



# game / wild meats



*a red deer in the Scottish Highlands; they have no natural predators, and numbers can be controlled by shooting for human consumption, although there is a proposal to reintroduce wolves into the wild in Scotland.*

## what is it?

It's all about harvesting meat from the wild. In the UK, the kind of wild animals that are good to eat (apart from fish) include deer, rabbits, squirrels, ducks, geese, game birds such as partridges and pheasants, and pigeons. They can be shot, humanely trapped, or they could be road kill. Game animals can also be farmed, but then the benefits of truly wild game (below) are lost.

What we don't mean is the shooting industry, which isn't about food, is an incredible waste of resources. Animal Aid quote gamekeepers themselves when it comes to the figures. It costs around £30 to produce a pheasant for shooting, and the average price for a bird is £2, but most birds don't make it to the table at all. It's about killing animals for fun, and for social status / prestige reasons. US executives are flown over to shoot game in the UK for this reason. And almost none of the birds shot are wild (although grouse are). Over 40 million pheasants are raised intensively, from battery eggs, fed grain that needs lots of land to produce, and released into the 'wild', where many of them get run over, starve or become easy meals for predators, because they're not really wild at all. Plus these 40 million introduced animals are competing with native wildlife for food. Also, the shooting industry is responsible for the snaring and shooting of other wild animals that prey on game birds, including birds of prey. Breeding birds for 'sport' has been banned in the Netherlands, and we support Animal Aid's campaign to have it banned here.

So, back to truly wild animals.

## what are the benefits?

As long as the animals are not endangered, this is probably the most eco-friendly way to obtain meat. Food can be harvested from nature – no land needs to be cleared for farms. Unlike the meat industry, it involves no chemicals, hormones, abattoirs, pasture or animal housing, or land to grow roots or cereals for feeds.

Many game species are pests: squirrels ring bark and kill trees, and introduced grey squirrels out-compete the native red, which has become rare. Rabbits eat crops and young trees, and deer prevent attempts to re-forest areas by eating young shoots. Shooting and eating pest species is better than snaring or poisoning.

The meat of wild animals has a lower fat content than domesticated animals, and is healthier.

Vegetarians and vegans rightly point to the fact that a plant-based diet requires less land than a meat-based one, which is why we support vegetarianism/veganism. But this only applies if the land is farmed. Harvesting food from the wild involves no alteration of natural ecosystems at all, and therefore has a lower impact than even a vegan diet – especially if the wild meat is local and the vegetables are imported. Perhaps the most sustainable (and healthiest) diet possible is mainly local and vegan, with the occasional meal including wild meat. A further philosophical point is whether it's right to kill animals at all. That decision is down to the individual, and if you don't think it's right, you can become vegan. But it's impossible to prevent the killing of animals - it happens in nature all the time. Red deer have no predators in Scotland. From an ecological perspective, controlling numbers by shooting or by the proposed reintroduction of wolves are both good ideas; but from an animal welfare perspective, shooting is more humane.



*plucking a road-kill pheasant for roasting.*



*rabbits should hang for at least 2 days, pheasants for about a week, and deer up to 10 days.*

## what can I do?

Firstly, you can only shoot or trap game on your own land, or if you have the permission of the landowner. There is no common land in the UK any more, so you have to find out who owns it.

### shooting

Air rifle: shoots pellets, suitable for rabbits, squirrels and pigeons, no licence required.

Shotgun: for moving targets, relatively short-range (up to 35m) – e.g. squirrels moving through trees.

Rifle: single bullet, up to 300m, but more usually around 100m, best for deer.

You need a shotgun licence, or a firearms licence for a rifle - available from the police. Guns need to be kept in a locked metal cupboard bolted to the wall. There are seasons in which game can be shot legally, but some can be shot all year round. You should also think about insurance (landowners will probably want to see it before they allow you on their land). Talk to the dealer you bought the gun from. Plus, don't try and shoot game until you are a good shot, so that your quarry will be killed cleanly. Practice on targets.

You can't use a bow and arrow to hunt game in the UK (although you can in other countries).

**trapping:** we only condone trapping where the animal is killed instantly, not snares that can hold an animal in terror for hours or days.

**Rabbiting:** ferrets are put down rabbit warrens, rabbits are flushed out into nets, then killed instantly with a sharp blow to the back of the head, or a twist to break the neck. Don't try it if you don't know how to do it. Go rabbiting with people who know how to do it first.

**road kill:** you're not allowed to take home road kill if you hit the animal yourself (as it would encourage people to try and hit animals deliberately). But if someone else has, and it's fresh, feel free to take it. There are quite a few people around who cook the usual road kill - deer, rabbits and pheasant, but some have even developed recipes for pot-roasted fox or badger burgers. Waste not, want not.

**preparing:** many people find wild meat too strong or 'gamey'; but if it's prepared and cooked properly, game can be delicious. Wild animals have harder lives than domestic animals, and so their meat is tougher. For this reason, game is often hung for up to 10 days to allow enzymes to break down proteins and improve tenderness and flavour. The skin should remain on during hanging to retain moisture. The animal must be bled and gutted immediately after killing, then hung, skinned / plucked, butchered and cooked. As these are very practical skills, perhaps a course is the best way to learn.

**cooking:** game tends to be very lean, so you have to make sure that it doesn't dry out during cooking. Also, it can be tough unless cooked for a long time. Casseroles and pies are excellent ways to serve game. No room here for recipes, but you can find them in books and online.

## resources

- British Association for Shooting & Conservation: [basco.org](http://basco.org), 01244 573000 – codes of practice for firearms & deer stalking, info on licences, training, seasons
- Animal Aid: [animalaid.org.uk](http://animalaid.org.uk), 01732 364546 – campaigning against the pheasant shooting industry
- [justgamerecipes.com](http://justgamerecipes.com) – over 1500 game recipes
- Jeremy Hobson & Philip Watts, *Cook Game* – lots of game recipes
- John Mettler, *Basic Butchering of Livestock & Game* – how to prepare your catch
- see LILI's website for these and more books and courses on preparing and cooking game

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