

RSPB review of gamebird shooting and  
associated land management in the UK

# **Engagement with the shooting community: summary of feedback**

May 2020



## Executive summary

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### Background

The RSPB is developing policy to help understand and manage the environmental impact of gamebird shooting and its associated land management. To inform its policy development, the RSPB consulted with its members and key stakeholders to gather feedback on a set of draft principles that, if applied to shooting and associated land management, could improve the natural environment.

3KQ was appointed by the RSPB as an independent, impartial consultancy to gather views from within the shooting community, in particular shoot owners, managers, agents and shooting clients, in order to understand the perspective of this important group of stakeholders.

Our report to the RSPB is a summary of what we (3KQ) heard, both in relation to the set of draft principles provided by the RSPB for feedback, and regarding the wider context of the policy review.

### Participation

We carried out telephone interviews with 60 people. All conversations were confidential, meaning we took written notes to feed into the report, but that the names of any individuals participating will not be shared with the RSPB. This was designed to enable participants to be frank and open with their responses.

Because of the diversity of the shooting community itself, the crossover between stakeholder roles (with some stakeholders holding multiple roles in the shooting community), and the fact that many participants engage in a range of different scales and types of shooting, it is difficult to attribute specific views to specific roles or types of shooting. Indeed, our impression is that the range of views described here generally cuts across the whole range of roles and types of shooting, although a larger quantitative study would be needed to either confirm this or to pull out any definitive differences between groups.

Stakeholder type	No. of participants: first role	No. of participants: second role	No. of participants: third role
Shoot manager / provider / owner / gamekeeper	27	6	-
Client / gun	8	6	2
Agent	5	6	1
Land agent / manager for a number of shoots	4	1	-
Commentator / journalist	4	1	1
Works for representative / shooting organisation	4	2	-
Game breeder / seller	2	-	-
Other (e.g. consultant, other organisation connected to shooting, photographer)	6	3	-

Location	No. of participants
England	22
Scotland	17
Northern Ireland	5
Wales	2
Combination / national / international	14

Upland / lowland	No. of participants
Upland	12
Lowland	10
Both	26
N/A or uncertain	12

## Feedback on the topic of gamebird shooting and conservation

### Strong links

All participants acknowledged the link between conservation and gamebird shooting. In almost all cases, this link was seen as a positive one, with the following points being commonly raised:

- Management activities that create or maintain good habitat for gamebirds also create good habitat for a number of other species.
- Good land management has wider benefits to ecosystems and biodiversity.
- Sustainable land management makes sense in order to retain the ability to shoot.
- There is a moral imperative to take the responsibility of land management seriously, including from a conservation perspective, as no one wants to willingly damage habitats.
- The UK has very little natural landscape, with most of it having been managed for many years, so needs continued management in order to maintain or enhance the ability of certain species to thrive – the shooting industry has always been an integral part of this management.

The wider contribution of gamebird shooting to local communities and economies, and the financial investment it brings to UK-wide conservation activities was an additional focus for some participants.

Those participants that mentioned potential negative environmental impacts tended to focus on gamebird shooting with high release densities, often adding that these more intensive activities have tended to become less popular in recent years and that self-regulation is improving.

There were two common themes across the majority of responses, which participants mentioned in relation to the need for a practical, flexible and responsive approach to land management for game:

- Balance – including the need to sustain species in numbers that help to balance the overall habitat and ecosystem, and the need to balance local context with on-the-ground knowledge and evolving scientific research.
- Diversity – including the range of types, size, locations and contexts (e.g. regarding other land management activity and environmental context) of gamebird shoots.

Some acknowledged the difficulty people might have in reconciling care for birds and the wider environment with the activity of shooting, but many participants felt strongly that the majority of those currently involved in gamebird shooting see conservation as integral to the industry, and are keen to contribute to habitats and ecosystems that are diverse and sustainable.

### Changing attitudes

Participants observed that the increased interest in environmental impacts of gamebird shooting, particularly of more intensive forms, has come from both outside and within the industry. Outside

the industry, they tended to say this interest came conservation groups or more extreme pressure groups. This often came with concern that this is sometimes based on misinformation or driven by a vocal anti-shooting agenda, not helped by a historic lack of communication from the shooting industry about the benefits it can bring. In terms of changing attitudes within the industry, there were two common viewpoints:

- There has been increased interest in and discussion about environmental impacts and conservation benefits across the board – including from providers, clients and agents.
- There has been no increase in interest since that interest has always been there, although perhaps conservation is becoming more of a target than a by-product of gamebird shooting.

Participants commonly spoke about historic bad practice or the presence of a small proportion of people still carrying out poor practice within the industry, but many said that there has been significant positive change with respect to self-regulation (e.g. through industry bodies) and sustainable shooting practices, particularly in the last 10-15 years. Some added that this change is being further catalysed by a decreased interest in more intensive forms of shooting, and the drive from younger members of the shooting community to focus on sustainability.

### **Current practices**

Many participants described specific activities they had carried out, were in the process of undertaking, or were aware of others doing, to improve the environmental benefits of shooting and associated land management. These included:

- Shoot-specific activities such as reducing release numbers, reducing antibiotic use, and breeding native species such as grey partridge for conservation rather than shooting.
- Wider management activities such as diverse planting, adoption of the principle of net biodiversity gain as part of self-regulation, undertaking natural capital assessment, restoring peat or moorland and partnership with conservation organisations on specific projects.

## **Feedback on the draft principles**

### **General comments on the development of principles**

Across the board, participants agreed with the need for good practice and positive environmental impact from shooting activities, but tended to feel that the shooting industry is already on the right path in this regard with self-regulation and shifting customer preferences. Several participants said that the nature of shooting should be to limit impacts and enable conservation benefits, through the way in which land is managed to create favourable habitats for a wide range of species, for net biodiversity gain, and to ensure shooting can happen year-to-year at a sustainable level.

For the majority of participants, the idea of additional legislation or regulation from outside the shooting industry was not welcomed, and many saw the RSPB's principles – whatever their intended application – as the start of a slippery slope towards restricting or banning shooting, and jeopardising some of the conservation work being done on the ground, regardless of how sensible the principles themselves might be.

Although some participants outright rejected the idea of changing practices based on external input, many said that if the evidence was there, then the shooting community should listen and be willing to change. Where that evidence comes from, who collates and assesses it was more of an issue for these participants. Several were cautious or rejected the idea of the RSPB fulfilling a neutral role in this regard, due to a lack of trust over underlying motivations and the questioning of the RSPB's stated neutral position on gamebird shooting.

The idea of defining limits on environmental impact tended to be received with the response "it depends", supported by the following points:

- Blanket limits don't make sense due to the wide range of different local contexts and biological

interactions at any individual shooting location.

- It depends on the detail of what is being limited, to what end, and upon who would develop and monitor.
- In order to set limits, there needs to be a full and objective understanding of the data and the science surrounding cause and effect, and there is not currently enough research to provide this in many cases.
- Limits are necessary in some cases, e.g. with intensive pheasant shooting, but there needs to be a sense of proportionate application, common sense, and balance.
- Any limits would need to be agreed rather than enforced.

### Comments applicable to all principles

Alongside the comments above, much of the feedback on individual principles applies to the full set. This includes the following points:

- Some or all of the principles are common sense and agreed with, and in many cases already widely practised, but there are issues with the RSPB developing them and issues with the detail of the principles themselves.
- The principles do not appear to recognise the increasing and wide range of good practice that is already happening across the shooting community. For example, the framing and language used could give the perception that bad practice is assumed.
- There is a risk that the principles miss all audiences because the majority are compliant with them, and those that aren't may become defensive and less willing to engage or change.
- The deep understanding that comes from every day, on-the-ground practice and first-hand data does not appear to be accounted for or valued. Equally, principles need to be based on the full range of current scientific understanding, gathered in a neutral and unbiased way.
- There is not enough detail, definition or context to the principles – this is of particular concern to those who feel that the principles could be used to catalyse a ban on gamebird shooting.
- Any principles need to be flexible to different settings and circumstances, taking account of the overall land management mix and objectives in different locations, as well as the actual numbers of particular species present in any one place.

### Comments applicable to specific principles

A brief summary of the key messages in response to each principle is provided below.

- **Principle 1: Shooting must not adversely affect the population of any native species targeted for shooting.** Largely agreed with in principle, and seen as fundamental to good shooting practice: only shoot a sustainable surplus. Lacks definition, particularly “adverse”. The species given as examples are rarely (grey partridge) or never (black grouse) targeted for shooting, and without intervention by the shooting community would be at risk of extinction. **See also comments applicable to all principles above.**
- **Principle 2: Effective measures should be in place to ensure that shooting operates within the law and those not complying with the law must lose their permission to shoot.** This goes without saying, as all shooting should operate within the law, although there will always be some people in any community that break the law. Additional licensing is unnecessary. The current law should be examined to ensure it remains up to date with scientific evidence, and to ensure effective investigation and appropriate penalties (either harsher or more lenient). **See also comments applicable to all principles above.**
- **Principle 3: Management must not adversely affect the population of any native species in order to increase the shootable surplus of gamebirds, this should be underpinned by**

**transparent reporting of the number of animals killed.** Mixed views – seen as generally sensible and fundamental to good land management, but issues with taking account of local circumstances and the need to focus on the overarching aim of achieving balance, with concern about unintended consequences. Requires further definition. The example of the mountain hare received strong pushback, with many participants commenting that management for gamebird shooting contributed to mountain hare numbers and that this species was visibly more prolific on managed grouse moors than on unmanaged land. **See also comments applicable to all principles above.**

- **Principle 4: Species in favourable conservation status, killed for the purposes of maintaining or enhancing the activity of gamebird shooting, should be managed in accordance with best practice guidance.** Overall agreement and already felt to be the case – everything to do with gamebird shooting should be carried out in accordance with best practice. Best practice needs clarification, as may depend on location, and depends who is responsible for defining and overseeing. Any new guidance should be based on dialogue and agreement. **See also comments applicable to all principles above**
- **Principle 5: Land used for gamebird hunting should be managed in a manner that protects and enhances the natural habitats and ecosystem services it supports.** Should already be the case for the majority of land managed for shooting. Good habitat is an important foundation for, and should be an aim of, gamebird shooting activities. Gamebird shooting is rarely the sole focus of land management, and every location is different. A natural habitat, and therefore a baseline to compare outcomes against, is very difficult to define, due to the long history of land being managed or impacted by human activity in the UK. The language of the principle could be plainer English. **See also comments applicable to all principles above.**
- **Principle 6: Some practices associated with shooting need to be assessed for their environmental impacts and, if necessary, to be better regulated or stopped.** Significant caution or scepticism due to concern about an underlying agenda to restrict or stop gamebird shooting. General agreement that if specific activities were proven to have environmental impact the industry should be willing to change, but with caveats that the industry is already assessing and self-regulating on many fronts, and that any assessment should be undertaken with care, taking account of best available research and knowledge – which is often conflicting. **See also comments applicable to all principles above.**

## Feedback on the relationship between the shooting community and the RSPB

### Shared purpose

“Common ground” was a strong theme for those who discussed the relationship between the shooting community and the RSPB. Many felt the two are or should be focused on similar objectives with respect to conservation. Some noted the significant investment in conservation activities made by the shooting community, as well as on-the-ground partnership working between the RSPB (and others) and the shooting community in relation to particular projects or locations.

Several participants acknowledged that there are some within the shooting industry that don't share, or appear to share, the overarching objective of environmental benefit and conservation. This group were clearly felt to be in the minority, and many participants talked about the growing pressure from within the industry to identify and call out examples of bad practice.

### Shifting relationships

Although several participants commented on the important role played by the RSPB, there is a clear sense that many feel the relationship between the shooting community and the RSPB – at least at a national level – could be in a much better place than it currently is, particularly given the shared interests discussed above. Reasons given for this included the following:

- Feeling let down by the RSPB, particularly in relation to national messaging about gamebird shooting and associated land management, for example a lack of acknowledgement of the benefits it can bring.
- Perceived mismatches between what the RSPB communicates and what it does on land it manages, for example regarding the scale of and rationale for predator control on its own land.

A few participants recognised that the shooting community could have done, and could still do, a better job of communicating how it has changed and what it contributes to conservation efforts.

### **Current perceptions**

Several participants noted that there is some great work happening on the ground between the shooting community, the RSPB and others. But there is a clear message about the lack of trust and engagement at the national level.

Many recognised the challenge and tension that might be felt by the RSPB in engaging with multiple stakeholders with potentially very different views. Dialogue and the building of a greater understanding on all sides were far more popular solutions among participants than continuing to let relationships erode.

### **Rediscovering common ground**

Many participants called for increased engagement between the RSPB and the shooting community – either with shooting associations or representative interests, or by engaging more on-the-ground. Transparency and having the right people around the table were felt to be fundamental to any process of rebuilding trust and shared understanding

All participants commenting on this suggested that the continued erosion of trust and relationship could only have detrimental effects on the conservation of birds and wider ecosystems, while a recognition of shared purpose and common ground could lead to significant conservation benefits.