

# THE ALLERTON PROJECT

by Austin Weldon

## Austin Weldon explains the role of the GWCT's demonstration farm and its significance to gamebird research projects

My role as Advisor for the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust sees me travelling far and wide around the UK and often further afield to mainland Europe. Only last week I went to help with the development of a new shoot in Toulouse in Southern France. Despite all this gadding around and time away from the family, my main patch is central England, based at the Trust's 800 acre demonstration farm at Loddington in Leicestershire.

**The farm was originally owned by Lord and Lady Allerton** and very generously donated to the Trust upon their death. Our involvement in the project stemmed from Lord and Lady Allerton's keen interest in shooting and its role in the wider countryside. The project sets out to explore the potential of game management on farmland for meeting wider environmental objectives.

**The core aims of the project include:**

- To advance public education in different farming methods and the effect thereof on the environment

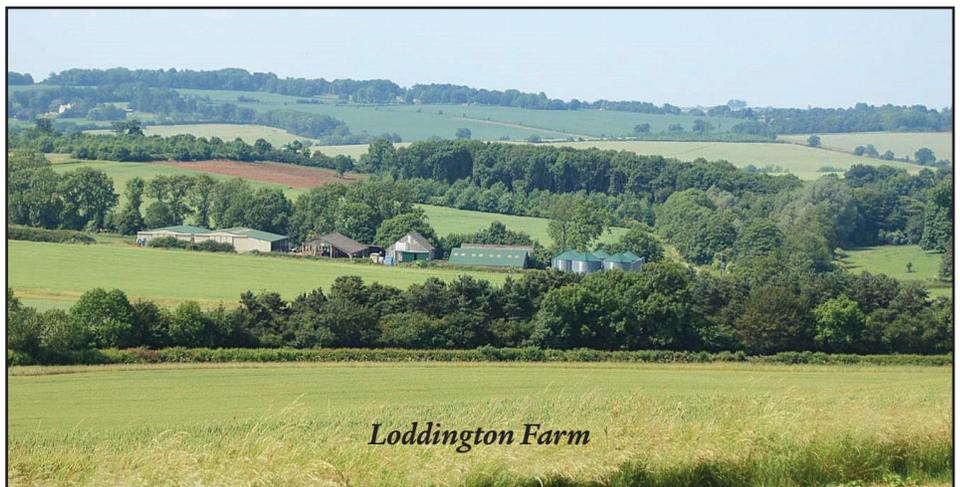
and wildlife (both flora and fauna);

- To conduct research into different farming methods and the effects thereof on the environment and wildlife (both flora and fauna);
- To disseminate the useful results of such research.

**The Allerton project started in 1992** and has proven very influential in steering UK policy through research led science. Over 3,000 people visit the farm each year including farmers, gamekeepers and crucially, politicians and policy makers. This gives us a superb opportunity to demonstrate

good practice through a working farm which has to be financially viable.

**We run a modest shoot at the Allerton Project** aimed at a scale that many people can relate to and replicate on their own shoots. For the 2015/6 season we released 2,500 cock pheasants - no partridges are released or shot on shoot days to help conserve the population of wild grey partridges. We also have ponds, and these are fed to encourage wild duck, I'm sure readers will agree that evening flighting is a great way to end the day.



*Loddington Farm*

## We've deliberately chosen to only release cock pheasants

based on the results of a three year radio-tracking study during which we found that cocks tend to stray less than hens, so they generally provide better returns. Breaking down the daily behaviours a pheasant exhibits we found that cocks tend to spend a lot of their time either feeding or fighting, and even in the winter cocks will spend plenty of time scraping. Whereas hens will be either feeding or wandering (outside of the nesting season). All of the above assumes that good quality habitat has been provided because even if the laziest stay at home pheasant is released into a desert for a habitat, it is highly likely to stray. Consequently, the Loddington farm has a diverse network of cover crops, brood-rearing areas, beetle banks, hedges and woodland. Despite this, a small percentage of our birds will still get shot on neighbouring shoots, so understanding where your birds go is an important part of managing a shoot.

**Each year we mark all the released pheasants** using a simple plastic tag, similar to the sort of thing used for tagging clothes, these are fitted by the game farmer during the catching up process. Each release pen is given a different colour tag and we also mark the tags with the year, so we know the age and pen origin of each recovered bird. Interestingly, at Rotherfield Park in Hampshire where the Trust is running a grey partridge reintroduction, the guns shot two cock pheasants with tags from 2011. This is fascinating information and well worth doing to get a better understanding of where your birds go and how long they live. If you find you have a particular pen which gives poor returns your tags will show it and



*Photo by Laurie Camphel*

you will be in a better position to make informed decisions in the future. The Trust are looking for more shoots to contribute to a tagging study and so if this is of interest please contact Maureen Woodburn at our Fordingbridge office: [mwoodburn@gwct.org.uk](mailto:mwoodburn@gwct.org.uk). We can provide all the equipment and knowhow.

**We're now at the start of the season** and all game should be looking settled and healthy. Basking in the Indian summer we've just had, it seems almost too early to be thinking of shooting! The birds on the Loddington shoot were released on the 9th August so we've a little while to go yet before they're fully mature. This has worked in our favour and we feel that fewer have wandered so far this season, which is also partly due to the excellent cover crops which this year have been managed by farm manager, Phil Jarvis. Kings provide the cover crops for the shoot and under the steerage of Richard Barnes and his team we have cover to suit a wide variety of wildlife, not just game. We still use maize in some areas but we largely have kale and we find that using these two varieties in a rotation of kale for two years and maize for one means we can maintain a clean

seed bed, hold game well and also benefit many other species, especially songbirds during the leaner months.

**By now our hoppers are largely concentrated** around the flushing points and holding areas of our drives. Feeding pheasants towards your shooting areas takes a lot of the hard work out of drives on shoot days, but even now on advisory visits we find some shoots are still walking birds to flushing points when judicious use of feeders will ensure that they're already there ready and waiting. Nice sunny feed areas with approximately one feeder to 20 birds ensure that there's enough food to accommodate the number of diners and you avoid the overly protective cock bird situation which puts others off feeding.

**Many keepers are aware of the importance of predator control** and Loddington is one of many places where the efforts of resident keeper at the time, Malcolm Brockless, were recorded and quantified by the Trust. We've again increased the predator control efforts at Loddington with our current keeper but I'll save telling you about his results for an article in the spring.