

Feature

Bird performance on shoot days

Alan Beynon BVM&S MRCVS looks at the importance of performance assessment at picking up early indications of disease.

WITH THE PHEASANT SHOOTING SEASON WELL under way, one would have thought that life as a gamebird vet would be quieter, although there are several projects that have captured my imagination.

Throughout the winter period of shooting, it is important to look out for signs of disease in your birds. This information can be gathered from many different sources.

As well as the keepers, I often speak to the beaters and they often are the first to notice weak birds: “birds not making it to the guns” or “not getting up”.

The beaters will also notice the birds’ droppings and any changes in this may

be associated with a change in the weather pattern or a period of increased shooting pressure.

The keepers will be aware of flying ability and this may be as a result of unfavourable wind or high air pressure, but in some cases, it can be an early indication of disease. The keeper will also be aware of how much food is being used and, if very vigilant, may be recording this. Clearly, as each day’s shooting is finished, the volume of food used will drop, but sudden drops can be an early monitor of problems.

My last port of call is the game cart. It is here that I can gain a lot of knowledge.

Examining the breeds shot is very revealing in itself and, along with the drives shot and the shot ratio, you can gather a lot of information as the season continues as to what breeds perform best on which drives. Where mixtures of breeds are used, one type may perform in a certain way that draws another breed faster or higher. It might be that the first breed is shot out earlier in the season and the second breed is still available for shooting after Christmas. As a vet, I notice strong breed disease characteristics and am able to predict which problems are more likely to occur in certain environments.

By monitoring the dead game on your cart after each day’s shooting and distinguishing what has been shot throughout the season, it may well help decide what breed produces the best returns in certain drives.

I also examine the body condition and score this on a 1-5 basis. Finally, any poor or obviously diseased birds can be examined and a diagnosis made and measures put in place to control a developing problem.

We are carrying out a simple survey at the moment looking at worm egg counts on birds on shoots with low, medium and high performance birds to assess the impact of low levels of worms on birds’ flying abilities.

This is carried out routinely in racing pigeon lofts and there is a direct correlation with flying performance and subclinical disease, ie. the birds are carrying an infection but do not show any signs of disease. Many other problems can be identified such as coccidiosis, mycoplasma and hexamita (spironucleus) and these can also have an impact on performance.

Of course, there is nothing that can be done to treat these birds in the shooting season as any medication has a withdrawal associated with it. Instead, we are trying to assess the health of the



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birds now in preparation for any changes that may need to take place in next year's rearing and release programme.

Most of the changes that we would suggest would be to management. For example, high worm burdens require a change in the way birds are fed as much as the product or frequency of treatment.

Traditional practices such as whistle feeding encourages birds to eat from the ground in the same area each time and in many cases, we see the same area of feed ride used each year. Analysis of this environment shows massive numbers of worm eggs.

Similarly, trail feeding the centre line of a road or track will concentrate birds along this area, but feeding one metre each side will attract the birds to a relatively worm-free environment.

Other suggestions involve moving feeders and drinkers regularly or considering wire mesh stands or raised systems for feed stations. There is strong evidence that wild birds, especially corvids, are important vectors in worm egg transmission into shoots. I have examined droppings from several and there is often a high incidence of

gapeworm, although all the birds look a very healthy population!

All of these suggestions will reduce worm egg intakes by birds as the eggs persist from year to year.

I am a firm believer that whatever the symptoms of sub-performance, we must try to understand whether there is a disease process involved through careful examination. Once it has been established that it is a disease issue (and not other factors), we have to put in place a management system to control that problem.

Medication in the pursuit of performance is expensive, short-lived and unsustainable as nature will adapt to the disease problem and you will generate another set of issues.

Nowhere is this more evident than the control of worms in grouse populations and the use of medicated grit. It appears that one disease has been controlled and another has appeared.

Careful observation of birds and their performance, keeping accurate records and an enquiring mind all help monitor and prevent sub-performance in your birds and enhance your shooting experience.

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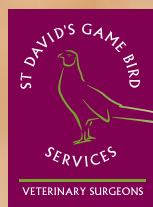
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