

# Worm control in grouse



**Dan King** of Sandhill Vets talks about the role of Flubendazole medicated grit in controlling strongylosis.

Strongylosis in red grouse, caused by the caecal worm *Trichostrongylus tenuis*, has been documented for decades and was responsible for large crashes in grouse numbers in the past. Since the development of medicated grit, now with Flubendazole (Flubenvet 5%) we have been able to control worm burdens in grouse much more reliably.

The worm damages the lining of the caeca and causes protein loss and malabsorption, things that the grouse cannot tolerate especially as they survive on a predominantly poor diet of heather. Not only does this result in disease and mortality, but the malnutrition reduces fertility meaning poor hatches and weak chicks that inevitably die.

Flubendazole works by killing all stages of the worms (not all wormers do this) meaning the eggs and larvae are killed or prevented from developing. This has a significant effect at reducing the environmental burden of worms on the moor and therefore reduces new infections. This is particularly important for young birds. It should be noted that is unlikely that all grouse consume enough

grit to be certain of reaching the high concentration required to kill the adult worms, but the effect of killing larvae in caecal pats and reducing further infections is effective at controlling worm populations. This larval reduction does not occur with other methods.

However, we must use wormer with extreme caution otherwise we are at risk of developing resistance to wormer (as has occurred in the sheep industry), which could result in worm control being lost altogether. Medicated grit must not be used if the worm burden is not sufficient to warrant it. Other factors like weather, nutrition, grouse density, age structure, other diseases and body condition must be also factored in when considering the use of medicated grit.

To determine whether medicated grit is needed, the intestines from 10 young and 10 old shot representative birds from each area should be taken, processed and the worms counted. These samples can be sent to ourselves at Sandhill, the GWCT or keepers can perform the counts themselves. Ideally counts should be performed in early and late autumn as counts are likely

to rise from August to December. If these counts do not provide the justification for medicated grit, then caecal pats should be collected and worm egg counts performed in January to February.

Good management of medicated grit is vitally important to ensure birds are taking sufficient quantities to achieve the required effects. All non-medicated grit must be removed, as this will only dilute the intake of the medicated product. Grit must be fresh, and any surplus should be disposed of when removed in June. Grit stations should ideally be moved annually or as a minimum kept very clean to help prevent the transmission of diseases such as Coccidiosis and Cryptosporidiosis, which build up from secretions and droppings.

As no wormers are licensed for grouse, their use is illegal unless prescribed by a vet under the 'cascade' protocol. Providing counts are sufficiently high to warrant the use of medicated grit, the grit is managed well and the 28-day withdrawal is followed, this practice is responsible and effective in protecting the health and welfare of the birds. ●



## DAN KING AND SANDHILL

Dan King is a partner at Sandhill Veterinary Services LLP specialising in gamebirds. With 40 years of avian experience and its own lab, Sandhill Vets offers a comprehensive service including worm counting for grouse.

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