

Annual Grouse about Shooting Grouse

While other game bird seasons are autumn and winter pastimes for those with appropriate access, the grouse season starts in the summer on the 12th August – for historical reasons.

It indexed off the social 'season' when debutantes were presented at court and then hawked around sporting meetings and cultural events for socially acceptable predatory young men to take note of. One went to the Henley Regatta, Wimbledon for the tennis, Bisley for the rifle shooting; there's also Polo, Trooping the Colour, various horse racing meetings, the Chelsea flower show etc. Mr D'Arcy could dine out for the whole social season on expectant fathers-in-law.

For the top tier of society it ended with Cowes Week, a sailing regatta on the tidal waters of the Solent under the gardens of Osborne House in the first week of August. Then everyone headed for the hills for the grouse shooting to start on the 12th.

It may not be quite like that now. Debs have 'A' level exams in the middle of the season, the historic landed gentry are still paying off 20th century death duties and the grouse moors have become multi-million pound businesses where the shooting is let to those who can afford it.

The emotive attacks of the old days, in which it was deemed by Cromwellian types unacceptable to shoot grouse (or anything else), but OK for hen harriers and golden eagles to eat them alive, fell largely on deaf ears. Much of our food industry involves the slaughter of animals for human consumption. The wildlife contribution to sustaining us remains a significant proportion of the whole; fish are wildlife.

Where supplies are outstripped by demand, 'wildlife' is farmed; venison and salmon are examples. Grouse are in that sense 'farmed' by way of management of the land and of the freeloaders who predate grouse. And that is where the current 'anti' attacks are centred.

Moorland management is said to have environmental knock-on effects (relating to water) that taxpayers ultimately pay for and those wildlife species that include grouse in their diet are mysteriously under-represented over and near grouse moors. In a week where the natural balance of nature was in the news – Zimbabwean resident and alpha male lion Cecil turned up dead with the finger of blame pointing at an American big game trophy hunter - the issue is the unintended (or indeed intended) consequences of skewing the natural balance of wildlife.

In the case of grouse, their natural existence depended on lightning burning off old heather to allow new shoots to flourish for the grouse to eat. Where this happened, the wildlife that eats grouse would also flourish and where nature forgot to set light to the heather, grouse numbers dwindled as they starved and so did predator numbers, as they starved too.

Every eco-system works the same way; so where the natural habitat of the species that lions live on (or off) is ploughed up for farming or built over for housing, wildlife suffers a decline; that reduces the lions' food source, so starvation reduces their numbers. In the case of lions, the 'conservation' interference is big game hunting, rather than using the natural selection method of starvation to keep their numbers at sustainable levels.

Someone who understands these things assesses the habitat and all that live therein and from that what is a sustainable number of antelope; wildebeest and lions can be calculated. Surpluses to those numbers are unnatural and unsustainable, so in Zimbabwe they sell big game licences to hunters, based on selling off the right to cull surplus wildlife as a revenue stream.

It's a farming technique; farmers know how many sheep/cows/horses/geese can be sustained per acre of grass without that renewable resource running out; factoring in buffer feeding in the winter and so on. Their calculations can be skewed, of course, by freeloaders such as wild geese or rabbits taking a share. One has to allow for that or do something about it.

Back on the grouse moor, skewing the moorland habitat to maximise the grouse population means good bags and large cheques, but it should also have a benefit for the predators. Where that is not happening, the likes of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) get suspicious. Their position, by the by, seems to be that moorlands should not be managed for the benefit of grouse and those that survive in their failing habitat should be eaten by hen harriers.

The multi-million pound businesses that survive by managing the land should go away. The trouble with that thinking is that all Britain's land is managed in some way or other for someone's living, albeit not always for the food chain. We also grow bio-diesel and timber, for example. So why would one way of making a living from manipulating nature be less acceptable than another? All have the same goal, that of harnessing nature to the benefit of mankind, whether that's a roast pheasant with all the trimmings, a very expensive day out grouse shooting or harvesting trees planted fifty years ago from which to cut roof beams: food, recreation and commodities.

The grouse moor shortage of hen harriers and Golden eagles is probably because these species are not managed; they are 'protected'. The RSPB will likely say that their numbers are being controlled illegally. The logical solution is, as with lions in Zimbabwe, to work out what a proportionate population of avian predators is natural and reasonable in the circumstances and then to manage their numbers to that level. The law doesn't facilitate that. It's an all or nothing approach and its failure is obvious.

Consider the wood pigeon; Colonel Peter Hawker kept diaries and log books of his shooting activities from 1802 onwards and in forty years shot barely one wood pigeon every other year. And he was not known for passing up the chance to shoot anything, so the inference is that wood pigeon were nowhere near as numerous then as they are now. To be fair, one should bear in mind that in 1802 he would have been using a flintlock, albeit one at the zenith of efficiency, this being just before the earliest cap lock systems made their appearance. Clay pigeons are a tough call with a flintlock, so there may have been more pigeon about that did not present, considering the limits of his equipment, as possible targets.

In 1988, the League Against Cruel Sports reckoned that we shot thirty million wood pigeon a year. Whatever the number, if they had been around in such quantities in Col. Hawker's day, he would have achieved, surely, a greater lifetime bag than the nineteen he did.

So, as the human population increased, more corn was planted and fields got bigger as mechanisation demanded easier access. Huge prairies of corn beckoned wood pigeon and their numbers increased. One can either accommodate their freeloaders or do something about it. In practice, we do a

mixture of both; wood pigeons are shot and still wildlife eats about a third of what we plant, so there is an acceptable predation number.

The other impact on pigeon numbers that governmental interference had was a policy of wiping out the species that predate pigeons; peregrines, buzzards et al during the world wars to give carrier pigeons arriving from Occupied Europe a better chance of getting through. Those species are 'protected' now and are on the increase due to the abundance of pigeon to live on (or off). As are those corvids who live off (or on) road kill.

Thinking about the war briefly, we also notice that ash trees have really begun to reassert themselves: self-sewn, they stand in their millions all over the southeast of Britain. It has taken a long time. Ash trees were harvested during WW2. Every accessible mature tree went into the war effort. The timber went to a variety of uses, including gliders and Mosquito aircraft. After the war, labour shortages meant there was no systematic replanting of this thirsty hardwood tree and the absence of the mature trees producing seeds meant that it has taken a long time for the puny ones left to grow up and then to multiply.

Our point is that if one manages one aspect of nature, there will be a knock-on effect for the rest. We have no problem with grouse shooting per se; it's out of our price range but is clearly a profitable use of the land to the benefit of the owners. We can be certain of that because, as with lorry fleets, there is no government subsidy for managing a grouse moor. Some industries have their hands in the government's pockets – railways, as an example. Nobody can run a railway without government handouts, because it's a quaint, outmoded nineteenth century mode of transport, sustained by public money for its museum value.

Nobody puts a lorry on the road unless it can pay its way. There are no subsidies; one pays a heavy road tax for using the roads. In the case of a grouse moor, it's profitable and if not it would close down. The way to address the issue currently concentrating the antis is to include grouse moor predators in the system of management; define a sensible population of hen harriers that one can afford predated the grouse, (let them have a third of the chicks) allow their numbers to grow to that level and then keep them at that sustainable level.

There seemed to be a lot of ignorance around in the wake of Cecil's demise, but for those who have thought about the process of fitting as much wildlife as possible into the remaining habitat, it makes sense. The 'Cecil problem' is that he was killed while at the apex of the social pyramid of lion society. Normally, the apex male would be left in charge until challenged and defeated by a younger rival; then he's fair game, as his role in his society is over.

By including both predators and the vegetarians they live off (or on) in the management scheme of the countryside, Zimbabwe has a better management system than we have in the UK. It could be sorted out here, albeit never to the satisfaction of those who object to shooting as a sport.

The SRA is a broad church, so we recognize that our membership includes people who shoot birds for fun and those who hate the idea of it. What our members have in common is the various certificates and exemptions in the Firearms Act, 1968, as amended. Our public liability insurance extends to all the legitimate activities to which those firearms can be put, be that a commando with a blank-firing Sten gun at 'War and Peace', a George III period soldier with a flintlock musket in a sentry box at Dover Castle, or a man with a Bofors Gun

demonstrating the undiminished quality of its rotator bearings so long after it was made.

On the live ammunition side, our members shoot clay pigeons, real pigeons and probably grouse; not to mention anything else (legal) that is a valid target, be that paper, cardboard or wildlife. What we don't do is attack any of the activities our members legitimately undertake. In this instance, we heard of the traditional annual attack on grouse shooting, looked at the facts and saw a logical solution, as presented above.

We know it won't be adopted; too many interests are vested in raging about the problem to want a solution. You will see that in our next blog, about the Law Commission's proposals for the law relating to firearms.