



Why we must face up to our responsibilities

The 2018/19 season was dominated by discussion about bag sizes and the market for shot game. With these issues now in the public domain, what must we do to safeguard our sport?

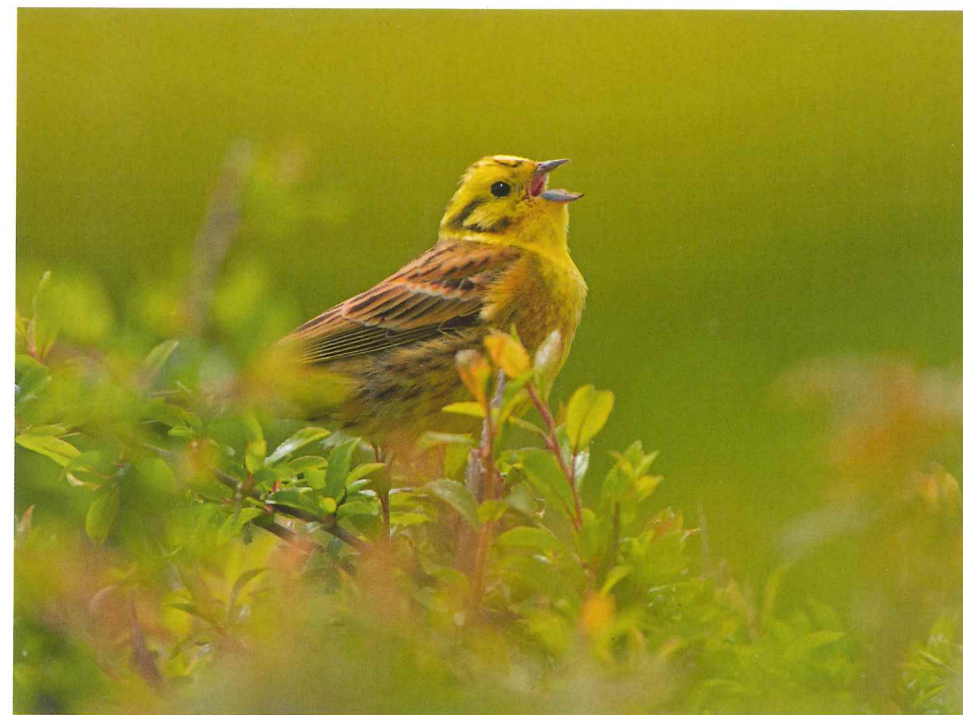
WRITTEN BY SIR JAMES PAICE

AS diaries start to fill with next season's dates and rearing pens come alive, all shooting people need to ask themselves whether next season will bring the same conversations as the previous one. Have we all started to address the challenges that we face? Throughout the past season, it seemed the main topic of conversation was about big bags and what happens to the shot game. There are other issues: predator control, high birds, lead shot, releasing densities, frequency of shooting and noise near residential property. Recent press articles have put all these issues in the public domain. The non-shooting public will have different opinions and, for some, the idea of killing for sport is unacceptable, whatever the number, but others will take a broader view. We only have to look at the ban on shooting on government land in Wales, on Ilkley Moor and

the efforts of the Wild Justice campaign to realise that we cannot afford to be complacent. We cannot ignore what has happened in many European countries, where releasing and, in some cases, shooting itself is banned or restricted. They thought they were immune; anyone in Britain who thinks so is in denial and could bring us all down.

Not all our challenges can be addressed by science; some are purely ethical and we need to ask ourselves whether certain practices are really acceptable in today's world or whether they stand up against emotional arguments put up by those who would stop us. We need to challenge ourselves and our peers where practices are unacceptable and that might even mean walking away from a shoot if we are not happy. Never forget that times and opinions change and what was acceptable a few years ago may not be today.

As a charity primarily involved in research and education, the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) has plenty of peer-reviewed scientific evidence on all the relevant topics. We have investigated release-pen densities, the impact on woodland flora, seed mixes, predator densities and many more. We have also demonstrated that a well-managed game shoot provides a net environmental gain on the land it occupies. That may be a much higher breeding success for waders in the uplands and even for raptors; it shows as higher songbird populations in the lowlands through the provision of seed crops, predator control and woodland creation and management. There are many other gains, but the bottom line is that if shooting didn't exist on that land then nature would be worse off.



Left: the GWCT has demonstrated that a well-managed game shoot provides a net environmental gain
Above: seed crops on shoots have resulted in higher breeding success for songbirds such as yellowhammers

All this may seem obvious to some but counter-intuitive to others. I, and the people I shoot with, do it because we enjoy a day outside, it is not just about shooting and certainly not about numbers but the natural environment and all the other wildlife that surrounds us. The hares emerging from the cover, the deer and even the squirrels in the woodland and, of course, the clouds of songbirds. We do not want to shoot on some barren area where all you see is the quarry. Of course, it means that gamebirds are shot for sport but any objective assessment should balance the distaste that that creates for some people against the wider benefits provided and paid for by those who shoot.

Raising the subject of politics and politicians at this time might seem inappropriate but I know, from personal experience, the regard that Defra has for GWCT science. Defra officials visit our demonstration farm at Loddington and our officials meet regularly. Similarly, with the Scottish and Welsh governments, our close contact means we are respected. The relevance of this is if we say that losing shooting would damage biodiversity then it will be taken seriously and is a major tool in any future debate.

The Code of Good Shooting Practice was developed by the shooting community 28 years ago and was based on much of the GWCT's research. Now that the British Game Alliance (BGA) has created a new Assurance Scheme involving an inspection regime against its own set of standards, including

the Code, it is essential that those shoots, the practices of which may not be the best, do something about it. The inspectors are trained by the GWCT using our own scientific evidence to support the standards. The BGA is finding new markets for shot game but that alone will not staunch the criticism from non-shooters. It requires a united effort to demonstrate that the countryside needs well-managed shoots for environmental,

“The countryside needs well-managed shoots for environmental and economic reasons”

as well as economic, reasons. As take up of membership increases, I hope that BGA will not only ensure that its standards are achieved but that they are raised to include a biodiversity assessment of every shoot.

The GWCT believes in effective self-regulation of shooting and recognises that subjective judgements on the numbers of shot or released birds make no reference to the area of land involved, its ability to provide cover and food for the game and a natural environment for the shooting to take place. A small number of birds released on unsuit-

able land can have a proportionately greater impact than a large number on a well-managed shooting estate. The vast majority of shoot managers understand that. The ability to demonstrate a net environmental gain should be the objective of every shoot of any size on any landscape. Such an assessment would remove the need to include the countless variables between shoots with the one straightforward objective. It could lead to a reduction in the number of birds released or at least an end to the annual increase, which might then help in ensuring all game is eaten. Our advisers have carried out many assessments on shoots of different types. Every shoot whether large or small, lowland or upland, should be able to boast about what it does for nature.

We also need well-informed guns, be they part of a small syndicate or guests on large scale commercial days. Last year, the GWCT published *The knowledge: every gun's guide to conservation*. It is about ensuring that guns not only understand what is going on but know enough to ask the right questions; it is giving guns more power to drive up standards. Our 'Accredited Shot Certificate', which is derived from *The knowledge*, is the online assessment to show that the gun has not only read the book but absorbed it. Ideally, every shoot should ensure that its guns hold such a certificate. We are now working on an online 'Accredited Shoot Operators Certificate', to be launched soon and to be followed by an online means of assessing the level of biodiversity on a pheasant shoot.

This is real self-regulation but it also requires teeth. So, just as a farmer has difficulty in selling grain that is not farm assured, it should be equally challenging for non-assured shoots to find sporting agents able to sell their days or people willing to buy their game. The value of an 'Accredited Shot Certificate' should be that guns are more selective over where they shoot and that shoots won't allow you to shoot without it just as most currently require you to be insured. The real teeth, however, are the informed guns and shoot operators who cajole, persuade and, if necessary, ostracise those who let the rest down.

It is unrealistic to expect everyone to accept shooting but, unless the whole shooting community accept their own responsibilities, as the majority already do, then legislation to reduce or even ban game shooting could be the consequence.

As, is so often the case, the future of the majority is in the hands of the minority. ■
Sir James Paice is chairman of the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT).