

Managing Woodlands to Suit Game Birds

By Amy Dutton - CALU

Many farmers and landowners in Wales have patches of unmanaged woodland. A recent CALU workshop looked at how these areas could be managed to create ideal habitat for game birds, particularly pheasants.

If birds are being reared on site they will need to be penned to protect them from predators. The pen is also where the young birds will learn how to roost and feed from troughs. Habitat management around the pen is critical.

The woodland edge is an ideal location for siting the pen, provided the ground cover is managed correctly. The site needs to provide sufficient low cover (below 1m) for the birds during daylight hours and enough mid-level (1-2m) plants for roosting at night. The area should be split approximately one-third open ground; one third low level cover; and one third mid-level roosting area.

The different vegetation heights need to be evenly distributed throughout the pen so that the birds are evenly dispersed. If the birds tend to cluster in one area, the higher stocking rate can lead to a decrease in the health of the birds. The recommended stocking density for pheasants in pens is 700 birds / hectare of pen.

Pens are usually constructed with timber and one inch (2.5cm) mesh. The pen height should be around 1.8m, with the exact shape and size of the pen being determined by the site and number of birds being reared.

The second area required for game birds is known as the 'day site'. This is a good quality area of woodland with lots of mid height cover for roosting.

Good management of woodland for game birds will involve heavy thinning of dense woodland to allow light to filter through to ground level. This will allow natural plant succession with the development of brambles and shrubs. The species within the woodland are not important, as long as they provide mid and low level ground cover. Hazel coppice managed in a rotational system can provide the ideal conditions for pheasants.

Managing woodlands for game birds often leads to an increase in the value of the woodland for other wildlife and biodiversity in general.

The time scale from unmanaged dense woodland to prime pheasant habitat with low and mid level cover can be as short as 3 -5 years.

For more information please contact CALU on 01248 680450 or www.calu.bangor.ac.uk. The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust website is www.gct.org.uk.