NEW COLUMNIST

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Country Diary

We now have a deadline for the ban on lead shot but it is an ongoing debate worth looking at, from traditional and practical perspectives

I've been lucky enough to spend quite a few cold mornings standing in fields across the British countryside with a shotgun in hand, waiting for partridges to appear over a hedge or for a pheasant to blast through the mist. And during those mornings, between glasses of sloe gin and discussions of the one that got through, one subject keeps coming up: should we really be switching from traditional lead shot to steel when shooting game in the UK? It's one of those topics that can turn a quiet conversation into a full-blown debate quicker than someone missing an easy bird.

For a long time, I didn't think much about it. If the bird came down cleanly, the cartridge worked. But the more I listened to shooters, gamekeepers and conservation discussions, the more I realised there's a genuine argument on both sides.

From 1 April 2029 all cartridges must be non-toxic, as the ban on lead shot becomes law

Vulnerable

Let's start with the case for steel. The principal reason it's being encouraged in the UK is environmental. Lead is toxic and when pellets fall into fields, wetlands or woodland, they don't simply vanish. Over time they can be eaten by birds that mistake them for grit, which can lead to poisoning. Ducks and other waterfowl are especially vulnerable, which is why the use of lead has already been restricted in many wetland areas.

Steel shot poses a lower environmental risk. It breaks down without releasing toxins, which means the countryside isn't quietly accumulating harmful metal over the years. In a country like the UK, where wildlife habitats are carefully protected and public attitudes towards shooting are constantly scrutinised, switching to steel is often seen as a responsible move.

There's also the issue of public perception. Shooting already sits under a magnifying glass in modern Britain. Using a non-toxic alternative, such as steel, helps demonstrate that shooters are taking conservation seriously. Whether we like it or not, showing that the sport can adapt to environmental concerns helps keep it socially acceptable.

But steel has drawbacks, and most shooters who have tried it will tell you it behaves differently. For the same size, steel pellets are lighter than lead, so they lose energy faster and have a shorter effective range. That can mean fewer clean kills if the shooter hasn't adjusted their technique.

The first time I used steel loads on a shoot, I definitely noticed this. Birds I thought I'd hit cleanly kept flying, and my shoulder felt a bit more recoil than usual by the end of the day. Steel can produce a slightly sharper kick and requires different cartridge loads to achieve performance similar to lead.

"Lead shot still offers performance advantages that many shooters value"

There is the argument in favour of sticking with lead. It has been used in British game shooting for centuries, and there's a reason it became the standard. It's dense, soft and incredibly effective. Lead pellets carry more energy and tend to deliver reliable results even at longer distances. For many shooters, it simply performs better.

Lead is also kinder to older shotguns. Many traditional British guns, especially vintage side-by-sides, were designed specifically with lead shot in mind. Steel is harder and can put more stress on certain barrels if the gun wasn't built for it. Anyone who owns an older or valuable shotgun might understandably hesitate before feeding it a steady diet of steel cartridges.

Tweed

Tradition plays its role as well. Game shooting is steeped in history, from tweed jackets to carefully kept estates. For some people, using lead feels like part of that tradition, much like carrying a classic shotgun passed down through generations.

I can see both sides. Steel makes sense from an environmental perspective and is becoming the norm. Lead shot still offers performance advantages that many shooters value, especially when it comes to consistent results in the field.

In the end, the debate over steel versus lead in the UK is likely to persist until, of course, it becomes mandatory in 2029. Like many topics in the shooting world, it blends practicality, tradition and a fair amount of personal opinion. But whether you favour steel or lead, the most important thing is responsible shooting and respect for the countryside we enjoy.

***Jean-Paul Gaudin**, is one of the UK's most accomplished game Shots and recognised voices in the industry, showcasing the sport through his Seated Gun brand*