

The enemy at the gate



Matthew Knight of Knights Solicitors examines the pitfalls of turning from a gamekeeper into a game rearer.

At the beginning of each calendar year gamekeepers turn their thoughts to the next season and for many of them this means catching birds up, putting them into aviaries and laying pens, picking up eggs, setting them in hatching pens, bringing chicks on in brooder huts and if, if all goes well, sending growing birds onto rearing fields. In reality this is a game farming enterprise and some gamekeepers become game farmers for the spring and summer unless they rely on bought-in poults from specialist suppliers.

This temporary career has public relations and legal pitfalls for gamekeepers (and game farmers), and this article is a roadmap for avoiding the danger areas, to help you achieve the least harmful outcome if something goes wrong in spite of your best efforts, and to help you to deal with

hostile actors if they turn their attentions towards you or your aviaries, laying pens, hatching pens, brooder huts and rearing fields.

Not all gamekeepers find the transition

Not all gamekeepers find the seasonal shift to game farming easy.

to game farming easy and many rely on additional labour to staff what is a pretty intensive game farming enterprise during the spring and summer.

When you embark on this new career, I suggest six golden rules for staying out of trouble or getting out of trouble if you find yourself and your temporary game farm in it.

RULE 1

Be prepared for infiltration or invasion by saboteurs and animal rights activists. Think about where they can most easily get in and what they can most easily do to harm you, your permanent and temporary staff, your animals and rearing field and other facilities. Erect fencing and security lights and deploy resources to make it as difficult for them to get in as possible.

Do your facilities appear tidy and are they visually appealing?



Image: geograph/JThomas

RULE 2

Positively check any applicant for jobs and, in particular, check any seasonal workers. If you do not already know them or if they are not already known to contacts whom you trust, take up references and – if in doubt – do not engage them.

RULE 3

Do not be absent from your aviaries, laying pens, hatching pens, brooder huts and rearing fields for any longer than you can help during the crucial February to August period. Do not delegate supervision to anyone of whose knowledge and expertise you are not absolutely sure, even temporarily.

RULE 4

Be in good standing with your specialist vets. Some gamekeepers do not have a retained or even a regular vet and shop around to get the best rates – or worse try to economise by doing without external specialist veterinary advice or assistance. No client of my firm's who had a retained or at least a regular vet who was prepared to give evidence for him has ever been convicted of an animal welfare or animal health offence.

RULE 5

Be in good standing with the Police, with Defra, with the APHA and with the NGO. If things go wrong you need them on your side and not on the side of your accusers.

RULE 6

Try to make sure that your rearing field and other facilities look tidy and are visually appealing at all times or at least during daylight hours. That may be a bit of a tall order during May, June and July but it will pay dividends if something goes wrong. Maintain skeleton staff with appropriate instructions and resources during the hours of darkness.



That may be expensive but it will displace hostile attentions towards your less organised competitors.

Finally, talk to those gamekeepers and game farmers whom you know or know of and who have had problems in the past. Find out the history and

geography of the problems and try to organise yourselves and your rearing fields, etc so that you minimise the chance of similar problems happening to you and your facilities, or minimise the magnitude of those problems if they do occur in spite of all your efforts. ●

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Matthew Knight is the Senior Partner of Knights Solicitors. He has been giving legal advice to gamekeepers via the National Gamekeepers' Organisation's Legal Helpline since 2011. Knights Solicitors is a specialist litigation practice well-known for representing clients with animal and countryside interests on a national level. Knights Solicitors provides the NGO with a legal helpline service (see below). Tel: 01892 537311, www.knights-solicitors.co.uk. Ask for Matthew Knight, Richard Atkins or Jonathan Manser. **NGO free legal Helpline**

NGO members in need of emergency legal advice relating to gamekeeping and fieldsports can call the helplines below. Up to 30 minutes telephone advice is available free of charge as a benefit of your NGO membership.

For those in the South: Matthew Knight, Richard Atkins and Jonathan Manser, Knights Solicitors (Tunbridge Wells), 01892 537311 (24hr line).

For those in the North, Scotland and Wales: Michael Kenyon, Solicitor (Macclesfield), 01625 422275 or 07798 636460.

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