

WHAT THE SCIENCE ACTUALLY SAYS ABOUT GAMEBIRD RELEASING

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Dr Rufus Sage has spent 25 years as head of lowland gamebird research at the GWCT, publishing nearly 50 papers on pheasant and partridge releasing. He argues that the evidence is rather more interesting and nuanced than the loudest voices on either side tend to suggest

In recent years, I have picked up on two trends in the wider research community and among commentators relating to the potential negative ecological effects of game bird releasing. The first is the tendency for those who object to it for ethical reasons to hijack and sometimes misrepresent the ecological impacts. I would say to them: stick to the ethical arguments. The second is driven by increasing pressure on university academics to publish papers. Game bird releasing is seen as a topical and controversial issue, which helps with publication but occasionally leads to researchers with a shallow understanding of the field publishing research containing unsupported conclusions and management recommendations. Challenging bad science has helped maintain my interest in this area of research.

The GWCT is often seen as a shooting organisation, which it isn't, but it is certainly pro best practice game management. For this reason, detractors often accuse the Trust of bias. However, I would make the point that our science wouldn't get away with some of the dubious methods or interpretations that I have seen from others, as GWCT research is very closely scrutinised inside and outside the peer review process.

When designing an ecological study, the key for me is to use a large sample of good quality sites, and it has been a privilege to work on many estates over the years. Usually, half are defined as treatment sites with released game bird management, and the rest are comparative control sites – similar but without game interest. I would argue that this pragmatic approach can and does provide strong evidence of an effect or otherwise without definitively identifying a particular cause. For example, if you find on average 20 times more farmland and wood-edge songbirds in a sample of 40 game crop plots across different farms compared to 40 other small-cropped fields (which we did), you can be pretty sure that those birds are finding something they like about the game crop, and you can suggest some reasons for that. ➔

