



© Laurie Campbell

Supplementary feeding

Adequate food is a critical requirement for all animals, and gamebirds need plentiful sources of food if they are to thrive. As well as providing areas that are rich in food for birds to forage such as game crops, gamekeepers also provide additional food sources in the form of grain to support their birds through the winter and spring, when food is scarce. This is considered to be a central part of the gamebird management package.

Why do gamebirds need supplementary food?

Seeds and grains can be scarce on farmland in winter. Modern combine harvesters spill very little grain, and that which is left is often ploughed underground shortly afterwards. Overwinter stubbles, which used to provide a source of food, are left less often and are often sprayed after harvest to control weeds. The loss of livestock from many farming systems has also reduced the planting of fodder crop or the provision of animal food, which were useful resources for farmland birds⁸¹. In late winter (February/March) there is a period where very little seed and grain is available, known as the “hungry gap”. This is a problem not only for gamebirds, but for many other seed-eating farmland birds as well¹⁰².

Does supplementary food help gamebirds?

We know that higher densities of pheasants are found in winter in woodland where food is provided¹⁰³, and that estates that perform winter feeding have higher breeding densities than those that don't¹⁰⁴. However, as recommended by GWCT guidelines, it is also important to continue this supplementary food to support gamebirds and other species through the spring hungry gap, rather than stopping it at the end of the shooting season on the 1st February.

How does spring feeding benefit gamebirds?

The GWCT ran a project in the late 1990s looking at the effect of spring feeding on pheasant body condition, density and breeding success. Feeding was continued until May/June on the study areas, and pheasants in these areas were compared to pheasants in areas where supplementary feed was only provided until the end of January. The study and reference areas were switched the following year, and compared again to make sure it was an effect of the feeding programme that was detected, rather than other differences between the study areas.

The results showed that in areas which provide supplementary food in spring as well as winter:

- Pheasant density was higher in April¹⁰⁵.
- More young were observed in September, although there was not a statistical difference¹⁰⁵.
- Females maintain their level of body fat from February through to April, whereas it drops by half in areas that do not feed in March-April¹⁰⁶.
- Females that lose a clutch lay a replacement clutch in half the time (average 15 days), compared to those who are not spring fed (average 31 days)¹⁰⁷

Did you know?

The GWCT provides regular updates to feeding guidelines

Members of the GWCT can access the latest information about the best ways to feed your gamebirds and other farmland birds. For more information, visit www.gwct.org.uk.



© GWCT

How is supplementary food provided?

For both pheasants and partridge, grain is provided in hoppers, either along hedgerows, woodlands, game cover, or in open fields. The placement of feed hoppers may be affected by how well controlled the local rat population is. Supplementary feed should be provided throughout winter, and past the end of the season normally until the end of May to support released or wild gamebirds, as well as maximising biodiversity benefits.

Why does rat control affect the placement of hoppers?

Rats are known to visit feed hoppers, and encouraging and feeding a rat population is not desirable. In a recent GWCT study, brown rats made 17% of visits to feeding hoppers, but all of these were when feed hoppers were set along hedgerows⁸. When the hopper was moved, it took rodents longer than either gamebirds or song birds to find the new location, so we recommend that feed sites are changed regularly. For more guidance, refer to the GWCT guidelines for successful gamebird and songbird feeding.

Benefits to other species

Breeding populations of many farmland birds are in decline, in part because more of these birds are not making it through the winter. It is thought that the smaller amount of seed available to them in modern farming systems contributes to this⁸¹. The “hungry gap” in late winter/early spring has been well described¹⁰².

Provision of additional grain is well known to help farmland birds through the winter⁶⁵, and the limited studies specifically looking at gamebird feeding show that feeders are used by many species, including dunnock, blackbird and yellowhammer⁸. It seems that supplementary feeding can also help small mammals, as one study found more wood mice and bank voles near supplementary feed hoppers⁷.



The importance of measuring success

Much of the discussion around shooting and the impact of management for it centre around biodiversity, and the possible effects that conservation measures can bring. In fact, the Code of Good Shooting Practice says that shoot managers must “endeavour to deliver an overall measurable improvement to habitat and wildlife”. But how do you know what effect your efforts are having on the shoot? Are the birds and butterflies benefiting from your hard work, or is it not quite right yet?

The key is in the word measurable – to know wildlife is benefiting, you need to measure it, so monitoring the species you see on your farm or shoot is very important. Count a selection of the species that you have, in a consistent way, and you will know if they are thriving. If you have grey partridges you should certainly join the GWCT’s Partridge Count Scheme (see chapter 10). GWCT also collaborates with the BTO over counts of British breeding woodcock, so if you have this species in summer you could join the count. You could also carry out breeding bird surveys along the lines of those carried out by the BTO.

Another useful tool is the Shoot Biodiversity Assessment, offered by the advisory department at GWCT. The advisors will thoroughly survey the shoot and the methods in place, examine the game and wildlife and how it is managed, and give a confidential report with an action plan for future improvement for the shoot, and the biodiversity.

Follow the Code

Measurable improvement

*“Shoot managers **must** endeavour to enhance wildlife conservation and the countryside.”*

Management plan

“Shoot managers should prepare an appropriate, whole shoot management plan to ensure positive environmental benefit results from their activities and avoid excessive frequency of shooting over the same drives”

Ask the shoot

1. Do you plant cover crops that provide food and shelter for the gamebirds after the season has closed?
2. Do you plant a mix of cover crops, with other wild farmland birds in mind?
3. What do you do for pollinators?
4. What do you do to prevent rats round your feeders? Do you move them?
5. How late do you continue to put out supplementary feed?
6. How do you manage your woodland?
7. How do you manage your hedgerows for nesting birds?
8. What other wildlife benefits from the management of the shoot?
9. Have you had a biodiversity assessment?
10. If not, how do you measure improvement to wildlife on the shoot?
11. Can I see a copy of your shoot management plan?
12. How do you keep up with the latest information on game and wildlife management?
13. Are you a member of GWCT?