

Debate Pack
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e-petition debate on the open season for woodcock

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1

Petition to limit the shooting season of woodcock

A petition introduced by UK wildlife charity, Wild Justice, calling for [a shorter shooting season of woodcock](#), a native bird, will be debated in Westminster Hall on 27 February 2023. The petition which has received 107,916 signatures calls for the season across the UK to start on 1 December, rather than 1 September in Scotland and 1 October in the rest of the country:

Limit the shooting season of Woodcock

Mark Avery, Chris Packham and Ruth Tingay (Wild Justice) want the opening of the Woodcock shooting season to be pushed back to 1 December. 160,000 Woodcock are shot for fun across the UK whilst their population is declining. The Defra Secretary of State has powers to vary the shooting season.

Wild Justice wrote to Defra and the Northern Ireland authorities in March asking that the Woodcock open season should start on 1 December instead of 1 October (England, Wales & Northern Ireland, or 1 September, Scotland) see letter <https://wildjustice.org.uk/woodcock/we-ask-for-changes-to-the-woodcock-shooting-season/>. No substantive response has been received. This simple conservation measure is supported by science, and some shooters, and requires no new legislation for implementation.¹

The petition was laid following [a letter from Wild justice](#) asking the then Secretary of State for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustace, to amend the shooting season in England and Wales. Wild Justice [set out its reasoning](#) for this approach as follows:

A change to the shooting season is a simple matter and does not require primary legislation. It could be done, at no cost and with no delay in the next few weeks and be in place for next autumn's shooting season. There is ample evidence from advertisements offering Woodcock shooting that the call for voluntary restraint has not been heeded.

This simple and precautionary change in order to reduce the pressure on a declining species of conservation concern is a modest request of politicians. We see it as a test of their commitment to wildlife conservation.²

Government responses

The Government [responded to the petition](#) on 27 July 2022, setting out its reasons for not considering an amendment to the shooting season:

¹ Parliamentary Petition, [Limit the shooting season of Woodcock, e-petition 619615](#), closed 23 January 2023

² Wild Justice, [We ask for changes to the Woodcock shooting season](#), 28 March 2022

The reasons for the decline of the breeding population of woodcock in Great Britain are not fully understood but are likely to include: disturbance; habitat loss as a result of land drainage; the drying out of natural woodlands; changes in surrounding woodland management; the maturation of new plantations; and overgrazing (reduction of the field layer) by deer. While further work is needed to enhance our understanding, the Government's current view is that the woodcock population is more likely to be influenced by the extent and quality of habitat, rather than shooting. We will continue to keep this evidence under review.³

Following this, the Petitions Committee returned to the Government asking for a response which more directly addressed the request of the petition. The [amended response from the Government](#), published 11 October 2022 included a commitment to review the protection of wild birds to ensure recreational shooting is sustainable:

The reasons for the decline of the breeding population of woodcock in Great Britain are not fully understood [...]. Further work is needed to fully understand the causes of its decline.

Defra is committed to reviewing the protection we afford to wild birds listed on Schedule 2 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, in particular establishing the evidence underpinning the listing of species such as the woodcock, so we can ensure that recreational shooting is sustainable and does not undermine species recovery. This might include amending the close season for native species such as the woodcock.⁴

Previous to this [the Secretary of State had written to Wild Justice](#), in September 2022, to say that - the Government would be engaging “with key stakeholders and the Devolved Administrations to review the protection we afford to wild birds” in the context of recreational shooting.⁵

Devolved administrations

Wildlife protection is a devolved matter in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, the power to change the close season under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 is a devolved matter in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but not in Wales.

In Wales, the Welsh Government (Llywodraeth Cymru) has said in a [Written Response](#) that it is aware of the debate on amending the close season for woodcock and that the powers to do so rest with the Secretary of State.⁶

³ Parliamentary Petition, [Limit the shooting season of Woodcock, e-petition 619615](#), closed 23 January 2023

⁴ Parliamentary Petition, [Limit the shooting season of Woodcock, e-petition 619615](#), closed 23 January 2023

⁵ Wild Justice, [Defra to review impacts of shooting – including Woodcock](#), 27 September 2022

⁶ Welsh Parliament/ Senedd Cymru, [WQ84960 \(e\)](#), 6 April 2022

In Scotland, a written response from September 2022 set out the details of the ongoing review of protections for birds which is expected to be completed shortly:

Scottish Government has asked NatureScot to review the contents of Schedule 2 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Schedule 2 lists the species of birds which are protected during the close season but which may be killed or taken outside this period. Consideration of, and proposals for any changes to the shooting season for woodcock will be undertaken within this review, and in the context of other scheduled species.

We expect the review to be completed early next year.⁷

1.1 Woodcock populations in the UK

Woodcocks is the only species of wading bird in Britain and Ireland that is adapted to breed in woodland. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) describes it as “superbly camouflaged” with a habit of remaining motionless unless approached at very close quarters.⁸ The Wildlife Trust describes it as follows:

A fairly large, short-legged wading bird, the woodcock lives in woodlands and on heathlands where its mottled plumage provides it with excellent camouflage as it probes around the ground for earthworms and beetles to eat. If you happen to disturb one, it will fly off in a zig-zag pattern between the trees before dropping back to the ground and the safe, dense cover of the undergrowth. The woodcocks that breed in the UK are mostly residents, but they are joined by wintering birds from Finland and Russia.

In spring and summer, male woodcocks perform a display flight known as roding. At dusk, and just before dawn, they take to the air and patrol over large areas of their forest and heathland homes, calling in a series of grunts and squeaks, competing with other males to attract females.⁹

For further information an article in Birdguides magazine [Focus on: Eurasian Woodcock](#) provides a detailed overview of its lifecycle and habits.

Native and migrant populations

There are two distinct populations of woodcock in the UK. A smaller breeding population, resident all year round and a much larger overwintering population that arrives in the UK from November onwards. [The resident population has been on the Great Britain Red List of species since 2015](#) which means it is considered at risk of extinction. The

⁷ Scottish Parliament, [Written question S6W-10500](#), 2 September 2022

⁸ BTO, Woodcock Survey [website visited 23 February 2023]

⁹ Wildlife Trust, [Woodcock](#) [website visited 23 February 2023]

overwintering woodcock from the European population is considered of least concern internationally but the two populations are indistinguishable from each in the winter as they often occupy the same areas.

Native population declines

Males are territorial and display during mating season, so population estimates are based on counting their numbers. In the 1970's woodcock were generally widespread in the Great Britain but numbers have been declining since then. BTO and the Game Conservancy Trust surveyed breeding male woodcock populations in 2003. They carried out a second survey in 2013, and a third one will be carried out in 2023.¹⁰

The 2003 estimated that 78,000 breeding males were present in Great Britain The following survey in 2013 found a 29% decline with an estimated 55,241 breeding present.¹¹

The 2013 survey also found that that there has been a 19% decline in sites occupied by woodcock overall, with sharpest decline in Scotland, and the lowest populations in Wales and Southwest England. Increases where seen in Northern England. Occupied sites were clustered around larger wooded areas such as the New Forest. The males were found to be more abundant in woods containing a varied mix of woodland habitat types and in woods further from urban areas, preferring Birch to Beech woodland.¹² The study concluded that:

The Woodcock's population size and breeding range appear to be declining severely across Britain. Regional variation in the rate of decline might be explained by the distribution of large continuous woodlands.¹³

BTO also publishes data on annual counts of woodcock up to 2022 which show an overall declining trend in numbers

Counts were relatively stable until 2008. The number of roding males then declined steadily until 2015. In 2016 there was a substantial increase, giving the highest counts since 2008 - but numbers then reduced in 2017, stabilised,

¹⁰ Christopher J. Heward, Andrew N. Hoodless, Greg J. Conway, Nicholas J. Aebischer, Simon Gillings & Robert J. Fuller (2015) Current status and recent trend of the Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* as a breeding bird in Britain, Bird Study, 62:4, 535-551, DOI: [10.1080/00063657.2015.1092497](https://doi.org/10.1080/00063657.2015.1092497)

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² BTO, Woodcock survey results, Annual roding counts: 2003-2022 [website visited 23 February 2023]

¹³ Christopher J. Heward, Andrew N. Hoodless, Greg J. Conway, Nicholas J. Aebischer, Simon Gillings & Robert J. Fuller (2015) Current status and recent trend of the Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* as a breeding bird in Britain, Bird Study, 62:4, 535-551, DOI: [10.1080/00063657.2015.1092497](https://doi.org/10.1080/00063657.2015.1092497)

and declined again in 2020. In 2021 and again in 2022, numbers increased slightly, but the overall trend is for decline.¹⁴

The 2023 survey of breeding males is due to be carried out in the Spring and Summer.

1.2 Woodcock as game

Most British native bird species are protected under the [Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#) and are not allowed to be killed or taken without a licence. However, a number of native birds that are traditional game birds are allowed to be killed outside a close season, if listed in [Schedule 2](#) of the Act. [Schedule 3](#) allows for some birds to be sold, including Woodcock, if killed outside the close season.

Clause 2 sets out that killing or taking of a bird included in Part I of Schedule 2 outside the close season is an offence. Clause 2 defines the close season for Woodcock in England, Wales and Northern Ireland as 1 February to 31 September. This is different for Scotland where Clause 3 sets out the close season ends 31 August. Both Clauses 2 and 3 allow the above dates to be amended through regulations.

Shooting organisations advise on shooting Woodcock

The [Game and Wildlife Conservancy Trust](#) advises several [actions to reduce the number of woodcock shot](#) as game, including delaying the start of the shooting season. Advice includes:

- Avoiding shooting woodcock early in the season as migrant woodcock do not peak until December, advising that “for those that shoot woodcock, beginning shooting after the 1st December provides a useful rule of thumb”.
1. Improving the understanding of local woodcock populations before shooting as “migrants will vastly outnumber residents” once migrants have arrived.
- Showing restraint even where resident birds are absent as migrating birds return to the same site each year and “overshooting” would likely lead to reduced populations.
2. Shooting flight lines (the regular routes that woodcock fly) with caution, only targeting half the lines per season in an area.

¹⁴ BTO, Woodcock survey results, [Annual roding counts: 2003-2022](#) [website visited 23 February 2023]

- Curbing shooting in freezing weather, as this is when woodcock are at risk of increased mortality. And doing this before the Governments bans on shooting waders come after 14 days under the cold weather regulations.¹⁵

The [British Society for Shooting and Conservation \(BASC\)](#) also highlights the [guidance from the GWCT](#), although it does not specifically mention avoiding shooting before a certain date.

There is limited information available on the number of Woodcock shot each year. An estimate of the number of woodcock shot in the 2012/13 season, and which is [disputed by the shooting stakeholders](#), was published in 2019 in a GWCT book [The Knowledge - Every Gun's guide to conservation](#). This included an estimate of 160,000 shot in that year (although it highlights this figure may not be reliable) of which 3,200 may have been native birds based on research that estimated 2% of shot woodcock may be native.¹⁶ It should be noted that the advice from GWCT since then on delaying the shooting season may have impacted the proportion of native birds shot.

1.3

Stakeholder views on limiting the shooting season

[The RSPB supports the proposals in the petition](#) as “an emergency precautionary measure” that would help to reduce the probability that any shot birds are from the Red Listed UK breeding population. It highlights the advice from GWCT to refrain from shooting until 1 December as a reason to support extending the close season:

This change would help to protect the threatened UK resident breeding population by ensuring no shooting begins until the huge number of migratory birds have arrived.¹⁷

As referred to above the GWCT advises not to shoot woodcock before 1 December. However, it is [not supportive of the petition's call for a statutory extension](#) of the close season stating that:

Wild Justice may not fully understand the nuance of the factors driving woodcock populations and neither is it clear how their proposals for statutory changes to the shooting season would enhance the population status of our resident breeding woodcock.¹⁸

¹⁵ GWCT, [Shooting of Woodcock](#) [website visited 23 February 2023]

¹⁶ GWCT, [The Knowledge - Every Gun's guide to conservation](#), 2019

¹⁷ RSPB, [Giving Woodcock a fighting chance](#), 10 October 2022

¹⁸ GWCT, [GWCT Woodcock statement in response to Wild Justice](#), 2 March 2022

An [article in Sporting Shooter](#) refers to declining woodcock population and highlights “political pressure has been growing for the species to either be removed from the quarry list or the shooting season shortened”. The article also refers to work done to reduce the impact of shooting, and argues for the benefits for native birds of managing land for shooting game:

The opportunity to shoot woodcock sustainably provides the incentive for shoots to maintain conservation work for the species, providing habitats for resident breeding birds and over-wintering birds. The shooting community has the greatest incentive to preserve woodcock numbers. Most of the research into the species has been funded by the shooting community.

Shooting pressure on the species is reducing with some shoots over the last two decades voluntarily deciding not to shoot woodcock until late November or indeed not at all. Combined with growing levels of restraint, this suggests that shooting is not a population driver for resident birds.¹⁹

[Tim Bonner, Chair of the Countryside Alliance](#), referred to lack of woodland management, including increases in deer populations, as being “part of the problem”.²⁰

¹⁹ Sporting Shooter, [When to shoot woodcock](#), [website visited 13 February 2023]

²⁰ Countryside Alliance, [Tim Bonner: Should we be shooting woodcock?](#) 8 April 2022

2 Parliamentary material

2.1 PQs

Birds: Gun Sports

Asked by: Lord Randall of Uxbridge

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made, if any, of the number of woodcock shot annually in each of the last 10 years; and what discussions they have held, if any, with Natural England in relation to the effect of shooting woodcock on the status of woodcock.

Answering member: Lord Benyon | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Data for the number of woodcock shot in each of the last ten years has not been collated. However, there are publicly available game bag returns for the period 1961-2005 through the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust website (<https://www.gwct.org.uk/research/long-term-monitoring/national-gamebag-census/bird-bags-summary-trends/woodcock/>). Where shooting occurs on protected sites, some bag return reports may be requirements of consent by Natural England.

In response to a request from Defra, Natural England has submitted a briefing to Defra which considered woodcock ecology, population status and possible drivers of woodcock decline (including hunting).

Defra intends to review Schedule 2 to the Wildlife and Countryside Act, which lists species of birds which may be killed or taken outside a close season. In particular, consideration will be given to the evidence underpinning the listing of species such as woodcock so that we can ensure that recreational shooting is sustainable and does not undermine species recovery. This may include a review of the evidence for the timing and duration of the close season.

HC Deb 21 September 2022 | PQ HL2158

Birds: Gun Sports

Asked by: Lord Randall of Uxbridge

To ask Her Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Lord Benyon on 26 July (HL1705), what plans they have to review the close season for woodcock; and what representations they have received from (1)

conservation organisations, (2) game shooting organisations, in relation to any such review.

Answering member: Lord Benyon | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The Secretary of State has received representations from Wild Justice and the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust regarding reviewing the close season for woodcock.

In their representation, dated 21 March 2022, Wild Justice requested that the Secretary of State use their power under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to vary the close season for woodcock, as they believe this would be beneficial to the recovery of the native woodcock population. In response to the letter from Wild Justice, the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust wrote to the Secretary of State on 4 April 2022, setting out their view that restrictions to the close season could be counterproductive and that more research is needed to understand the reasons for the decline of native woodcock and the effects of shooting on their populations.

Defra intends to review Schedule 2 to the Wildlife and Countryside Act, which lists species of birds which may be killed or taken outside a close season. In particular, consideration will be given to the evidence underpinning the listing of species such as woodcock so that we can ensure that recreational shooting is sustainable and does not undermine species recovery. This may include a review of the evidence for the timing and duration of the close season.

HL Deb 15 September 2022 | PQ HL2157

[Birds: Gun Sports](#)

Asked by: Lord Randall of Uxbridge

To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to review the close season for woodcock.

Answering member: Lord Benyon | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The woodcock has been on the red list of Birds of Conservation Concern in the UK since 2015 due to a breeding range decline which is most likely to include disturbance and habitat loss because of land drainage and changes in woodland management.

The woodcock will benefit from a number of woodland grant schemes funded by both the Countryside Stewardship scheme and the Nature for Climate Fund, some of which specifically target management for declining woodland birds. These grants include the Woods into Management Forestry

Innovation Funds which aim to restore vulnerable woodland habitats, improve biodiversity and conserve threatened species, and the England Woodland Creation Offer, which provides an additional nature recovery contribution for woodlands which restore nature and species.

HL Deb 26 July 2022 | PQ HL1705

[Birds: Gun Sports](#)

Asked by: Jones, Mr Kevan

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, whether he plans to ban woodcock shooting.

Answering member: Rebecca Pow | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The reasons for the declines in woodcock populations are likely to include disturbance and habitat loss because of land drainage and changes in woodland management. The Government is not currently persuaded that hunting has a significant detrimental impact on the woodcock, and there are no current plans for a ban. We continue to keep evidence regarding the impacts on species under review to inform policy decisions.

HC Deb 11 January 2022 | PQ 93723

2.2

Scottish Parliament written question

[Question reference: S6W-10500](#)

- **Asked by:** Mark Ruskell, MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife, Scottish Green Party
- **Answered by** Mairi McAllan on 20 September 2022

Question

To ask the Scottish Government what consideration has been given to changing the start of the woodcock shooting season in order to improve populations.

Answer

Scottish Government has asked NatureScot to review the contents of Schedule 2 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Schedule 2 lists the species of birds which are protected during the close season but which may be killed or taken outside this period. Consideration of, and proposals for any changes to the shooting season for woodcock will be undertaken within this review, and in the context of other scheduled species.

We expect the review to be completed early next year.

2.3

Welsh Parliament written question

[WQ84960](#)

Asked by Mabon ap Gwynfor

What discussions has the Minister had with her UK Government counterpart regarding the dates of the woodcock shooting season and has she given any consideration to changing the date of the season from 1 October to 1 December?

Answered by Minister for Climate Change | Answered on 21/04/2022

I have had no discussions with my UK Government counterpart about the woodcock shooting season. However, I am aware of the recent representations made by Wild Justice to the Secretary of State for the Environment to vary the closed season for shooting woodcock. In the UK, the Secretary of State has the power to vary the closed season for woodcock under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

3

News and comment

The Field

12 January 2023

[Should the woodcock season change?](#)

Wild Justice

14 October 2022

[New, poor, response from Defra on Woodcock shooting season](#)

Leigh Day

27 September 2022

[Wild Justice secures review of native birds shooting list in boost to campaign to protect Woodcock](#)

Times

26 September 2022

[Defra shooting rethink offers lifeline to endangered woodcock](#)

Wild Justice

14 July 2022

[Wild Justice launches petition to help conserve woodcock](#)

Cornwall Birds

22 August 2022

[A plea to help limit the number of Woodcock shot in the UK!](#)

National Gamekeepers' Organisation

7 April 2022

[Why Wild Justice are mistaken in their latest letter on woodcock](#)

Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust

6 April 2022

[Our Woodcock letter to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)

Wild Justice

28 March 2022

[We ask for changes to the Woodcock shooting season.](#)

Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust

[Policy - Shooting of woodcock](#)

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