

Feature

Rearing to the code

Charles Nodder reminds us that this year everyone rearing gamebirds needs to follow the new Government codes...

THEY'VE BEEN A LONG TIME COMING AND AT times it's been a bumpy ride, but the new Government codes of practice for the rearing of gamebirds in England, Wales and Scotland are now in place. Everyone who rears and releases game (for releasing gets a mention) must be aware of what the codes require because failure to comply "can be relied on as tending to establish liability for an offence". In other words, ignore the codes at your peril!

The codes for Wales and Scotland are almost identical to that produced for England by Defra. The only differences are in the references to parent legislation and such like. As far as the requirements for rearing and releasing are concerned, the codes are the same, but it would be wise to get a copy of the relevant code for where you work. To download one, search for 'Gamebird Rearing Code' on the relevant website (Defra, Welsh Assembly or Scottish Government). There are also direct links to the codes from the Advice Sheets area of the NGO website.

Let's start with what the codes require for releasing, as that affects nearly all shoots. The introduction to the Defra

code says: *The contents of this Code apply to birds up to and including the period when they are confined to the release pens. Once the birds are able to leave and re-enter the pens voluntarily they fall outside the scope of this Code. It is recognised, however, that as keepers will retain some responsibility for the welfare of the birds immediately post release and until they have adjusted to a free-living existence, the suitability of the release environment to meet the needs of birds must be considered.*

The other paragraphs relating to release come right at the end of the code and state: *At the time of sale for release purposes, all gamebirds should be in a healthy condition and must be fit for transport, well adapted and appropriately hardened off in respect of feather development, weather tolerance, diet and method of feeding. All birds ready for transport to release pens should have a final inspection to ensure that they are fit for release before being moved.*

Release pens should be well prepared prior to the arrival of the birds, by ensuring they are of sufficient size,

provide shelter and have adequate feeders and drinkers of a type familiar to the birds available on site. The siting of release pens should take into consideration the need to minimise the risk of subsequent harm or injury, for example by predators or vehicles.

If you buy poults in from a game farmer or another gamekeeper you would be wise to make sure this year that your supplier is fully aware of the code and is following all its requirements throughout the rearing process.

So, moving onto the rearing process itself, what are the main themes in the codes? The key thing is that everyone rearing game must provide for the birds' needs, and where the code says "must" it means by law because the Animal Welfare Act 2006 requires that all kept birds **must**:

1. Have an environment appropriate to their species, age and the purpose for which they are being kept, including adequate heating, lighting, shelter, ventilation and resting areas;
2. Have ready access to fresh water and an appropriate diet to maintain growth, health and vigour;
3. Be provided with appropriate space and facilities to ensure the avoidance of stress and to allow the exhibition of normal behaviour patterns;
4. Be provided with company of their own kind as appropriate for the species concerned; and
5. Be adequately protected from pain, suffering, injury, or disease. Should any of these occur a rapid response is required, including diagnosis, remedial action and, where applicable, the correct use of medication.

The codes then go on to explain what these requirements mean in the case of gamebirds reared for sporting purposes. Each code runs to eight pages, so we cannot reproduce the full text here, but it is a legal requirement that everyone responsible for kept gamebirds is acquainted with the code, has access to it and that anyone working for them

You have a continuing responsibility for your gamebirds after release.



has received instruction and guidance on the code. A few extracts, although not a substitute for you getting hold of the code and reading it, will give a flavour of what it says:

RECORD KEEPING

“Records should be maintained of the source of all hatching eggs and birds, in order to trace their origins should this prove necessary.”

CATCHING UP

“In order to minimise the risk of disease transmission and promote welfare, laying stock should, wherever possible, be maintained as a closed breeding flock. Where adult laying birds have to be brought in, particularly from the wild, all possible action should be taken to check the provenance and health of the birds, for example by mixing with some sentinel birds, separate from the existing flock, well in advance of joining the flock. If healthy, these brought in birds may then be added to the flock before the start of the breeding season.”

CUSTOM HATCHING

“In order to minimise the risk of disease transmission, custom hatching (hatching eggs from external flocks) should be avoided wherever possible.”

VETS

“All gamebird breeders and rearers should register with a veterinary practice in order to deal with any incidents of poor welfare, disease problems or injuries that require attention. Expert advice should be sought from veterinary surgeons and other suitably qualified advisers whenever necessary, for example when the cause of a problem is not clear or when the treatment applied has failed to resolve the problem. Staff should be sufficiently knowledgeable to recognise normal behaviour and the early signs of abnormal behaviour associated with injury and disease.”

CHECKING BIRDS

“Birds should be checked at least twice daily during the breeding and rearing period for signs of disease or injury and to ensure that their welfare needs are being met and at least once daily at other times. This inspection should be carried out by knowledgeable staff.”



GAME FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

Use of bits needs to be justified and monitored.

CONTINGENCY PLANS

“There should be a contingency plan to prevent or deal with emergencies such as fire, flood, storm damage, interruption of supplies or notifiable disease.”

DIET

“All captive birds must be provided with a nutritionally balanced diet. Feed should always be of the correct particle size and type appropriate to the age and species, to maintain them in good health and to satisfy their nutritional and foraging needs. Any change in diet should be made gradually, and for a period of time some blending of the two rations represents good practice. Where a natural source is not available, insoluble grit should be provided in adequate quantities and of the correct size and type to help birds' digestion.”

BITS AND OTHER MANAGEMENT DEVICES

“The use of management devices or practices that do not allow birds to fully express their range of normal behaviours should not be considered as routine and keepers should work towards the ideal of management systems that do not require these devices.

“The use of bits in young pheasants for short periods (three to seven weeks) to prevent injurious behaviour should be justified and closely monitored on each premise. Bits should be made of suitable material appropriate to the size and age of bird and fitted and removed only by trained and experienced stockmen.

“‘Bumpa’ bits should not be used except in response to a specific need in consultation with a veterinary surgeon and only with particular care.

“Beak trimming should not be practised in gamebirds except in circumstances where there is an overwhelming need to protect the welfare of the birds.

“Plastic spectacles fitted to the beak to prevent feather pecking or egg eating may cause significant damage to the nasal septum and should not be used except in response to a specific need in consultation with a veterinary surgeon. Any type designed to pierce the nasal septum is illegal in birds.

“Anti-aggression masks or shrouds should not generally be used as a form of bird management.

“Outer primary feathers may be clipped to restrict flight but trimming growing feathers (‘blood quills’) must be avoided if it constitutes interference with a sensitive tissue and would, therefore, be a mutilation.”

DISEASE AND RECORD KEEPING

“Any bird suffering ill health or injury must receive immediate attention, including, where appropriate, the attendance of a veterinary surgeon.

“Records should be maintained of the source of all hatching eggs and birds, in order to trace their origins should this prove necessary.

“It is good practice to devise and review annually a flock health and welfare plan in conjunction with your veterinary surgeon.”