

Pens, poults and perils in releasing

Dr Mark Elliott BVSc VetMFHom MRCVS MLIHM PCH DSH RSHom,
uncovers a blame-game culture when bringing birds to wood.



As a vet specialising in gamebirds, I occasionally find myself being asked for an opinion when there are problems following birds being placed in release pens, with the end user (the gamekeeper) often seeking to blame the rearing field for supplying poor birds that have failed to thrive. (Similar issues can arise with chick supply and hatcheries – but that is for another article.)

With very few vets and practices specialising in this field, it can be the case that both parties are the same vet's clients which you might think has potential to add to the problem. However, the reality is that all vets will be what is termed a "witness to fact" in a clinical investigation relating to a dispute. So it can be the same vet who will investigate if both parties are happy for them to do so, but they can only present the case as found in an unbiased way – it is not for them to issue an opinion, although there is

often pressure to do so. The issue of "opinion" evidence would only come later if the dispute escalates and "experts" are instructed for court hearings. Only instructed "experts" can give an opinion and these would comment with their views on the case, as presented, with the evidence before them.

I find being a witness to fact is not all that problematic – it is simply a case of assessing all the information and presenting a honest appraisal of it. The job can actually be easier when clients both routinely use the practice: when all parties are committed to an open dialogue, I will often have clinical records for many groups of birds back to day old, sometimes even before that.

The role of the rearing field is clearly to supply healthy, hardened, well-feathered birds of consistent type, as ordered (including breed and date of delivery). If that contract is fulfilled, it quickly then becomes the gamekeeper's responsibility

and risk to nurture and rear the birds on, ensuring the environment they are released into is appropriate and fulfils all the requirements for achieving a good result.

There is some argument that disease can carry over from the rearing field, but it would not be a sensible producer who knowingly sent out sick birds. Mistakes can happen, and disease cannot always be predicted, so sometimes at the point of release birds get sick from even the best of rearing fields.

It must also be remembered that the stress of transport and the experience of rapid adaptation to a new environment is a risk borne by both parties as part of the rearing/releasing process. Steps can be taken to mitigate this, such as minimising the time in crates, the transport method and distance, and ensuring the release →

Attention to detail in the release environment is key. It is always worth trying to improve.



Image: Sophia Gallia

pen is fit for purpose – and it is the latter that I will come to shortly.

It is also important to acknowledge that the rearing field rears birds to be a certain age on a planned/booked delivery date. Birds held back because pens are not ready, the weather is inclement, or even if the gamekeeper is on holiday (yes, it happens!) are at risk of overcrowding, 'growing through' bits so they lose feather; and with the added stress going down with disease at the worst time for them to do so. Every year we find birds held back for weeks due to management concerns on shoots and – in my opinion – the end user must then take the risk and responsibility.

There have been attempts to create health passports for birds going to wood, detailing the diseases they have met and been treated for. Sadly, these have led to conflict through lack of understanding whereby the end users have argued that any disease in rearing means the birds will always be sick and anything ever after is the rearing field's fault. The more informed keeper will realise that disease in rearing, properly and effectively treated, is not a problem and can even be an advantage as the birds will have started on their path to immunity.

Disease lifecycles and causes

Let's look at the major diseases that are common around release – hexamita and trichomoniasis (the two often grouped together – incorrectly in my view), as well as coccidiosis.

Hexamita can occur in a matter of hours. It is clearly stress-related and the birds rapidly emaciate. Trichomonas can build over a couple of days and seems to affect certain pens/shoots consistently. The decline seen in birds is slower than with hexamita. Coccidiosis has a lifecycle that is predictable yet has strains that vary in virulence and significance. Clearly just a few days following delivery, it becomes impossible to apportion blame for disease outbreaks. For this reason many rearing fields stipulate that if there are any concerns over the delivered birds, these must be raised within the first couple of days or they will not accept any claim from the client.

So what can a gamekeeper do to reduce risk?

The first and most important thing is to have a good, long-term relationship with a rearing field. So long as the rearing field does its best, moving suppliers on the basis of one poorer season is rarely a good idea. Weather and associated conditions play

a part in rearing, and many other factors come into play.

I am currently investigating coccidiosis strains. Coccidiosis drives most other diseases of the release period because the gut damage can lead to increased risk of motile protozoans (hexamita, etc) establishing. It is unclear as yet, but by moving suppliers you may potentially risk exposure to different coccidiosis strains – incoming birds may not have developed immunity to the strains you have in your pens (it hangs around for years). Certainly we find that keeping the same supplier for the same pens year on year works.

If you have a lot of disease in any one year, then depopulate the shoot after the season. Old cock birds that always turn up as soon as poults arrive are not helpful and can carry over disease from one year to the next.

Most importantly, pay attention to the release environment. In some cases this may be limited by what is feasible – here in the South Downs a major part of the medicine use is on pens on the north facing scarps, whereas the warm, southern pens rarely trouble us. But even where pens struggle for reasons outside our control, many problems can be alleviated through attention to detail, so never stop trying to improve.

Here are few pointers from a vet's view (and these are the sort of factors that will be looked at in any dispute):

- Feeders and drinkers should be clean and plentiful, similar to those used in rearing so that birds find them quickly, and spread throughout the pen so all birds can access them easily without conflict and resource guarding. For example, one 32cm bell drinker per 50 birds (based on the linear circumference availing space to drink at peak times). There should also, ideally, be as many feed stations as needed to match the drinker measurements.
- Water supply should be tested and confirmed as suitable, always fresh, easily medicated if needed, controlled and checked regularly. Dehydration is the worst thing that can happen to a bird.
- Food should be similar (or the same) in size and formulation when poults first go to wood, so there are no palatability issues.
- Roosting areas should be plentiful over at least a third of the pen and spread over the pen area.
- There should be plenty of suitable ground cover (30-150cm height) that afford the birds a place to hide from predators and be protected from the elements. A third of the pen area is ideal.



Mark Elliott is a specialist gamebird vet within the South Downs Veterinary Consultancy. In his spare time he runs a busy small animal practice treating a high proportion of working dogs. He is also secretary to the NGO Deer Branch committee.

Contact 01243 779111, mark@southdownsvets.co.uk, www.southdownsvets.co.uk.

- There should be open areas where light can penetrate near to the cover.
- There should be no wet areas in the pen (including ruts from driving in) nor contamination from the previous year.
- In fact, there should be no ruts anyway as driving through multiple pens is never a good idea as this can spread disease.
- Stocking densities should be no more than 400 birds per acre in non-ancient woodland, less in sensitive areas (follow GWCT guidelines). Lower densities can require more feeders and drinkers to cover all areas for ease of bird access.
- Poults for a pen should be from one source and, where mixing of birds from close pens occurs, the same principle applies. They should all be the same age and released at the same time.
- There should be good predator control in place, where legal and practical.
- Birds should be checked at least daily.
- Remember – what is easier for the keeper may not be better for the birds – a good keeper accepts that.

More articles on the details of some of these points, often *KtB* articles, can be found on my website (see box above). ●