

08 FEED MANAGEMENT

GAME BIRDS REQUIRE A SPECIALLY FORMULATED DIET DURING THE EARLY STAGES OF THEIR GROWTH PERIOD. THE QUALITY OF INGREDIENTS, ALONG WITH PROTEIN CONTENT ARE DIFFERENT TO THOSE OF POULTRY.

The temptation to use cheaper poultry/turkey feed should be resisted. The exception to this may be on a hobby scale where conditions with zero competition may allow the young birds to grow satisfactorily.

Currently there are two compound feed suppliers in New Zealand, one on each island.

Your breeder will have started them on a high protein (+/-28%) starter crumb, and by delivery time they will have graduated onto a slightly lower (+/-24%) protein grower pellet. This is the same feed you will need to continue for at least four weeks after delivery.

Being a specialised product, your feed will need to be ordered well ahead of time so that the mill can plan for it. Aim to have your order confirmed early December, ready for delivery early January. You will need access to a suitable shed and a means to unload one-tonne pallets.

A guideline for your order is to allow 2 tonnes per one thousand birds. With good management this quantity will take them through the crucial growth period to 10 or 11 weeks of age.

The expensive grower pellet ration is quite susceptible to moisture and does not hold together well when wet. To avoid wastage, hoppers will need to be perfectly rain proof, and if feeding on the ground only apply the quantity needed for immediate use.

Grower pellet quantities should be monitored carefully. Preferably, records should be kept of quantities being consumed at each release location; this data may help detect a problem early but will also provide useful information for future years.

Where there is more than one gamekeeper or additional help is used, having daily feed amounts recorded will assist others in keeping the routine on point.

After the planned four weeks on grower pellet, the birds should be ready to change onto a grain feed. A run of cool & wet weather, or some other management issue may have set the birds back. With these, consider prioritising an extra week or two on grower pellet. Keep in mind, all changes in the routine promote stress, which can lead to behavioural problems or disease challenge. Pick a good week with stable weather, introduce the grain gradually. Expect this process to last one to two weeks. Initially, they will ignore the grain and continue to take pellet. Eventually a combination of curiosity and hunger will encourage them to take up the grain. Be ready for some associated bad behaviour!

Depending on variable factors such as weather and quality of habitat at the release site, along with competition pressure with larger numbers, the birds will be ready to spread out 4-6 weeks after release typically at 10-12 weeks of age. It is important to allow this, preferably as a gradual process, as normal rules for stock density apply – reduced competition equals better growth and reduced stress, minimising risk of management problems such as disease challenges.

As March draws to a close, birds will be gaining more independence and ranging further across the property. It is during this time, and from now on, that the effort the gamekeeper has put in with establishing a good routine will pay off.

Birds will largely tend to move in the early morning, travelling to their favourite areas to spend much of their day. Hopefully, these are the same areas where the keeper wants them to be – but not always. He/she will use the feeding routine to influence their movements.

Birds will tend to begin working their way back 'home', their preferred roosting areas (and, unfortunately, not always where you want them to be) around mid-afternoon. It is important to accept that things will look far from perfect at this point. Birds are still growing, gaining confidence and busy exploring.

Keep track of them by spending plenty of time observing. Things are set to change quite a lot in the coming six weeks.

WATER

Consideration must also be given to provision of clean drinking water. If the releasing area includes natural sources, it should be clean and free-flowing; try to avoid any still or stagnant water.

Usage can be surprisingly high during a dry summer, promoted by feeding dry compound pellet feed. Whether there is natural water available or not, it is wise to provide an additional source to ensure quality and reliability. In most situations a simple header tank plumbed into the farm supply is easy to set up.

Commercially available poultry drinkers are ideal, the best option being nipple drinkers which minimise wastage and mess. Areas around the drinkers can become damp and promote disease; the ability to move drinkers onto fresh ground regularly is essential.

If you are planning to tap into the farm supply, check with the manager over any supplements that may be in use.

AUTUMN TO WINTER FEEDING METHODS

All game birds, including pheasants, will take advantage of any source of feed available in their local area. In addition to the annual flush of berries, seeds, and invertebrates, they will readily exploit the farmed environment. As foragers, they will travel large distances in the pursuit of these, paying scant attention to boundaries.

This is the prime reason why game bird managers need to feed their birds throughout the year. Whatever the scale or budget, without regular feeding, any game bird venture is likely to flounder.

Furthermore, consistent feeding will not only encourage your birds to stick around (as long as the other key elements are in place; good habitat and reduced predation), it will ensure they remain healthy and in excellent condition.

Supplementary feeding is generally confined to wheat or maize. Both are equally effective, and your choice will likely be governed by price and availability depending on which part of the country you are in. Barley is not attractive to pheasants.

Many keepers prefer to have whole maize 'kibbled or cracked.' While there is a small additional cost per tonne for this, and some weight loss in the form of flour, it is very effective at keeping birds occupied by making them work to fill their crop. It also helps to make the otherwise large grains somewhat more palatable, particularly if partridge or quail are present.

Wheat is generally a better choice if available. Higher in protein, birds tend to consume less tonnage over the year which may offset extra cost if you are not in a wheat growing area. It stores well and is easily spread through spinners, hoppers etc.



Maize is undoubtedly attractive to game, but it does tend to make them fat, which is not desirable. The purpose of rearing pheasants is to produce as close to their wild counterpart as possible – lean, athletic, and definitely not carrying extra weight! Many gamekeepers would agree, the perfect feed would be 80% wheat and 20% lightly kibbled maize.

Whatever your choice of feed, you should buy the best quality you can afford. Do not be tempted by cheaper options, cleanings, or spoiled grain.

Ensure that you have adequate storage which is dry, rodent free and with enough space to handle your anticipated order. In most cases, a silo is the best option.

FEEDING STYLES

There are two predominant methods of feeding, a subject of endless discussion and debate among the gamekeeping fraternity since time immemorial! Ultimately, getting quality feed in front of your game birds is what it is all about. The details of how this is achieved will largely fall upon the gamekeeper if you have one, or by trial and error as you develop.

For the hard-pressed gamekeeper, nothing could be more important. While there are many factors in nature that can influence the outcome of season, an excellent feeding regime can be the difference between a satisfactory season and a brilliant one.

HOPPER OR ADD-LIB FEEDING

This system applies the theory of making endless feed readily available at all locations across the property.

Feed is distributed via hoppers; these can be purchased or home-made, and there are scores of designs that all aim to achieve the same thing - keep the grain dry, reduce access to pests while being readily available to pheasants.

POSITIVES

- Suits part-time or amateur shoot, as no daily commitment to spreading feed
- On a kept shoot, less routine feeding frees up time for other work
- Can keep an 'edge' on the birds, i.e. little or no human contact can make them behave more like a wild bird
- Works very well on a rough/walked up situation where it is less necessary to hold birds in key areas, and desirable to have birds unpredictably spread over the property

NEGATIVES

- No control over the quantity birds are taking
- Will attract other pests such as rodents, possums and sparrows
- Dominant cock-birds can become possessive over some hoppers, driving away other birds.
- Where stock, wild deer and pigs are present, some form of protection will be required to stop them being knocked over and raided. Windy areas can also be a problem.
- Minimum control over bird movements; they will tend to feed and then spend the day where they want to be. On a well set up property, where there is perfect habitat in the same areas to be shot this is not a problem. However, hoppers/feed alone will not successfully hold birds in areas that are less attractive.

HAND / WHISTLE FEEDING

There is often much confusion over the name of this feeding method.

It matters not how the feed is put down (whether by walking with a bucket, pouring out of a bag or using a motor-powered spinner), the key requirement is a daily routine with human contact. It works on the reverse principal of hoppers, by rationing feed in measured quantities.

Birds have a high metabolism and need to feed throughout the day, particularly through the cooler months when they are using more energy.

The system capitalises on this by offering small quantities at a time, known as 'keeping them keen.'

While undoubtedly the choice method for many professional gamekeepers, there are some important points to consider. The system is very labour intensive, and not very suited to the part-time or amateur shoot.

POSITIVES

- Excellent control over bird movements; a skilled keeper can 'pull' birds into ideal shooting locations.
- Daily contact with all the birds in each area, giving the keeper a much better overview of numbers and whereabouts.
- A degree of reliability as to where birds are likely to be at any given time of the day, making it easier to plan shoots.
- When working well, the system allows the keeper to run a very efficient shooting meaning less time standing around and more time shooting on the peg.
- On some properties, the drives can be completed with a small team of beaters. This has long-term benefits by reducing catering costs and vehicle requirements.
- Significantly less feed wastage; less feed overall in the long term, reducing costs.

NEGATIVES

- Hand feeding is a substantial commitment, requiring a daily routine, seven days/week for up to eight months, sometimes up to 6 hours a day.
- Relying on regular measured quantities of feed, pheasants are very unforgiving if it does not turn up on time. Thus, the routine must be followed without exception.
- This method is not for the inexperienced. Extensive knowledge of bird behaviour and the ground is an important factor.
- Birds become very attuned to the routine and can negatively react to any abrupt changes, however subtle.
- If poorly managed, birds can become lethargic and tame. On some ground, this can be turned into an advantage. In other areas, this can lead to unsporting birds.
- This technique is a powerful tool for the gamekeeper, but the performance of the birds and the drives are still subject to good management measures such as not over-shooting.

HAND / WHISTLE FEEDING CONT.

In order to gain the advantages of hand feeding, the training procedure must begin back in summer during the releasing phase. Traditionally keepers whistle their birds as they feed, but anything can be used, so long as it is always the same. The routine is maintained all the way through the release period into autumn, and then throughout winter.

Quantity requirements constantly change from day to day, and even hourly throughout the day, influenced by the weather, temperature, and availability of natural food. The experienced gamekeeper will observe the birds and adjust feed quantities accordingly.

COMBINED METHODS

Ground dwelling game birds enjoy foraging for their feed. It is natural behaviour that should be encouraged, and there are some tangible advantages to promoting this through your system.

Both methods previously mentioned are roughly equal in their pros and cons.

One negative of hopper feeding is the number of units required to ensure all birds have access to feed. This can be offset by spreading feed on the ground on a regular basis, but without the need for such a restrictive routine. This could be carried out every few days, or even once a week.

There are many ways to spread feed; by far the most efficient is by using a spinner attached to a ute tray or an ATV. These come in all shapes and sizes and are mostly designed for agricultural use but are easily adapted.

Units designed specifically for feeding birds are widely available in the UK and can be shipped to NZ.

A popular compromise is a combination of both hopper and hand feeding. Particularly on very large acreages, this can work very well.

Some areas suited to hopper feeding can be managed in that way, freeing up valuable time for the keeper to hand feed the areas that will most benefit from this system.

In order to work, there must be good separation between the two and would not work on small property.