



# BRIEFING: THE 'GAMEBIRD' SHOOTING INDUSTRY

## CAMPAIGN AIM A BAN ON THE USE OF BATTERY CAGES FOR PHEASANT AND PARTRIDGE PRODUCTION

### THE BREEDING CAGES

- 'Gamebird' production typically involves the use of metal battery cages for birds used for egg production, as well as industrial hatcheries, sheds (which can each hold as many as 10,000 birds) and large release pens.

- Each pheasant breeding cage holds one male and between eight and ten females. The units are fitted with a wire mesh sloping floor so that the eggs can roll through for easy collection. The roof is usually made from flexible wire netting, although some cages have been covered by rigid wire mesh. The cages are exposed to the elements and the birds have little respite from the wind, rain, cold and burning sun.

- Partridges are confined in breeding pairs in enclosed metal boxes that are correspondingly smaller and even more bleak than the pheasant units. Animal Aid's undercover team has filmed partridges in these boxes that breach the official Welfare Code, because they are utterly barren.

### Stress, Feather Loss, Wounds

- Our undercover evidence demonstrates that the caged birds suffer a high incidence of stress, as well as feather loss, and back and head wounds from stress-induced aggression. Many of the pheasants lunge repeatedly at their cage roofs in a futile attempt to escape. The resulting damage to their heads is known as 'scalping'.

### Fitted with Restraining Devices

- In an effort to eliminate the aggression between the birds caused by the crowded conditions in the breeding cages (as well as in the rearing sheds and release pens), 'game' farmers fit restraining devices over the birds' beaks to prevent them from pecking their cage-mates.

### THE £420,000 SHAM STUDY

- In 2010, Defra Minister, Jim Paice, withdrew an Animal Welfare Act (AWA) Code of Practice for 'gamebird' production that had been introduced in the final days of the Labour government and which would have outlawed battery cages for breeding pheasants. He replaced it

with one that allowed the cages to stay – albeit in a so-called 'enriched' form. This generally means that the birds have a plastic curtain set towards the back of the cage for 'privacy' and a block of wood or a piece of dowel suspended on two bricks for perching. In reality, these 'improvements' make little difference to the bleak prisons and the distress of the caged birds.

In 2009, Defra initiated a major study, costing more than £420,000, into *whether* the cages could meet the welfare needs of 'gamebirds' used for breeding. Astonishingly, the report was not published until July 2015 and, instead of looking at *whether* cages could be justified, or comparing the lives of caged birds with their wild counterparts, the study compared cages of different sizes and with different kinds of 'enrichments'.

Seventy-two pheasant and 48 partridge units were configured in different ways to test what would best suit the birds. However, the commercially expedient adaptations, referred to as 'enrichments', were determined by a group of stakeholders, most of whom were from representative bodies of the game farming and shooting industries.

It was found that enriched cages offered little welfare improvements on cages that were barren. But this was to be expected because, as Animal Aid has long argued, and as one of the study's stakeholders, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) also used to argue, it is the cages themselves that are the problem. In December 2010, BASC had called for an outright ban on the units because '... the available space in such cages is so limited, that the welfare of the birds is seriously compromised and ... the system does not conform, whether enriched or not, to the five freedoms which are the basis of the UK's welfare law'.

It is clear that, for industry stakeholders, what was wanted most from the Defra study was to be able to claim scientific legitimacy for their brutal confinement system. By fixing the key parameters, such as which enrichments were to be added or withheld, and by comparing one



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type of cage with another, rather than measuring the experience of caged pheasants and partridges with their wild equivalents, the industry got the result it wanted. Also of help to industry stakeholders was that key welfare indicators were omitted. These included data on the number of birds who died during the study. Also absent was an assessment of the impact of 'thermal stress' on birds confined to cages that are exposed to all-year-round severe weather.

## PUBLIC OPPOSITION TO CAGES

- A YouGov opinion poll commissioned by Animal Aid in June 2014 found that 77 per cent of respondents opposed the use of cages to breed partridges and pheasants for sport shooting. The figure rose to 87 per cent when counting only those who expressed a view.

## BACKGROUND ON THE INDUSTRY

### Scale of Production and Costs

- It is estimated that as many as 50 million pheasants and partridges for shooting were released in 2014.<sup>1</sup>
- It costs around 13 times more to produce a pheasant and to get that bird airborne than the shot bird will fetch retail – evidence that the birds are bred for 'sport', not food.<sup>2</sup>

### Feathered Targets

- A few weeks before the start of the partridge and pheasant shooting seasons (they run from 1 September to 1 February), the birds are released, thereby causing problems for native wildlife, who must compete with them for food and cover.
- Having been farm-reared, the 'gamebirds' are ill-suited for life in the wild. Some 50 per cent will die before they can be shot. Many will starve, be run over or succumb to predators.
- On shoot days, surviving birds are 'beaten' up into the sky to serve as feathered targets. A group of eight shooters, each of them paying as much as £1,000, might kill 400 birds in a single day. A significant number who are shot will not be eaten: the pleasure for many 'guns' lies in the killing rather than the eating.

### Slaughter of Wildlife

- Large numbers of pheasants and partridges inevitably attract – and, in fact, boost the populations of – predator species such as stoats, weasels, foxes and members of the crow family. Gamekeepers kill them with guns, traps and snares. Non-target animals, such as dogs, cats and sheep, are also inadvertently killed. But protected birds of prey,

including owls and kestrels, are deliberately poisoned by some gamekeepers. Certain species, including ground-nesting birds, do not impact on 'gamebird' production and are, therefore, not persecuted by gamekeepers. Since their natural predators are killed, these untargeted animals flourish. This allows the shooting industry to promote its slaughter of wildlife as a vital conservation effort.

- Another of 'game' shooting's vices is the discharging of tonnes of toxic lead shot into the environment every year, where it is ingested by swans, ducks, geese and other birds.

### Cheating the Public Purse

- Animal Aid has demonstrated the shooting industry's consistent failure to pay business rates and VAT, with the latter amounting to a shortfall that was estimated by HMRC, as far back as 2006, to be between £12 million and £20 million. Animal Aid continues to be vigilant and frequently informs the relevant authorities about non-payment of rates, resulting in payment being collected. Many establishments, however, still evade their obligations.

### TIME FOR A BAN

- In The Netherlands, the production of birds for 'sport shooting' was first curbed in 1986 and outlawed entirely in 2002. The action was taken largely because of concerns about potential damage to the environment caused by large releases of pheasants. Animal Aid is calling for a similar ban to be introduced in Britain. **As a matter of urgency, we are calling for the outlawing of battery cages, through the introduction of a new Animal Welfare Act Code of Practice.**

1 Martin Harper blog, RSPB, 'The RSPB and Shooting: separating fact from fiction', 29/03/2015

2 *Shooting Times*, 19 January 2011



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