

# insight

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## The benefits of grouse shooting

Recently I enjoyed a superb day's grouse shooting on Shap Moor run by the gamekeeping students of Newton Rigg College, Cumbria, many of whom are BASC Young Shots. I was in a happy but reflective mood at the end of five drives with a respectable tally of 35 brace. For such a high, cold and wet moor, following one of the worst breeding seasons for decades, the next generation of gamekeepers were rightly proud.

With an estimated 40 per cent of driven grouse days cancelled across the moors of England, the economic impact is massive and isolated upland communities that depend on a good grouse season are hard hit. Each driven grouse day employs 40 to 80 beaters, flankers, loaders and pickers-up depending on the size of the moor, but regardless of the bag.

Despite cancelled days, the moor owner continues to employ his staff, especially the gamekeepers, thus offering stable careers for the youngsters leaving college with excellent qualifications. The cost of keepers and the equipment they need is a huge outlay, particularly when there are no let days to defray the cost. Moor management is a very expensive business and definitely not the cash machine often portrayed by those opposed to driven grouse shooting.

The 2015 season has been a timely reminder that red grouse are wild birds, very much subject to the weather and other natural forces beyond human control. This unique UK sport is very

precious but the year-round conservation effort leading to an often very short shooting season is poorly understood.

It is essential that the management of these wonderful upland areas is continued and driven grouse is the engine that maintains the passion and investment of the owners.

GWCT research on the Berwyn Hills of North Wales illustrates what happens if driven grouse shooting stops and keepers disappear. Between the mid-1980s and 2002, despite being a Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds, lapwing became

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extinct, curlew declined by 79 per cent, golden plover by 90 per cent, ring ouzel by 80 per cent and black grouse by 78 per cent. Without predator control and an abundant food supply, the hen harrier population – also ground nesters and very prone to predation – dropped by 49 per cent.

The gamekeeper students are justifiably angered by the attack on their chosen career path. They recognise there is room for improvement and endorse the re-wetting of deep peat so it functions properly. This builds the moors' future

resilience to climate change and provides conditions for essential insects and nutritious cotton grass. It will also help protect water supply, improve quality, slow the run-off rate and keep the huge carbon store locked up. Carefully-controlled cool burning, in combination with cutting so as not to damage the underlying peat or moss layer, is firmly on the curriculum but leaving vegetation unmanaged is simply not an option.

Uniform, waist-high vegetation does not provide the vital mosaic of habitats that benefits all moorland birds nor return peat to a functioning state, but poses a very high risk of wildfire – potentially devastating to all these public goods.

The modern world of grouse moor management will deliver even more for everyone so long as we do not lose sight of how special our sport is, whatever the bag. The 365 days' work to put on a single driven day is what really counts.



*Robert Benson*