



Feeding through the season

Richard Leach, Sales Manager at Keepers Choice, says feeding over the winter is more important than ever...

For what was thought by many to be the first 'normal' build up to a season since Covid, the recent outbreak of bird flu gave a reality check to the challenges faced within our sector. Some shoots got their full allocation of poults, but most customers who I speak to have considerably fewer birds than they would like.

Due to this well-documented issue, it is more important than ever that the birds actually on the ground have access to the correct ration and volume of feed they need.

Minimising mortality is a given whatever the season, but with substantially fewer birds available there should be scope to reduce mortality further; and those birds which are available – albeit depleted in number – need to be fit and fly well to give the guns challenging sport. Upholding high nutritional standards is key to achieving this. If the feeding regime falls short, it will give rise to genuine welfare concerns.

What should be fed and when?

Generally, we advise customers that eight tonnes of feed for every 1,000 birds released is about right – with this made up of roughly two tonnes of grower's pellets and six tonnes of wheat.

In a regular year, this sum is usually correct, but this isn't a regular year with many gamekeepers' poults having been delivered in sporadic waves (some as late as September), which is highly unusual. This created the

problem of some birds requiring a different plane of nutrition to other birds much later into the year than usual, and it was essential that birds continued to receive pellets if their stage of growth suggested they needed them.

The main piece of advice we gave was not to move the new arrivals over to wheat too early as the younger poults wouldn't build the muscle mass and fat required to give them the best chance to thrive through the winter.

How to feed through the winter

This comes down to individual choice, but with wheat and feed costs so high, and the financial and logistic issue of fewer birds, the feeding regime going through the winter needs to be carefully thought out.

Many gamekeepers would normally put a spinner on their quad as their method of feeding. The benefits are clear: who doesn't enjoy a flock of hungry pheasants charging toward the quad? But, at what cost? The potential level of wastage when feeding this way should be enough to make most keepers reconsider using this method.

Hopper feeding, by contrast, significantly reduces the wastage, particularly pertinent at a time when wheat prices are phenomenally high. It is also less labour intensive, which may also help cut costs, or at least time. And, although it reduces the ability to manipulate the birds to certain parts of the shoot at certain times of the day, the cost benefit speaks for itself. Less



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feed should also be lost to wild birds and scavengers when hopper feeding.

Resilience

There aren't many sectors that could survive another genuine crisis so soon after the pandemic. And that should be testament to everybody involved in ours.

So far this season, the feedback is good and most of us who shoot are grateful just to be getting out into the field. Of course, the bags are smaller, but is this really a problem? We've come from a place of potentially no shooting, to days of great enjoyment. And fewer birds mean that each one is valued to the full extent – as they should be.

Remember – it is a legal requirement that you register your gamebirds. Find out more at gov.uk ●