

07 ROLE OF A GAMEKEEPER

THE WORKING YEAR FOR A GAMEKEEPER IS BROADLY DIVIDED INTO THE FOUR SEASONS, WHILE THE TYPE OF WORK IS ESSENTIALLY THE SAME WHATEVER THE SCALE AS WORKLOAD DOES NOT NECESSARILY INCREASE PROPORTIONATELY WITH LARGER NUMBERS OF BIRDS.

Some defining factors on the amount of gamekeeping resources required are as follows:

- Size of property – time required to travel & conduct work
- Number of planned shooting days & drives
- Suitability of property – land blessed with perfect game habitat will ultimately produce better returns and may require less management
- Additional workload – properties that rear their own birds and/or undertake their own groundwork if establishing game cover crops. General farm or grounds repair and maintenance

Priorities for the professional gamekeeper will always be focused on the care of birds – from delivery of young six-week old ‘poults’ in Dec-Feb through to the completion of the shooting season at the end of August. Within this time, workload will peak late summer and early autumn, when the keeper will be committed to seven days/week generally from dawn through to dusk.



SPRING - AUGUST TO DECEMBER

As the shooting draws to a close in late August, most gamekeepers will have worked eight months straight and will now be looking forward to a well-earned break.

Before this happens, time will be taken to sit down with the employers to review the season and confirm plans for the next.

If any breeding birds are to be caught, this will usually be completed through September.

Late winter is the perfect time to touch up the trapping network or create new sites, in readiness for the spring when predators will naturally become more active.

This time is also spent on maintaining equipment, planning the next year (particularly in the case of a developing shoot) and habitat improvements.

For most gamekeepers, the spring is a pleasant and rare time when they can work more 'normal' hours and take some time out for themselves and family. Without the daily commitment of looking after birds, this is the best period to clear all the year's outstanding projects.

Depending on the type of setup, other springtime priorities could be as follows:

- Establishment of game cover cropping
- Whether contractors are used, or this work is done in-house, crop types and areas will need to be planned. Ground preparation, soil testing, spraying off and working up all need to be completed in a timely manner working to the season in your local area.
- Many shoots will grow at least two species such as an early brassica and a later crop such as sorghum. Inputs such as seed, herbicides and fertiliser will need to be ordered well ahead of time.
- Development of new crop areas and maintenance of existing ones
- Good fencing is essential around game crops. Stock breaking in later in the year when the keeper is busy with birds is an unwelcome distraction, and a failed crop can mean the complete loss of a drive for the season. So, it pays to spend extra time fortifying crop sites.
- Preparations for poult delivery generally continue throughout springtime. Release sites or pens should be made ready, drinking and feeding facilities and targeted predator control in the immediate area
- Other project work is best completed during this period. This could include work to hosting facilities, vehicle maintenance or tree work to improve drives.

SUMMER - JANUARY TO APRIL

Most shoots will take delivery of pheasant poults over several weeks, starting as early as late December, with optimum time being February. Early birds can be problematic for the keeper by extending his or her working year by a few weeks. There is also an added expense having to feed them longer, and they can be prone to wondering as they reach maturity well ahead of the main flock. Likewise, late birds (mid-March) should be avoided where shooting is expected to begin in May as they may not be fully feathered by this stage.

(Note: it is considered poor management to shoot birds that have not yet matured.)

The exception to this rule is on larger properties where they can reserve these areas for later shooting to begin in June.

Good communication and a strong relationship with the breeder are essential. They must plan their program up to twelve months ahead, and they will be working hard to satisfy all their customers, who will likely all want their birds at the same time! While they have many important factors to consider in the management of their breeding operation, the customer must also be firm in accepting delivery only when conditions are suitable. It is critical to have all releasing infrastructure ready ahead of deliveries.

Deliveries will be affected by the following factors:

- Weather – stable, dry conditions are essential during delivery and for at least several days after. Good weather is also needed for catching the birds and crating at the breeder location
- Delivery location, distance to travel and capacity on delivery vehicle



Deliveries may take place over several weeks before the property has received the anticipated order. Over this period, the gamekeeper will intensely manage the birds, the latest arrivals having priority. For the first week, they will typically be visited up to four times daily for feeding and checks. In good conditions, after seven days the birds will have settled into their environment and become familiar with the keeper's chosen routine. At this stage, they may reduce the daily visits to two or three, depending on other commitments.

SUMMER - JANUARY TO APRIL CONT.

As a guideline only, a typical shoot of our example scale might utilise six release sites. The logistics of caring for these properly involve a strict daily routine – essential for good management of pheasants.

Dawn is an important time of day, and the keeper must endeavour to visit the birds as soon after as possible. Even on a smaller property, this may represent 40-60 minutes per release site including travel between each. It is easy to see how the kilometres travelled stack up through the year, and how a poorly maintained vehicle can quickly cause management problems for the shoot.

As it is impossible to be everywhere at once, a knowledgeable keeper will vary their morning routine to ensure they visit different groups of birds at first light. The same can be applied at dusk, when settling birds down for the night can often be problematic.

The following few weeks should be relatively steady, as birds grow and hopefully enjoy good weather. Predator control continues throughout, including many nighttime operations with the spotlight. The four weeks or so that one can expect poults to stay close to their release site is extremely valuable for the keeper; this is the best opportunity to imprint the management system onto the birds before they gain more independence.



AUTUMN – APRIL TO JUNE

April is the peak month in most situations. The days are still relatively long, and by now the keeper will be spreading groups of birds around the property, drawing them into the drives where it is hoped they will spend the rest of the winter – in preparation for the rapidly approaching shooting season. If a typical shoot has twelve drives or more, the feeding locations (compared to release sites) will have more than doubled, meaning more travel and time.

Between this commitment, the keeper will be repeatedly checking boundaries and any problem areas where birds are travelling in undesirable directions. A mild autumn with an abundance of natural food can cause significant challenges when trying to hold birds on the property, and substantial losses will occur if left unchecked. Local knowledge, an acute understanding of bird behaviour and the property are essential in dealing with this annual problem. Birds often tend to travel at similar times each day, though weather will change things; the keeper must work out where these areas are, so they can be there to meet them with a loyal team of dogs which are used to push wondering pheasants back toward home. It is always easier to deal with these if you catch them early on their way to somewhere, rather than trying to deal with them once they get where they are going!

In more recent years, as maize silage has become more common, several shoots have experienced considerable problems once birds have found this feed source. When fed out in strips around the farm, cattle generally trample cracked grains into the soil, providing endless entertainment for pheasants. It can be extremely difficult to get them out of the habit, making it tough to draw the birds into and hold them in the desired drives.

While the daily routine of feeding and boundary checks continue, along with ongoing predator control, the keeper will have a keen eye on the calendar and rapidly approaching shooting season. Preparations will continue throughout April, including bringing in equipment from bird rearing, cleaning, disinfecting, and storing. Vehicles and other shoot-day equipment will need sorting out, hosting facilities readied, and catering plans confirmed. Time will be spent with the employer or whoever hosts the shooting days, placing pegs for each of the drives and generally discussing the battle plan. In the evenings, teams of volunteer helpers will be contacted and provided with the shooting dates for the season ahead.

WINTER – JUNE TO AUGUST

Usually, most keepers are glad to get the first few early shoots out of the way. By now, the winter weather should have set in, reducing any wanderlust in the birds as temperatures drop and natural feed becomes a little scarcer. Understanding this is useful; birds have a high metabolism and quite simply, the cooler it is the more fuel they need to function. This is why gamekeepers enjoy a good wintry spell, as the birds tend to draw back home to the feed. The birds should be looking great, and nicely sharpened up after being disturbed a few times, and the volunteer teams should all be working well together. So, for many, June and July are the premium months to enjoy this winter sport.

The shorter days should mean the keeper can work slightly less hours, though it very much remains a seven-day-week commitment. The focus will continue with studying the ever-changing bird movements and planning the upcoming days to suit client expectations.

The keeper will develop a plan for the next day based on such things as expected weather, target bag number, bird concentrations and gun's abilities & experience. Ideally, there will be a 'plan B' to cover any challenges. They will also need to consider when a given area or group of birds was disturbed and do everything possible to 'rest' that area for as long as they can – preferably up to one week. For single-handed keepers conducting two shoots each week, the workload is a busy one, with a constant cycle of clearing up after one shoot while planning the next. Thus, once a shoot is aiming to conduct more than twenty days each season, extra help becomes more necessary.