**Gamebird releases in Shropshire**

All 532 pages of *The Birds of Shropshire* will by now have muscled their way on to many members’ bookshelves. What a wonderful and thorough volume it is! But even one as detailed as this could not include everything, and I would like to put some additional information on the record.

Amongst the species texts that I compiled were those for Pheasant and Red-legged Partridge. It was clearly important for me to include, if possible, estimates of the numbers of both species released and shot in the county each year. But how could I achieve this?

National figures were available courtesy of a detailed report published in 2006 entitled ‘The Economic and Environmental Impact of Sporting Shooting’. The report, by a firm called Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC), includes a great deal of information, notably on the numbers of gamebirds released and shot in 2004, however, no attempt was made to assess numbers county by county. Numbers were assessed by region but these were not published, however, a PACEC consultant kindly provided me with the figures for the West Midlands Region. These were 7.4% and 5% of the national totals for Pheasant and ‘partridge’ respectively (PACEC lumped Red-legged and Grey Partridge together, but there are now few releases of the latter and any such releases are of small numbers).

The report’s figures for Pheasant and Red-legged Partridge releases have since been updated to 20012/13 by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) who estimated that 43 million Pheasants and 8.9 million Red-legs were released in that shooting season which was the one on which I based my subsequent calculations.

Shropshire occupies 27% of the land area of the West Midlands Region. This provided me with a way of extrapolating rough estimates from the region to the county. But it would have been a simplistic approach based on the assumption that the shooting of Pheasant and Red-legged Partridge is evenly spread across the region, which appears unlikely. So, was there perhaps a measure of shooting activity which might provide a better guide? It occurred to me that the numbers of gamekeepers per county would provide as good a guide as any. Very helpfully, the National Gamekeepers’ Organisation and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation provided me with their respective gamekeeper membership totals, both for the West Midlands Region and for Shropshire. From these I worked out the percentage of each organisation’s regional membership that was based in the county. Coincidentally, the mean of the two figures was 27%, bringing me back to the land area figure I had first thought of!

Use of this percentage led to the annual release figures published in *The Birds of Shropshire*: 859,000 Pheasant and 120,000 Red-legged Partridge. These are no more than estimates, but the use of a similar methodology at some future date should enable trends to be determined. Estimating the numbers shot introduces other variables. Rates differ between the two species, as do both the numbers of ‘wild’ birds in the shooting bag and the opinions of researchers, but the figures I have used, expressed as a proportion of the numbers released, are 35% for Pheasant and 40% for Red-legged Partridge.

Since my calculation of the numbers released, Guy Shrubsole, author of ‘Who Owns England? How we lost our green and pleasant land and how to take it back’ (2019), has come up with county by county figures for the numbers of Pheasants reared in 2018. Whilst being reared, Pheasants are classed as livestock (magically they change status to ‘wild birds’ when released) and as such their numbers have to be given to the Animal and Plant Health Authority. A Freedom of Information request provided Shrubsole with figures by county, including 726,000 reared in Shropshire. This is considerably lower than my estimate for releases, but his figure of 35 million reared in the UK is well down on the release of 43 million estimated by the GWCT. It has been suggested that birds are reared abroad for release here and perhaps this explains the discrepancy.

Whatever the true figure the numbers are huge. They prompt the really important question: what effects do these massive annual releases of non-native birds have on the ecology of the countryside?

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