PHEASANT RELEASE PEN

How to create a pen that meets *The Code of Good Shooting Practice's* requirements

Pheasant releasing has taken place since the early 1900s but grew in popularity in the 1960s when wild bird populations could no longer support shooting demand. It is now common across much of the UK and it is estimated that one in twelve of all woodlands in England contain a pheasant release pen[1].

The management associated with the release of pheasants often brings many benefits to the environment. This may include creating new habitat in the form of new woodlands or game covers. Management practices such as coppicing, thinning and ride maintenance enable light to reach the lower layers of a woodland, benefiting many species of insects, birds and plants.

Supplementary feeding of gamebirds can also benefit other farmland birds, while general pest and predator management brings benefits to a wide array of species.

However, release pens need to be well-thought-out and built with consideration for their surroundings to ensure impacts to the environment are minimised and the net impact of gamebird release and associated management is positive for the environment. *The Code of Good Shooting Practice* provides advice and guidance to shoot managers and is there to help shoots reduce any negative effects while building on the positives[2].

By following the guidance in this guide, shoots can be confident that their practices are compliant with *The Code of Good Shooting Practice*.

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The following Golden Rules apply:

- Shoot managers must endeavour to enhance wildlife conservation and the countryside.
- Shoots should release no more than 1,000 pheasants into each hectare of release pen. In sensitive woods, such as ancient semi-natural woods, no more than 700 birds per hectare should be released.
- Shoots should comply with *The Code of Good Shooting Practice* at all times.
- By law, if you keep 50 or more pheasants or partridges anywhere in the UK then you must register on the Poultry Register.
- Conduct regular habitat management work to enhance both release pen and surrounding environment.

Location of the release pen

A release pen should contain a mosaic of three key elements, roughly a third of each:

- Sunny, open spots
- Low cover to take shelter from predators and the elements
- Abundant roosting shrub cover

For pens located in heavily shaded areas, remove trees/branches to create gaps in the canopy. This will allow ground flora to become established. Other management may include:

- Brashings, felled trees and deadwood can be left to create cover and insect habitat
- Coppicing.

Key points

- Consider what parts of a woodland will be in the sun at different times of the day, as birds often follow the sun. This may influence the position of a release pen as well as where feeders and drinks are located throughout the season.
- Ensure the pen has protection from the elements. This may include good tree cover for roosting, dead hedging, hedge creation and/or hedgelaying.
- Remember that a pen location that appears favourable in spring may look very different come mid-summer. Review the habitat in your pens throughout the year to ensure they are in good condition throughout.
- To minimise damage to woodland rides, think about vehicular access and potential issues around getting to the pen, especially in wet weather.
- Avoid moving release pens if possible - instead, look at other management techniques, such as reducing the density of pheasants released, to reduce the need to relocate pens.
- Release pens should not take up more than about one-third of the total woodland area on a shoot.
- Always avoid siting release pens in, or close to, locations that are particularly environmentally sensitive.
- Be aware of SSSIs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest), SPAs (Special Protected Areas), SACs (Special Areas of Conservation) and other sensitive habitats and liaise with the landowner and the relevant statutory authorities to avoid potentially damaging activities.
- Avoid siting release pens where there are areas of natural running water, as this may impact on the watercourse/habitat and on the effective management of the birds once released[3].
- The siting of release pens and feeding of game near highways should be avoided.
- Where possible, release pens should be sited out of public view.

Release pens need to be well thought out to ensure impacts to the environment are minimised, so the net impact of releasing gamebirds with the associated management are positive for the environment

Well planned access will help to protect the surrounding habitats

Stocking densities

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) recommends that to avoid damage to habitats, shoots should release no more than 1,000 pheasants into each hectare of release pen (400 per acre or 10sqm per bird).

In sensitive woodlands, such as Ancient Semi-Natural Woodlands, no more than 700 birds per hectare of pen (280 per acre) should be released.

Where shoots exceed the recommended densities, they should be able to demonstrate that their particular circumstances and management regime helps to avoid significant damage to woodland flora and fauna. They might, for example, limit the period of time birds are in kept in release pens.

By law, if you keep 50 or more pheasants or partridges anywhere in the UK, you must register on the Poultry Register[4].

Avoid square corners

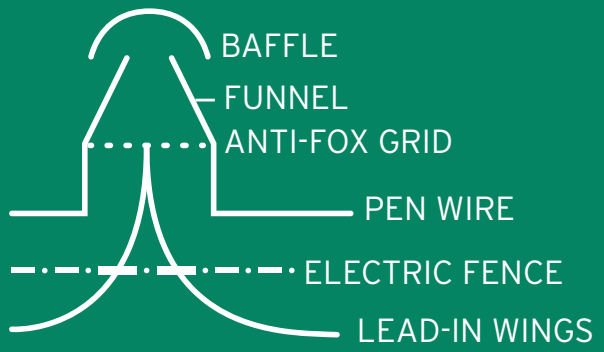
Pheasant released at the correct stocking density will often hold much better

Release pen construction

Key points

- Clear a 3-4-metre-wide track for your pen perimeter and site the fence in the middle.
- It is recommended that sustainably sourced, treated posts are placed no more than five metres apart, with straining posts at every change of direction.
- Avoid square corners to prevent birds building up.
- Make gates large enough for vehicular access. This allows efficient transport of feed and equipment without the need for numerous smaller journeys. Another gate at the far end of the pen may be of use.
- The fence should be 2 to 2.1m high, with roughly 30cm buried below ground or turned out and pegged down to stop predators from digging their way in.
- It is a good idea to leave 30cm of netting turned out and overhanging the top of the pen perimeter to make it more difficult for foxes to climb over. For the same reason, the wire should not be too taut.
- Do not attach netting/wire to standing trees.
- Remove any overhanging branches, inside or out, to a height of four metres.

Layout of re-entry funnel



Its important that each section of the anti-fox grid measurers no more than 9cm

Re-entry holes

- Re-entry funnels should be placed every 50m or so with additional ones if the behaviour of the birds dictate it.
- Re-entry funnels should come back into the pen to prevent birds escaping.
- Lead-in wings outside the pen help to guide birds towards the re-entry point. These should be protected with an anti-fox grid.

Electric fence

An electric fence positioned around the outside perimeter of the pen serves as an extra deterrent for predators – particularly foxes.

Two strands of wire about 15-30cm from the ground, and 40-50cm from the pen, supported by electric fence posts every five metres, are recommended. An extra strand may be considered higher up the fenceline where mink or pine martens are present.

Use a brush cutter or slasher and avoid herbicide to clear the ground before erecting the electric fence.

Electric fence units should be set up at least two weeks prior to release with daily checks to ensure no shorting.

Its important to keep the electric fence clear of debris to ensure the fence works correctly

Other considerations

- Ensure your shoot is complying with *The Code of Good Shooting Practice*.
- Ensure the release pen is kept litter free, tidy and in good condition.
- Consider the shoot's impacts on the environment.

Further guidance/reading

[1] Ecological Consequences of Gamebird Releasing and Management on Lowland Shoots in England (NEER016) A Review by Rapid Evidence Assessment for Natural England and the British Association of Shooting and Conservation, First edition – July 2020

[2] *The Code of Good Shooting Practice* (codeofgoodshootingpractice.org.uk)

[3] Capstick, L. A, Sage, R. B & Hoodless, A. (2019) Ground flora recovery in disused pheasant pens is limited and affected by pheasant release density, 231:181-188

[4] Poultry register – Poultry (including game birds): registration rules and forms – gov.uk

BASC – basc.org.uk

GWCT publication – The Knowledge: *Every gun's guide to conservation* (2018)

GWCT – gwct.org.uk

Code of Practice for the Welfare of Gamebirds Reared for Sporting Purposes (publishing.service.gov.uk)

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