



Veterinary

Release pen siting and moving

SOPHIA GALLIA

Dr Mark Elliott BVSc VetMFHom MRCVS MLIHM PCH DSH RSHom argues that by lowering the stocking densities in your pens, you will get higher returns.

RELEASE PENS FOR PHEASANTS ARE COMING in for a bit of stick at the moment. The wider conservation world has turned its attention towards so called “obvious” damage that releasing into pens, and releasing in general does to wildlife and their habitats.

However, research conducted and published by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) gives a more balanced view, looking at a wider picture and identifying the points at which both negative and positive gains can be made. We all know that farmland management that promotes and achieves wild bird population gains comes at an economic loss to any estate, but much

that is good can be achieved. Releasing game is one of the potential offsets to that economic loss and can benefit other species in a landscape dominated by food-production. With forethought and investment, well-kept estates can brim to bursting with wildlife throughout the year, in contrast to many seemingly barren, neglected wildlife “reserves” with unfettered public access and all it brings.

As we also know, efforts by keepers and game farms have led to significant reductions in antibiotic use in the fight against antimicrobial resistance. Now the easy bit has been done, the focus is turning to where marginal gains can still be made; one key area is the immediate

release period. It is here that attention to detail and new information on pens and their management comes into its own.

As we learn more about the lifecycles of disease-causing organisms and their relationship to the birds’ immune systems, we can interrogate areas where we might make a difference.

We already know that we transport and release into pens birds close to the peak point in their lifecycle where disease can result from stress. So anything we can do to reduce stress at this time is vital.

Transporting birds risks physical stresses such as dehydration, so should be kept to a minimum. The environment at their destination should be the best possible,

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with plenty of clean water, in enough drinkers that are easy to find and feeders placed where the birds will feel safe. This avoids competition for resources that can compromise weaker individuals (see also *KtB* articles Summer 2016, Summer 2017, Spring 2018 and Autumn 2018).

It's easy to provide drinkers and feeders, but it's harder to ensure the pens themselves provide an optimal environment for the birds to grow on and flourish. This requires planning ahead.

One way to improve the release environment quickly, and at the same time reduce exposure to any over-wintering disease organisms that survive in the soil, has previously been to move pens to a new location from time to time. However, recent research from the GWCT has called into question this practice and focused thoughts on how we can do better with what we have already. Its paper, *Ground flora recovery in disused pheasant pens is limited and affected by peasant release density*, published recently in the *Journal Biological Conservation* (and mentioned in *KtB* Spring 2019, page 14), identified from long-term monitoring of soil conditions and ground flora that it takes a surprisingly long time for recovery back to the pre-establishment state once a pen is disused and this is a concern.

However, the report did also find that some plant species do better in the short

term as the fertility of the soil is richer. That said, this change and recovery is something we must consider in decision-making on shoots. Already shoot owners are looking at how existing pens can be made better, and are considering the density of pheasants released, much as the report recommends.

Pheasants love a mix of sunny areas to bask in, dry soil to bathe in, cover to hide in and safe roosting. For years we have been advised that an even mix of high canopy, mid-canopy and open ground is the ideal – it is. Unfortunately, a fear of predators from the skies, as well as years of little or no management of woodlands has led to closed canopies that leave a weak understory, little ground cover and inadequate perches for roosting. So birds fresh from the rearing field, often clipped to prevent early escape, have only cold damp ground on which to survive. Competition for what perching is available can be fierce. Over-stocked pens lose ground cover quickly and bored pheasants are not very nice to each other, so holding them in the pen becomes difficult, and competition for resources increases. Bare ground exposes faecal material to the bored investigator, increasing disease risk. Chilling has the inevitable result, and is worse when it rains.

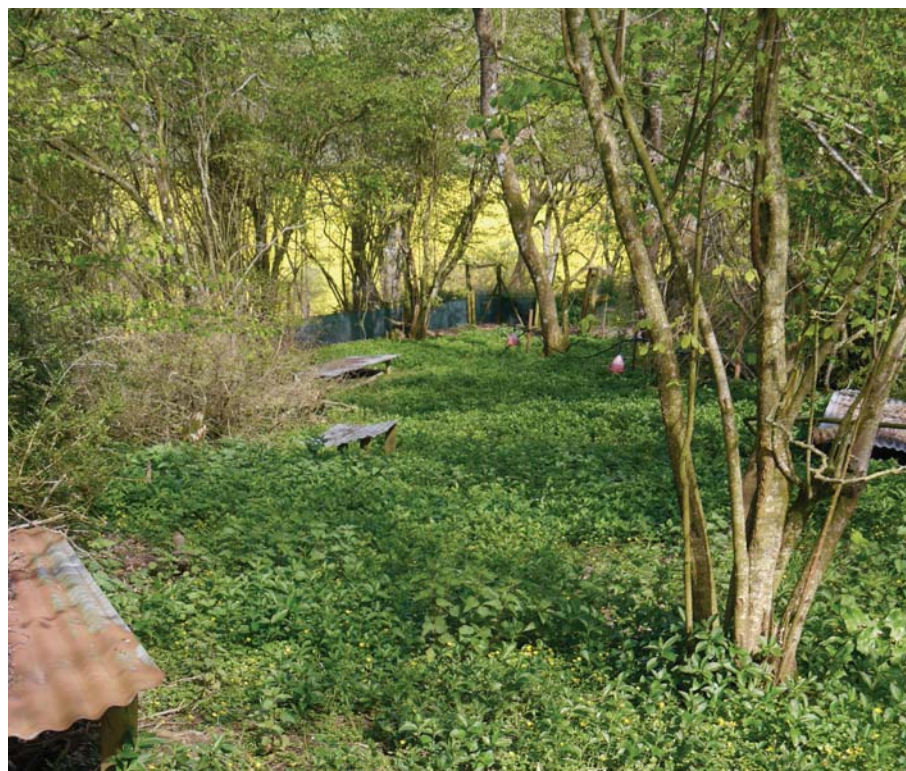
The disease argument for moving pens probably never really stacked up

as a long-term solution. As some key diseases can – or almost certainly do – survive in the environment from one year to the next, and escalate rapidly when key hosts are available: it doesn't take long for a new pen to become another reservoir of disease organisms that affect gamebirds. High density stresses the birds, and proximity increases transmission between them, so immune systems get overwhelmed; we come back to the need for plenty of space in the pen. Over-stocking leads to poorer returns, so why do it? If your returns are lower than you would like, perhaps the answer is fewer birds, not more!

As production subsidies are phased out in favour of land management for biodiversity, this is a good time to be investing in your woodland. Creating rides not only provides sunning areas that birds need, but opening the canopy can encourage understory and ground cover. Surfaced all-weather access can avoid ruts that collect and hold water in which disease organisms can thrive. Well managed pens can benefit flora and fauna, *and* our birds

The results of such efforts take time to show – in reality, probably a few years – but long-term planning now will pay dividends for years to come for wildlife, for pheasant shooting and for the wider economy.

Release pens need plenty of ground cover, shelter and roosting sites.



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NOTE IT!

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