

Pheasant shooting in the Cairngorms National Park

Description



Game bird rearing by General Wade's military road north east of Luibleathan which appears to be on the Ralia Estate (its hard to tell exact boundaries from map) Photo July 2016

The [£500 fine for a man who mistakenly shot a buzzard on a pheasant shoot](#) raises some interesting questions about shooting in our National Parks.

The incident took place on the Ralia/North Drumochter estate – an estate in two parts – although its not clear which from the newspaper report. While I have seen evidence of intensive pheasant rearing

on the Ralia part of the estate (above) I have also seen buzzards on several occasions in and around the policy woodlands by North Drumochter Lodge (photo below), most recently in November.



Looking north west along the North Drumochter Lodge policy woodlands and A9 shelter belt towards

Aside from red grouse, I have seen very little bird or other wildlife on the North Drumochter Estate apart the Lodge buzzards and red deer (although I did see a Greater Spotted Woodpecker last time I was there). What I have seen ([see here](#))

are lots of corvid and other traps.



Trap by Allt Beul an Sporain west of Balsporran Cottages

Such traps can catch buzzards. That one can see buzzards quite easily on North Drumochter suggests that the Ralia/North Drumochter Estate tolerates or perhaps even likes them (releasing them from traps?) and it was quite possibly the estate that reported the man who shot the buzzard to the police. Imagine a responsible keeper before a pheasant shoot briefing the shooting party and telling them to watch out for other birds who then realises one of their clients has ignored their instructions. They would not just be very annoyed, they would also want to protect their reputation. Hence perhaps the report to the police.

Whether or not this is what actually happened, it should have. It seems wrong that not even in our National Parks is there a requirement for shooters to be able to correctly identify what they are shooting, have the self-control not to shoot unless they are 100% certain their target is legitimate and have the skill to do so. This is relevant to the long awaited review of grouse moor management: any

shooting license should be dependant on shooters being properly briefed and trained and, where they are not and incidents such as this happen, the shooting license should be lost. The Cairngorms National Park Authority could take a clear lead here by developing a code of good practice for shooting in the National Park.

While there is still some deliberate persecution of buzzards, the persecution that once confined them to the North West corner of Scotland has ended and allowed them to re-colonise the rest of the British Isles. (I regularly see and hear buzzards in Pollok Park in Glasgow). What this illustrates is that is that while in general shooting interests perceive some raptors, notably hen harrier and golden eagle, as threats others are tolerated and what is tolerated has changed over time.

Pheasants v grouse

In 2014 the Cairngorms National Park Authority with Scottish Land and Estates commissioned a report on the Social, Economic and Environmental Contribution of Landowners to the National Park ([available here](#)). The research was in the form of a survey and there were 52 responses in all. The the returns on shooting make interesting reading.

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Table 3.14 Direct income from sporting land uses on res

	Total Income	% of Total*
Pheasant/Partridge	£1,097,262	25%
Grouse driven	£755,668	17%
Salmon	£534,495	12%
Venison Sales	£500,389	11%
Deer Stalking	£488,785	11%
Grouse walked up	£169,302	4%
Sporting leases	£154,555	3%
Other	£84,473	2%
Trout	£84,313	2%
Total Sporting Income	£4,471,742**	

*Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding up of figures/removal

**Total income figure includes additional unspecified sporting income from specific sporting activities

Extract from research commissioned by CNPA and Scottish Land and Estates in 2014

Now, not every landowner returned the survey and there may be problems with accuracy of the return (estates might not want to reveal their true income) but I was struck that pheasant shooting appears to bring in more income than driven and walked up grouse shooting combined. If income was what mattered estates would be focussing on pheasant/partridge shooting – and one might have thought the animals that predate on pheasants – rather than grouse.

Table 3.12 Total area of land used for sporting land uses and

Sporting Land Uses	Area (Ha/Km)	No. of
		Commercial sporting
Fishing (rivers) (n=20)	209 (Km)	1,120
Red stalking (n=28)	173,088	461
Fishing (Lochs) (n=12)	-	300
Roe stalking (n=23)	78,832	209
Pheasant/partridge (n=21)	28,701	276
Grouse walked up (n=23)	71,939	190
Grouse moor driven (n=22)	116,783	76
Other, please specify (n=2)	2,299	12

What's more, pheasant/partridge shooting not only provides more days shooting than driven grouse shooting, in terms of land-use it takes place over a much smaller area than grouse shooting. As a consequence it produces far more income per hectare and – I would hazard – the costs per hectare are also a lot less. No need to install lots of tracks and grouse butts. Rearing pheasants, from an income perspective, appears far more rational than rearing grouse.

This, however, ignores the value of land which at present is driven by exclusivity rather than say ecological worth. Landed estates are valued by the number of deer or brace of grouse to be found on them because shooting red deer and red grouse has more social cachet than shooting, say, pheasants. You can see some of this in the estate returns above: the number of days pheasant shooting retained for family/personal use is 32 out of 396, less than 10%. The number of driven days grouse shooting reserved for family/own use is 65 out of 230 or over 25%. It appears that one is valued far more highly by owners than the other.

The converse to this is that any threat to what gives an estate its social cachet is a risk not just to the

owner's ability to enjoy what is so exclusive, it also threatens to undermine the price of the land and therefore their wealth. The consequence is that hen harriers, which are perceived as a fundamental threat to red grouse, are being persecuted to extinction, whereas buzzards – which occasionally will take red grouse (they are generalist predators who prey on what they can catch) – are tolerated.

What pheasant shooting shows is that even from a fields sports perspective there are more productive forms of land-use than intensive grouse moor management: planting or enable regeneration of woodland would enable more pheasants to be reared, which in return would allow greater revenue returns from the land. The problem is land values and land-use are not decided rationally but by the tastes and culture of an elite and at present their focus is on grouse. Until this is tackled raptors which commonly prey on grouse will be persecuted and others, which do not or do so only occasionally will be tolerated.

I don't think the Cairngorms National Park Authority will be tackle the culture of the landed elite by persuasion. As a consequence, whenever a raptor crime takes places in the National Park, they need not just to discuss this with the landowners concerned – and I hope they meet North Drumochter to establish exactly what happened – they should be considering what changes they could introduce to regulate shooting.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. landed estates
3. wildlife persecution

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