

# The Press and Journal

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## There's not much to grouse about after a better season

### ACTION LEADS TO BEST SHOOTING FOR YEARS ON SCOTTISH ESTATES

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Scotland's grouse moors have had one of their best shooting seasons for years, the Press and Journal can reveal.

Bags on the majority of estates are up because of better moorland management, action to combat the problems caused by ticks and much-improved weather at the time chicks hatched.

Ian McCall, the Scottish director of the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, said moors in the Angus glens had benefited particularly from a concerted action programme to control the ticks, which prey on young birds as well as carry louping ill, a virus that can also infect the central nervous system in humans.

Mr McCall said ticks had for years caused serious damage on moors. They can in areas with the highest levels kill four in every five grouse hatched.

The tiny ticks are also very good at breeding. Research shows the tick population, if left unchecked, can grow 10-fold every 10 years. The changing climate of wetter and milder summers and winters have helped them too.

The Angus initiative, which started six years ago, now involves 14 estates covering 250,000 acres.

They have been managing wild deer which are among the most common carriers of ticks, as well as focusing on sheep management and improved gamekeeping skills.

Mr McCall said: "It's not been cheap as it has involved them dosing sheep against ticks every eight weeks between March through to August-September. But it has been shown to work. Tick numbers have been reduced."

Two of the Angus estates involved in the project have also changed ownership. They have employed extra gamekeepers whose sole role is to focus on grouse management.

Mr McCall said: "The result of that is that within four years one of the properties has shot more grouse this year than any year previously. They've thrown everything at it. It is the biggest single example of a grouse moor recovery in the north of Scotland."

Mr McCall said the results in Angus were providing the stimulus for other estates in Scotland to similarly act.

This included a property in Stirlingshire, where tenant farmers, keepers and landowners are all working together to revitalise their moorland.

Mr McCall was quick to stress the important relationship between hill sheep and grouse, adding that moors properly managed for either of the species greatly benefited the other.

Strategic muirburn encouraged young sprigs of fresh heather, which were an important part of the diet for sheep and grouse.

He acknowledged the problems of overgrazing by sheep in some areas in the past, but said the recent changes in subsidy support was allowing a better balance to be struck.

Mr McCall saw an increased role for so-called shepherd-keepers. These specialists have been employed by some

estates and have a dual role in managing both hill sheep flocks and grouse moors.

He too sees a role for outside investment in grouse moors, especially if estates lack the cash themselves to improve their moors.

Encouraging enthusiastic grouse shooters to let moors for a reasonable period of time could yield considerable benefits as well as provide the necessary cash injection needed to rebuild grouse stocks.

But Mr McCall warned: "Managing just for one species is not in the best interests of Scotland's biodiversity and agriculture."

This season has been particularly successful as the early spring allowed good heather growth. A warm period in April and May helped provide plentiful stocks of the insects on which the grouse feed.

Mr McCall said this year's covey sizes at 10-12 were far higher than normal.

Mr McCall, who retires from the trust early next year, said while bags were up they were still far short of the 100 brace that he remembers being shot on some estates day after day when he was a boy.

Robert Rattray, the partner responsible for sporting lets at land agents CKD Galbraith, said the investment in management and the favourable weather had worked in favour of grouse.

"There is no single factor responsible. It is a combination of things. Grouse numbers are up, but it is still pretty patchy. The one thing I can say is that those people who have been investing time and effort into the management of grouse have reaped the benefit in the last season," he added.

The worst area for grouse remains Perthshire, where bags were disappointing. But Mr Rattray said there had been improvements with some significant rises reported on driven grouse moors in Aberdeenshire, Inverness-shire, Morayshire and Banffshire. He reported figures of more than 200 brace in a day on one Angus moor.

Mr Rattray said demand for grouse shooting had been largely unaffected by the recession last season. It was too early to say if lets would be a hit next year as marketing has yet to get under way.

The angling season has in contrast to the grouse year been disappointing, apart from the "odd patch" of brilliance, Mr Rattray said.

The spring run of fish failed to materialise and the grilse were late. An "encouraging" season was reported for sea trout and that is believed to be down to the good numbers of sand eels around the UK coast and which the sporting fish feed on.



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