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month, and next year. And to have the ability afterwards to explain why it didn't happen."

There seems to be daily predictions by various groups of how long the Covid 19 outbreak will take to get through, or how many people are/will be infected. Overnight many political pundits and journalists have turned into disease control experts instead of listening to and accurately reporting what the real experts are saying. It's a bit like the exit poll at the general election only with much less data and sometimes distorted facts.

Whether locking down populations and destroying the economies of affluent countries will have proven worthwhile, or even saved anyone longer term, only history will inform us in time.

One thing is certain, the world we live in will change dramatically, no doubt with a much more compliant population, and that will no doubt please the politicians and their masters.

My view is that we should have better integrated the scientific facts into political decisions, become more questioning of the media, and if we still then decided to jump off the cliff we needed data to inform us of the rationale of such an action and the chance of a safe landing.

But for now, it is what it is, and the impact on the Gamebird Industry and our way of life is huge. Many shoots are still hoping to run as normal, others are closing for a season. Early partridge seem much reduced while confidence for later pheasants is quite good. My early assessment is that only around 60% of the normal number of birds will be reared in 2020.

Many of the shooting organisations have called for guns, shoots etc to support the Gamefarmers by placing deposits as soon as they can so there can be enough rearing this year for shooting to continue. And it's not just important for this year – for without enough birds placed there will not be enough hens to catch up at the end of the season so 2021 could face shortages as well.

This has highlighted the fact so much of the Industry has been based on trust in the past, with the constant delays in settling bills meaning Gamefarmers, Shoots, even the Vets, have all bankrolled the sport for years. Now, around the country there are Gamefarms who haven't been paid for their poults from last summer, and now likely never will. Support Industries will consequently take a hit as well and so the way we all work must change. Already few Gamefarms will rear without a minimum 50% deposit for Poults, some hatcheries are asking for 100% of the costs of chick supply up front before even setting the eggs, and so change must come if we are all to remain viable.

For many Veterinary practices the shut-down to emergency care only is causing serious financial as well as practical concerns. Contrary to popular opinion, it is estimated as much as 40% of clinics trade at, or even

below, market defined break-even points and I expect some clinics may never re-open if this shutdown continues for more than a few weeks.

When it comes to Gamebirds, as it is just me that does this work, and so I do not anticipate any issues with providing this service (and I am currently recovering from a flu like illness as I write this so hopefully I am already immune). I have arranged cover with other specialist Gamebird and Poultry practices just in case I am sick, and likewise I will cover them as needed. We all have to adapt to survive this year.

However, I am going to have to adapt to the pharmaceutical companies needing longer lead times for orders to ensure medicines supply, them needing payment quickly to keep the price down (for me and thus you as well) how I might pay for that, and not knowing for sure the demand this year.

In previous years I have used reserves of the Small Animal Clinic to fund buying the bird medicines in bulk so I can provide them at competitive cost. I have also carried huge debt when we reach the peak of release, some of which I am still chasing now. That is no longer possible, and so I need you to help me to help you; but more on that in a moment.

As you will have realised, all the Spring meetings were cancelled so we have not been able to inform you of many important issues. Most of which I will try and cover in this Newsletter. It is necessarily long as a result but do please read it through and any questions as always, give me a call

Keep well, keep safe, and take care

Mark

Veterinary Fees in 2020

Firstly , the good news, I am pleased to report medicines will again be held at the same prices as previous years, but only so long as invoices are paid in a timely way this year. As noted I need you to help me to help you.

Secondly, I have to change my terms and conditions to those below as I will no longer be able to fund the summer peak from reserve funds and the Small Animal Clinic; additionally I have to order medicines in bulk, and pay suppliers quickly to keep prices down for you.

Retainer Scheme Clients

1. Must have paid their Scheme Membership by May 15th latest to be part of the scheme this year
2. Will be invoiced on the day of service and must settle the fees due in full within 30 days of invoice.

Clients not in the Retainer Scheme

ALL fees must be paid on the day, ideally by Credit Card, or for prescriptions by return of post from invoice.

New Clients. All new clients will need to have applied well in advance to join the practice and provide 2 acceptable trade references.

Dominic Boulton, Chairman of the Game Farmers Association (GFA) was due to give a talk at our Gamefarmer's Meeting in March which was sadly cancelled, He kindly has put together the following message

"The GFA was formed in 1908 and is the oldest shooting related organisation in the country. It was formed with the intention of protecting and promoting the game-farming industry, raising and maintaining standards of husbandry and welfare, and to create links between Gamefarmers

The best way I can demonstrate how the GFA operates these days is by way of a summary of what we have been involved in over the last twelve months or so.

In 2018 I accepted a seat on the British Game Alliance Advisory Committee (BGAAC). As a result of this, The GFA was approached by the British Game Alliance (BGA) to help design and implement a game farm audit scheme (GFAS), similar to their shoot audit scheme (SAS), more on this later.

As last years' laying season got under way, we had a number of reports of members being targeted by activists. This activity was being encouraged and assisted by a map showing game farm locations which appeared on face-book. With the invaluable assistance of the Countryside Alliance and the police we soon got the map removed. We are now looking at ways of improving security, communication between game farms, and between them and the Police, to try to establish networks that can react to incidents quickly and help others to avoid being targeted. Indeed, Mark Elliott and some of his clients are involved in setting up the first such group.

Much of the GFA's work happens at a political level and often goes unnoticed. Political issues in the past year have been many and varied. Some had the potential to affect our businesses directly, other issues had implications for shooting more generally and therefore potential game changing impacts on our customers. Charles Nodder (Political Advisor to the GFA) represents the GFA and its Members.

In late spring the Welsh Assembly pushed ahead with review of the Code of Practice for Rearing Gamebirds. Charles and I, along with several other representatives from the shooting/veterinary world made the trip to Wales to meet with the civil servants tasked with conducting the review. After a decidedly frosty start, by the end, we were given the impression that they had accepted that material change to the code could not be justified on the available evidence. It is worth noting here that one of their proposed changes to the code concerned raised laying units and this is something we are looking into very carefully at the moment. We have still not had the final version of the revised code and thus it is still susceptible to changes at a higher level. Needless to say, if material changes are introduced, we will do whatever we can to protect our members' interests if they appear to be compromised in any way. It seems inevitable that Defra and the Scottish government will follow suit sooner or later.

Our antibiotic reduction campaign continues, and we again followed up the rearing and shooting season with a very useful meeting in February with our trade vets and representatives from the game feed industry to discuss the next phase of this ongoing project. Our joint communication on this matter will be disseminated to the wider shooting world in the next few weeks.

We are currently agreeing our next target for 2024 with the Government's Targets Taskforce. Anyone who thinks we should have kept our heads down on this issue is being very naïve. The government has made it very clear that without further significant progress before it's review in 2024, restrictions may be imposed upon us.

All of these challenges and more were handled during the year. Some required lobbying of politicians, others, meetings with civil servants and licensing officials. Most needed coordination with BASC, the CA, the GWCT and the NGO.

I also represent the GFA on the Shoot Liaison Committee and our Vice-Chairman (Peter Bailey) does the same on the Code of Good Shooting Practice Committee. Charles Nodder also attended several meetings of the national Avian Diseases Core Group concerning Avian Influenza (AI), on which he represents not just the GFA, but the entire gamebird sector.

Charles also provided me with regular advice, and we issued press releases on key events and activities throughout the year; even a letter published in the GFA's name in The Times, which I think may be a first in the Association's long history.

Our involvement with the BGA has been ongoing. Although the BGA was set up to market shot game, without some form of assurance scheme significant progress in this area would be impossible to achieve. Thus, the BGA introduced the GFAS for its members. The GFA committee decided that it was crucial that we be involved and thus have a measure of influence over it. Four committee members took part in a trial of the scheme during last years rearing season and, following feed back from this, the scheme went live in the last couple of weeks. I do not think it unfair to remark that the GFAS is in a considerably better place than would have been the case without GFA involvement.

Most recently, the GFA has joined forces with BASC, NGO and CA to register as interested parties in the Judicial Review being brought against Defra by Wild Justice (at considerable cost). If left unchallenged it could cause catastrophic damage to the shooting world. We are determined to fight this and help Defra to persuade the court to see sense in this matter.

We are all better off by far with the GFA than without it, so please join us. The more members we have, the more we can achieve for the benefit of all. Through South Downs Vets' you have the rare **opportunity to join the GFA with your first years' membership free**, so please take advantage of it and help protect your future.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter, I am very sorry I was not able to deliver this information to you in person. I wish you all the very best for the coming season.

Dominic Boulton

Networking in case of Saboteur Activity

As Dominic has said an idea has been floated around recently, following recent Police notification of extremist animal rights activity in the South East, of setting up regional groups, coordinated by the GFA, to rapidly link everyone via a platform such as Whats App. Sussex Police have welcomed this and have made contact with a number of clients to progress this project and ensure the information and intelligence gets through to everyone – you do not need to be a GFA Member to participate.

We were to discuss this at the Spring meetings, and get people organised. We were also going to have a talk on “Your Rights, Their Rights” so all were properly informed as to how to deal with any extremists attempting to disrupt their business/Shoot

I think it merits a meeting in the early Autumn, when we are free to hold these again, which I hope to organise. In the meantime, if you would like to join the first pilot group which is the Gamefarmers group let me know and I will pass on your details to the regional GFA Council Member.

Research Updates

Understanding the Pheasant Microbiome

Some of you will already be aware that I have been very involved in setting up and progressing research into the diseases of Gamebirds with Surrey University and 2 other Vet Practices through 2019.

The idea, and need, for the research arose out of the Governments requirements for everyone to work on reducing the use and need for antibiotics, and the consensus view that overall reductions would stall without good scientific research to inform and assist Vets in the field.

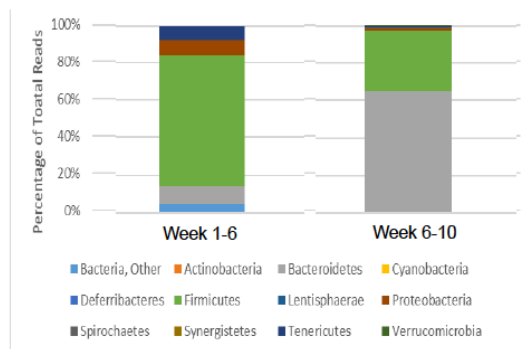
No-one was doing any research into the diseases we have to deal with when rearing and releasing Gamebirds so we have to do it ourselves. Taking one example – Hexamita – we know the disease, we know how to treat it, but we don't have clear evidence-based data on why it appears, how it spreads, how it survives year to year, and how the treatments we use actually work. To beat it we need answers to all those questions

Thanks to funding from the GFA, Eco Animal Health, the GWCT and support from some of our clients. we were able to follow 6 groups of birds from day old to 10 weeks, gaining baseline data on the bacterial part of the microbiome week by week, enabling development of future projects to answer real questions that will help in the field. Without baselines we have nothing to move forward on.

This has identified quite a few areas to investigate and the first 2 projects in 2020 are to interrogate the 2019 samples for antimicrobial resistance markers in both Partridge and Pheasants.

We also plan to look at the findings of Mycoplasma species in the hind gut of most birds (240 samples were collected) and their relevance (or not) to Bulgy as a disease.

Bacterial profile wks1-5 vs wks 6-9



What was truly astounding was the almost immediate change in bacterial colony types on moving to wood, and this merits further investigation as this is the time of highest risk of disease appearing as we know.

Different foods used had a significant impact, but how (+/-ve) we have yet to be sure. What food types (substrates) increase risk of problems, if at all, at different times is a question it would be good to answer, but more samples and a lot more interrogation of the data will be needed.

In 2020 we need to collect more samples from many more birds, focusing now on collecting from disease outbreaks, so don't be surprised if I ask for samples (all anonymised of course).

It is only a start, a pilot project, but already we are learning and starting to understand what we need to do now to get the data we will need for the future.

Research Updates

Understanding Mycoplasma

1. Vaccination – why it is not a solution.

Mycoplasma seem never to be out of the news and perhaps causes more concern to Gamefarmers and Keepers than any other disease.

There has been quite a lot going on the last few years to investigate this and I have reported before to all on the advice of the British Veterinary Poultry Association working party, which was very clear that elimination of the disease by culling out infected cases is the recommended way forward.

Presentations at recent Vet Meetings have pretty much confirmed again that Vaccination with Chicken Vaccines is not to be recommended and achieves nothing by way of prevention.

There remains the anomaly of Autogenous Vaccination. These vaccines are made from disease organisms obtained from birds in that infected flock, that have been inactivated and given back to the birds on that site to try and resolve an ongoing problem. This can be a useful tool in sites endemically infected with the disease that cannot control it any other way – the word being Control, not cure.

Use of those vaccines are legally restricted to the holding from where the infection was isolated, or to other holdings with an epidemiological association with that source farm

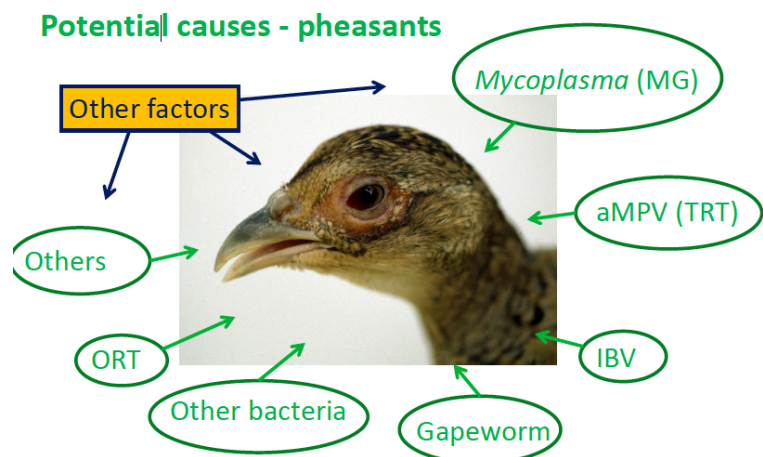
From this it is clear, if vaccination is being used, then the birds must, by definition, be infected or at high risk through association.

We heard last year of many problems up and down the country, yet amongst my clients outbreaks on shoots were reduced from 21 in 2018 to 6 in 2019. In both years, where we could trace the source, the birds originated from vaccinated flocks.

My personal opinion is also, that using inadequate vaccines (and autogenous are at best only partially effective) risks applying an evolutionary pressure to the bacterium which could lead to super-mutants that are harder to resolve.

So I have to strongly recommend to clients that they DO NOT source chicks or poults from sites using autogenous vaccines

Of course no-one and nothing is perfect - the Surrey Research has identified an issue in that there may well be Mycoplasma's in most birds all the time, but are these the one's linked with Bulgy Eye? We hope to find out more on this soon, but it could be a gamechanger as to how we view and treat this illness.



2. Mycoplasma Testing

A few clients have enquired about this recently, following recent publicity about a “validated” test, making claims it will save clients a fortune and will resolve the problem. Concerns have also been raised over adverts claiming Mycoplasma free status of Laying Flocks as a marketing tool.

I’m afraid I can best respond to both questions with the statement drafted at the recent BVPA Gamebird Working Party (of which I am a member)

“BVPA applauds the ongoing work to develop more reliable testing for, and greater understanding of, *Mycoplasma gallisepticum* infections in gamebirds. It is important that any test is ultimately validated to OIE standards. However, it is also recognised that no laboratory test can confirm a flock is completely free from infection. Claims of freedom from Mycoplasmas should not be made. That said, testing is an important and useful tool in the fight against Mycoplasmas.

The BVPA Gamebird sub-committee is constantly working to establish and support the development of the science around this subject so that evidence-based decisions can be made in practice.”

In 2019, where we were able to trace the source of infected birds that arrived at the practice, they almost all came from tested and vaccinated laying flocks.

So what to do? I do agree testing is useful as a tool, but no more than that. There are different tests available that attempt to answer questions regarding current, or previous exposure to the disease and related concomitant infections. I do use them when required and am always happy to discuss them with clients. Ultimately culling and focus on the laying flocks remains the best way forward at this time.

Worming of Gamebirds

This merits a mention as what has been something we don’t think about much has become an occasional issue in recent years – for not working as anticipated !

Traditionally the practice has been to worm the poults to wood, 2 and 4 weeks following placement, for Gapeworms, relying on that to resolve other worm infestations as well. Most years this works well as the birds will be exposed, treated at the right time, and then become more or less able to cope with any low-level ongoing infection. However, the long hot dry spells, with the ground being so hard, has led to birds not picking up their first infection until later, the worming therefore was too early, and Gapes has affected older birds. Consideration should be given to how and when to worm older birds in hot summers, and whether a third dose of treatment is needed.

Secondly, we have seen an increase in various Gutworms, sometimes at very high levels. Again mostly in older birds around 12 to 14 weeks of age. This can impact their growth, predispose to other diseases, and if left can affect the birds flying performance later on. Logic says this is for the same reason we have seen the Gapeworm problems and so again, consider planning for worming later and older.

Capillaria worm has appeared more frequently on some shoots, and we have had to double dose birds to resolve that issue, and in a couple of clusters through Kent and Sussex we do seem to be seeing resistance of Gapeworms to the usual wormers so are having to set up novel programmes to get round this.

Lastly, there is a new in-feed wormer being pushed by some feed companies as cheaper than the commonly used Flubenvet. My concern is that in-feed worming always risks underdosing and then resistance problems, and so my advice is we stick with Flubenvet unless there is clear need to change and we keep what we have effective for backup as long as possible.

In the meantime, worming is something I will be discussing with everyone through the season as clearly treatment programmes need to be tailored to individual shoots needs now.

Docking of Tails

With the Covid 19 lockdown has come a sudden and unprecedented number of enquiries re Docking Working Dogs Tails from all over the South East. Whilst thanks to all for recommending me, I have to update you on what we can/will do.

We do understand that, with the takeover of many traditional vets, it is getting harder to find Vets that understand the issues and will Dock Tails. However, we have had so many problems with owners who do not regularly use the clinic (non-payments, non-returns for chipping, getting very aggressive and demanding with staff etc) and yet none with our own clients who we know well. Docking is mandated by legislation and we Vets put our careers on the line if the law is not complied with.

So from now on we have decided we will only dock tails and hind dew claws for:

1. Dogs owned by Gamekeepers/Underkeepers/Owners of Shoots/Gamefarms registered with us
2. Owners of Working Dogs who use our Small Animal Clinic routinely for their Veterinary needs, and have been registered with us for more than 6 months, and we know the puppies are intended for work.

Facebook and Website

We have a new website up www.southdownsvets.co.uk and a more active **Facebook page South Downs Veterinary Consultancy @Southdownsvets**. These have useful articles and information on them which will be updated from time to time.

Do go on and follow the Facebook page so that information trail gets through to you.

At the moment I am working on a **Guide to Pheasant Rearing – A Vets View**, which will be on both as soon as finished.

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Lastly, just to wish everyone as good a season as possible, keep well, keep safe and I'm sure we will all come through these difficult times soon.

Kind regards

