

Moving towards self-sufficiency

Dr Mark Elliott BVSc VetFFHom MRCVS PCH DSH RSHom looks at how best to prepare for inevitable future bird flu outbreaks.

Unsurprisingly, with all the chaos resulting from the Avian Influenza outbreaks affecting chick and poul supply this year, attention is already turning to the 2023 rearing season and how best to mitigate against similar disaster for shoots.

We can be fairly certain that minds are focused similarly across the Channel, and steps are certainly being taken to prevent such problems again and rebuild the supply chain, but it is also possible it may take some time to re-establish in full after three hard years already due to Covid. French and European stock will continue to be a significant source for the UK, not least due to the quality of the birds.

For the short term at least, many clients are already establishing over-wintering flocks, or considering shooting lightly on hens towards the end of the season and catching up in late January to secure egg supply. Some are taking a longer-term view and investing heavily in hatchery development, rearing infrastructure and seeking to become entirely self-sufficient. We expect to see a return to the keepers' (and vets') roles being more all-year round.

Careful thought is essential as there are many pitfalls, not least a generation of keepers being expected to pick this up, many of whom will have little or no experience in breeding and rearing. Education and working to known standards will play a part. The course curricula designed by the British Veterinary Poultry Association's (BVPA's) Gamebird sub-committee and launched by many practices in 2022, are well thought out and thorough, which will help. I ran courses this spring relating to rearing and releasing and, despite Covid still being around, the courses were well attended and well received, with over 140 keepers, staff and students coming. Word has got round about how useful these are, and more dates are planned. A breeding and hatching module is one of those courses. The new Trusted Game Health & Welfare scheme, which most vet practices covering gamebirds are now signed up to, has auditing and advice on

standards for all life stages, from the laying flocks to release, and these are useful for benchmarking when planning – ask your vet about these as well.

Perhaps the most important consideration now is where and how you source your laying stock. All the planning and training in the world will not help you if you start with poor quality or diseased birds, the impacts of which only escalate as the season goes on.

2022 saw a mad rush for almost any pheasant available and some producers got

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badly caught by buying in disease-carrying stock; there have been some significant losses in lay, as well as problems passed on to the poults.

Stock should ideally be traceable back – at the very least – to the parent flocks, which themselves should have been clean and disease free. Poults bred to become breeding birds should not have been in contact with (or worse, suffered) diseases that can cause ongoing difficulties for the future.

Perhaps the most obvious disease that can pass on, and which people are aware of, is Mycoplasma. It is a good example to consider as it is the disease that causes the most anxiety and concern. The NGO sponsored research into this disease via a BVPA Working Party and that research concluded that elimination of infected stock was the only way forward. The guidelines formulated from that research are available online. Certainly, that has been the approach I have adopted with my clients and together we achieved a reduction to just one case in 2021 across the whole area of the South East that I cover. That outbreak arose from an outside, clean source of

eggs contaminated (we believe) by the contract rearing in the hatchery – mixing eggs from clean and diseased flocks.

That same NGO-sponsored research confirmed vaccination as a tool that only masked problems at best, and outbreaks of Mycoplasma in chicks and poults bred from vaccinated hens are often reported. The vaccines mostly utilised are those known as autogenous vaccines – in simple terms made from the disease on the farm. Although these vaccines remain a tool to help 'control' Mycoplasma problems in endemic areas

and on infected premises, their use is governed by legislation and they are restricted to infected and directly at-risk stock identified as part of an epidemiological unit. Infected stock, despite treatment, can produce carriers of the disease that may bring down future flocks at times of stress, such as during lay. For this reason, many vets would avoid recommending selecting poults for future breeding when the chicks derive from

Mycoplasma-vaccinated parent flocks.

Testing for the disease has become more common and is a useful tool to consider; it does, however, have limitations – not least that it takes just one infected bird to bring down a flock. It is both impractical and unaffordable to test every bird, and the testing anyway is not 100% reliable. Testing can, however, provide some confidence regarding bought-in stock if results come back clear, and we don't have much else available. For this reason quarantining incoming groups of birds, before moving them into the main flock, is now common practice while test results are awaited. Quarantining anyway is logical for many disease risks.

If catching up, remember that pheasants wander, and disease on neighbouring estates can be an important consideration. Working together benefits everyone as the health of the UK flock can only improve if we are open about these things when seeking to eliminate problems.

Lastly, but not least, Avian Influenza has not gone away, indeed the observed persistence of HPAI (H5) virus in birds





since the 2020-21 epidemic wave indicates it may well have become endemic in wild bird populations in Europe, creating a year-round risk. Biosecurity (as far as is practical) is a must. You must also register your flock with APHA.

Do discuss disease risk and mitigation with your vet well ahead of sourcing and placing stock, both over-wintered and caught up.

Moving on from disease risk, one has also to look at when and what stock you need for your ideal hen/poult. Some strains of pheasant will lay earlier and produce more eggs; some strains may be better suited to different laying systems. Are you going to have birds in groups in large pens? Would aviaries and small groups be better? What buildings are available? Do you have raised cages, and will you be able to use them in the future with bans being discussed? Have you allowed for expected mortality of hens in rear? Have you allowed for worst case scenarios? What is your back-up plan?

Consider when you need your poults to move to wood and your release pen sizes. You need to rear batches to fit your pens' stocking requirements, as adding in later, or mixing ages of birds is a recipe for disaster from a disease and management viewpoint. If staffing is limited, how are you going to time your batches of reared birds around the usual jobs of setting up pens, etc? The last thing a keeper needs

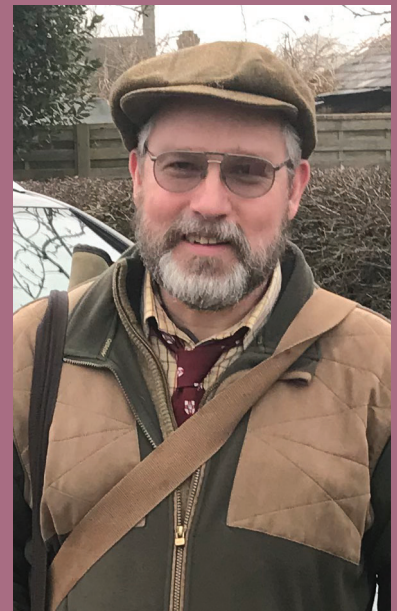
is chicks still arriving when putting birds to wood.

Local co-operatives are being looked at in which shoots have their own caught-up laying stock but pool eggs so they can rear chicks in fewer batches, and of the correct amounts for individual need. Ideally you want to avoid multi-age rearing sites as they generally suffer more disease as the season progresses. A couple of batches delivered as day-olds is better, and most of the tasks, such as biting, can be well out of the way by the time the first batch goes to wood.

Have you an arrangement for the incubation of any eggs produced? There is already a shortage of new incubators and hatchers so you may need to seek out someone who can contract hatch for you. That is easier said than done as many larger producers will be unwilling, having put time and effort into disease prevention in their own stock, to risk incubating your eggs if you have not done the same. Biosecurity needs to become a state of mind, rather than an afterthought.

There is a lot to consider (only touched on in this article) but it can be done. It was done and done well in years past, but with the shooting season upon us it is easy to get distracted. With the shortage of stock to source from being a major concern this season, it is obvious that just buying/catching any hen available is clearly a risk you do not want to take. Plan ahead! ●

Above: If you're going to catch up you need to do it in late January and not after 1 February.



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