



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Protecting wild birds: Consultation on Amending the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 which allows certain species of wild birds to be killed or taken outside of their close seasons

Consultation Document

23rd March 2026

We are the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We are responsible for improving and protecting the environment, growing the green economy, sustaining thriving rural communities and supporting our world-class food, farming and fishing industries.

We work closely with our 33 agencies and arm's length bodies on our ambition to make our air purer, our water cleaner, our land greener and our food more sustainable. Our mission is to restore and enhance the environment for the next generation, and to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.

The Scottish Government

The Environment and Forestry Directorate works to protect and enhance Scotland's natural environment and resources, providing scientific support and an integrated evidence base for environmental and rural economic policies.

We are responsible for:

- playing a full role in tackling the global climate emergency and limiting temperature rise to 1.5°C
- protecting and restoring Scotland's nature with flourishing biodiversity and clean and healthy air, water, seas and soils
- promoting the wise use and reuse of resources to end throw-away culture
- conserving and growing our natural assets through a thriving, sustainable economy
- supporting a fairer, healthier, more inclusive society through a healthy environment

The Welsh Government

The Marine and Biodiversity Division within the Welsh government's Environment Directorate, leads Welsh government's work to protect, restore and sustainably manage Wales' terrestrial and marine natural environment. Its role spans delivering Ministerial and Programme for Government commitments, providing expert advice across government, and driving forward programmes that enhance biodiversity and ecosystem resilience.

Our responsibilities include:

- Leading key Ministerial and Programme for Government commitments, including habitat restoration and biodiversity target development.
- Providing ecological, scientific and veterinary advice across government, including responses to wildlife health issues.

- Delivering major nature recovery programmes, including Nature Networks, Marine Protected Areas and Bee Health.
- Overseeing and fund grant schemes supporting conservation and ecosystem resilience across land and sea.
- Contributing evidence and expertise to wider policy areas, including climate resilience, farming reform and biodiversity target setting under the Global Biodiversity Framework.
- Working with delivery partners including Natural Resources Wales, eNGOs, Local Authorities, National Parks and sector groups to support nature recovery and sustainable management.



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1. Introduction and overview

This consultation seeks views on proposed changes to Part 1, Schedule 2 (2.1) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (WCA). Schedule 2.1 sets out which wild bird species may be killed or taken outside the “close season”. The close season is the time of year when birds are protected to support breeding and migration, and it varies by species.

Schedule 2.1 currently lists 19 species of wild birds in England and Wales and 23 species in Scotland, mainly ducks, geese and wading birds. Although all wild birds are protected under the Act, Schedule 2.1 provides limited exemptions that allow these listed species to be shot outside the close season, mainly for recreational shooting and harvesting.

In 2023, Defra and Natural England (NE) carried out a review of the protection we afford the species in Schedule 2.1 of the WCA in England. Similar reviews were carried out by NatureScot on behalf of the Scottish government and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) on behalf of the Welsh government.

As a result of these reviews, this consultation is proposing changes to the list of species under Schedule 2.1 of the WCA, as it applies in England, Scotland and Wales, to provide greater protection for certain species currently listed. These proposed changes are summarised in the table below:

Species	England	Scotland	Wales
European white-fronted goose	Remove from Schedule 2.1	No change - has already been removed from Scotland’s Schedule 2.1	Remove from Schedule 2.1
Goldeneye	Remove from Schedule 2.1	Extend the close season	Remove from Schedule 2.1
Pintail	Remove from Schedule 2.1	Extend the close season	Extend the close season
Pochard	Remove from Schedule 2.1	Remove from Schedule 2.1	Remove from Schedule 2.1
Common Snipe	Extend the close season	Extend the close season	Remove from Schedule 2.1
Woodcock	Extend the close season	Extend the close season	Extend the close season
Woodpigeon	Add to Schedule 2.1	Add to Schedule 2.1	Add to Schedule 2.1
Coot	No change - maintain Schedule 2.1 status	No change - maintain Schedule 2.1 status	Remove from Schedule 2.1

Golden plover	No change - maintain Schedule 2.1 status	No change - maintain Schedule 2.1 status	Remove from Schedule 2.1
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In 2025, following the conclusions of the reviews, Ministers of the UK government, Scottish government and Welsh government recognised the opportunity to work together, and to jointly propose making changes to legislation with the ambition of protecting species of wild birds showing declining populations. This public consultation (a legal requirement before making any changes to Schedule 2.1) has therefore been co-ordinated across the three governments. It also seeks to minimise the burden on British stakeholders who might otherwise have had to respond to three separate consultations from three different governments asking broadly the same questions.

Who will be affected by these proposals?

These changes would directly affect anybody who participates in the shooting of any of the species listed above.

The proposals in this consultation build on the British Association of Shooting and Conservation's (BASC's) [Sustainable Shooting Code of Practice](#) for Wildfowl Quarry Species which covers voluntary restraint for certain species, targeted conservation measures and participation in data and evidence-gathering initiatives.

2. How to respond

The consultation period will commence on 23 March 2026 and will be open for responses for a period of **8 weeks**. The consultation period will close at 23:59 on 17 May 2026.

We have asked you several specific questions throughout this document. If you have any other views on the subjects covered by this consultation which have not been addressed, you are welcome to provide us with these views in the open text box at the end of your response.

Please provide your views via the Defra consultation platform Citizen Space using the following [link](#). If you are unable to respond on Citizen Space and wish to submit a written response, please ensure your response covers the questions outlined. Written responses can be emailed to: WildlifeManagementAndCrime@defra.gov.uk or sent to the address below:

Wildlife Crime & Management Team,

Defra,

Seacole Building,

2 Marsham Street,
London SW1P 4DF

Using and sharing your information

How we use your personal data is set out in the consultation and call for evidence exercise privacy notice which can be found here <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defras-consultations-and-call-for-evidence-exercises-privacy-notice>

Other Information

This consultation is being conducted in line with the Cabinet Office “Consultation Principles” and be found at: [Microsoft Word - Consultation Principles \(1\).docx \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#). Your responses will be shared with the Scottish Government and Welsh Government.

Confidentiality and questions about you

Q 1. Would you like your response to be confidential?

Yes

No

Please explain your reasons for requesting confidentiality.

Q 2. What is your name?

Q 3. What is your email address?

Q 4. Please tell us who you are responding as, selecting from the following: (Please tick as many as relevant)

- Animal welfare/environmental organisation
- Shooting organisation
- Other non-governmental organisation
- Member of the public
- Other (Please specify)
- Prefer not to say

Q 5. If responding on behalf of an organisation, please provide the name of the organisation you are responding for. If you are responding for more than one organisation, please say how many organisations you represent and their category (as set out in the previous question).

Q 6. If you are a business, how would you identify based on your number of employees?

- Micro (1 - 9 employees)
- Small (10 – 49 employees)
- Medium (50 - 249 employees)
- Large (250+ employees)
- Not applicable

Q 7. Considering the reform proposal, are you able to provide any feedback on additional wider impacts to business, competition and trade, skills and training requirements and investment within the sector?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 8. If you are a Small and Micro Business (SMB) (qualified as 1-49 employees), are you able to provide any information on impacts, including on additional costs, from the proposed reform?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 9. If you are a Medium-sized business (50-249 employees), are you able to provide any information on impacts, including on additional costs, from the proposed reforms?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 10. Do you foresee any impacts on business from the proposed reform being different between regions across the UK?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 11. Please select the geographical coverage of your organisation or the area that your response relates to from the following: (Please tick as many as are relevant)

- England
- Northern Ireland
- Scotland
- Wales
- Republic of Ireland
- UK
- Other (please state where)

3. Background

This review was carried out to ensure that shooting certain species of wild birds is sustainable and does not undermine their recovery. This was in line with the Secretary of State's species abundance target to improve the status of threatened species in England by 2042 and to halt species decline by 2030; the Scottish government's targets to halt biodiversity loss by 2030 and restore and regenerate biodiversity by 2045; and Wales' objectives as stated in the Nature Recovery Action Plan (NRAP), since several of the species on Schedule 2.1 are experiencing declining populations and appear on conservation priority listings, including [Birds of Conservation Concern in the UK \(BoCC\)](#), the latest version being the BoCC5; the fourth Wales assessment of Birds of Conservation

Concern Wales; and the second GB assessment of International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red Lists ([IUCN Red Lists](#)).

The governments of the UK, Scotland and Wales commissioned their Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCBs) – NE, NatureScot, and NRW respectively - to carry out an assessment of all wild bird species listed on Schedule 2.1, to identify those that are potential candidates for a change in status with respect to the schedule. This included species that might be removed from Schedule 2.1 and species that may remain on it, but their close season – defined for certain wild birds in Section 2(4) of the WCA - could be subject to amendment. The initial scoping exercise identified species that are declining in abundance and are listed as either Red or Amber by the BoCC5 or considered at risk of extinction at the Great Britain level, and whose prospects for population recovery in England/Scotland/Wales might be influenced by shooting. The species identified in each national scoping exercise were prioritised for further focussed scrutiny to consider whether shooting is adversely affecting their conservation status. Evidence-based assessment of those species considering: current conservation status; ecology (habitat and diet); migratory behaviour and movements (and timing of breeding,); population status (abundance and distribution); population trends and the drivers of population change (including the likely impacts from climate change) was then carried out.

The Scottish government is also proposing to introduce voluntary moratoriums on shooting **ptarmigan** (across Scotland) and **grey partridge** (in areas where populations in Scotland remain low and no releases occur). These proposals follow the model of the existing voluntary moratorium for black grouse, which has been successful largely because of strong and sustained support from land managers committed to recovering vulnerable populations. As with previous approaches, the success of these new voluntary measures will depend on clear commitment from the sector. The Scottish government will be engaging closely with land managers to determine support for the proposals which will be necessary to ensure they are successful.

There are no ptarmigan in England and Wales as the species has been extinct in these nations for centuries; and grey partridge is hutable under Section 2 of the Game Act 1831 in England and Wales rather than Schedule 2.1 listing. Therefore, both these species fell outside the scope of this review in England and Wales.

The SNCBs also considered where it may be beneficial to *add* species to Schedule 2.1.

The subsequent advice and recommendations received from NE, NatureScot and NRW have formed the basis for this consultation. For certain species that may be lawfully sold once killed, we are also interested in views and knowledge regarding economic factors. European white-fronted goose and goldeneye are not subject to this interest as sale of their meat is prohibited.

Where any species is ultimately removed from Schedule 2.1 in England, Scotland and/or Wales, future consideration will be given as to whether it should also be removed from

Part III of Schedule 3 of the WCA which lists those species that can be sold dead during specific seasons.

All technical advice and assessments have been published along with this consultation and relevant links are provided throughout.

4. Proposed changes to section 2(4) and Schedule 2.1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as it applies in England, Scotland and Wales

A): Removal of European White-Fronted Goose from Schedule 2.1 in England and Wales

Two sub-species of white-fronted goose winter in Great Britain, the European white-fronted goose *Anser albifrons albifrons* and the Greenland white-fronted goose *Anser albifrons flavirostris*. European white-fronted geese breed on the Siberian tundra. After breeding, and a period of moulting, flocks gather to migrate south to winter quarters, leaving the breeding areas from late-August through September and arriving in Britain from mid-September to December. Return migration begins in early March with most geese having left British wintering sites by late March.

According to research (N.J. Aebischer, 2019)¹ the estimated number of European white-fronted geese shot in the UK in 2016 was less than a hundred.

This species is Red Listed under BoCC5. It is considered at risk of extinction in Britain, primarily due to a dramatic, long-term decline in its wintering population. While the wider population across Europe is assessed as stable, long-term monitoring has identified significant declines in parts of the UK, with important implications for maintaining the conservation status of the population across the UK countries. The European white-fronted goose has already been removed from Schedule 2.1 as it applies in Scotland. **The**

¹ Fifty-year trends in UK hunting bags of birds and mammals, and calibrated estimation of national bag size, using GWCT's National Gamebag Census, European Journal of Wildlife Research (2019) 65: 64

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10344-019-1299-x>

UK and Welsh governments are therefore proposing to remove European white-fronted goose from Schedule 2.1 as it applies in England and Wales respectively.

Removal from Schedule 2.1 is proposed in order to:

- a) help reduce the impact of shooting on declining non-breeding populations.
- b) protect (including from possible accidental shooting) individuals of the population of globally endangered Greenland white-fronted goose which occur, albeit in small numbers, in UK and are physically similar.

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural England's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural Resources Wales scientific advice can be found [here](#).

Q 4A1: Do you agree the European white-fronted goose should be removed from Schedule 2.1 in England and/or Wales?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

If "Yes",

- Both nations
- England only
- Wales only

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 4A2: Can you provide more recent evidence on the number of European white-fronted goose that are shot in England and/or Wales?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

B): Removal of Goldeneye from Schedule 2.1 in England and Wales

The goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) is a medium-sized diving duck. The males in particular are striking in appearance. It breeds on freshwater habitats with high invertebrate availability, with a supply of tree-holes (or artificial nestboxes) for nesting. It is a scarce breeder within the UK and most of the more common, overwintering, non-breeding population is Scandinavian in origin. The overwintering birds typically begin arriving in the UK from October and peak between January to early February. Emigration generally begins in early-March and is largely complete by late April.

Research by Aebischer (2019) estimates 450 goldeneye were shot in the UK in 2016.

The UK government and Welsh government are proposing to remove goldeneye from Schedule 2.1 as it applies in England and Wales respectively.

This species is Red Listed under BoCC5, because of severe wintering population decline over 25 years (plus breeding rarity), but is also rated Vulnerable to extinction in GB according to IUCN. Long-term monitoring indicates a 58% decline in the UK wintering population since the early 1990s, with marked declines also recorded in England (41% between 1997/98 and 2022/23) and Wales (55% between 1995/96 to 2020/21).

Removal from Schedule 2.1 is proposed in order to:

- a) reduce the potential impact of hunting on the breeding and non-breeding populations, based on the precautionary principle, until more accurate data is available to show that recreational shooting can be managed on a sustainable basis. The application of the precautionary principle manages risk where there is a lack of scientific certainty of the seriousness and likelihood of plausible environmental damage.

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural England's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural Resources Wales scientific advice can be found [here](#).

Q 4B1: Do you agree the goldeneye should be removed from Schedule 2.1 in England and/or Wales?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

If "Yes",

- Both nations
- England only
- Wales only

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

The Scottish government meanwhile is proposing not to remove goldeneye from Schedule 2.1 in Scotland but extend its close season. Section 2(4)(c) of the WCA defines the close season in the case of wild duck in or over any area below high-water mark of ordinary spring tides as 21 February - 31 August.

Bi) Extending the Close Season for Goldeneye in Scotland

The species first bred in Scotland in 1970 and has expanded through deployment of a quantity of nesting boxes on Speyside and elsewhere. Scotland hosts the majority of the breeding population, estimated to be about 200 breeding females in 2010, with the majority being along the Great Glen, Strathspey and Aberdeenshire. There are no reliable estimates of the current Scottish breeding population, although changes in range recorded by the last BTO Atlas suggest it may be stable or increasing.

The Scottish government is proposing to extend the close season of goldeneye so that shooting may not begin until 1 October instead of 1 September as is currently the case. Goldeneye have a large wintering range and the small breeding population appears to be either stable or increasing in Scotland due to range expansion. Changes to the GB population status are largely a result of declines elsewhere in the UK. There is no evidence that shooting is impacting on this species and numbers shot in the UK are relatively small, which supports a conclusion that shooting is currently sustainable. However, given the vulnerable status of the species and the importance of the Scottish breeding population, extending the close season to 30 September would reduce the risk of resident birds being shot before the arrival of the migrant population.

A full rationale for this proposal based on NatureScot's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

Q 4B2: Do you agree the close season for the goldeneye should be extended in Scotland to 30 September?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 4B3: Can you provide more recent evidence on the number of goldeneye that are shot in England, Scotland and/or Wales?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

C): Extending the Close Season for Pintail in Scotland and Wales

The pintail (*Anus actua*) is a highly migratory dabbling duck that winters widely across the UK, favouring estuaries, coastal wetlands, and flooded grazing marsh. Wintering birds in Britain and Ireland originate from breeding grounds across Iceland, Fennoscandia and western Siberia. The UK supports around 22,000 overwintering birds, *with fewer than 30 breeding pairs nationally*, almost all in Scotland, giving the species a Critically Endangered GB IUCN Red Listed breeding assessment. The species is identified as Amber under BoCC5 due to their long term, moderate breeding range decline, small UK breeding population, localised breeding and the international importance of the population.

Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) data suggests a significant long-term *increase in Scotland's wintering population* against a wider UK-level decline of 10%. The Scottish breeding population of an estimated 28 pairs (five-year mean) has fluctuated around these numbers over the last ten years. The drivers of population change are unknown although factors such as feeding ecology, water levels, disturbance and breeding productivity have all been suggested.

In Wales, pintail also occur primarily as winter visitors, with the species now considered a non-breeding bird following only sporadic breeding attempts. Wintering numbers declined substantially after the early-2000s, mirroring the UK decline. Pintail is listed as Amber under Birds of Conservation Concern in Wales.

While current harvest is not considered by the Welsh government to be unsustainable at a UK scale, uncertainty remains because of low bag-recording coverage and the small size of the UK breeding population.

Estimates indicate that around 680 pintail were shot in the UK in 2016 (Aebischer, 2019).

Both the Scottish government and the Welsh government are proposing to extend the close season for pintail in order to:

- Reduce the likelihood of shooting individuals from the small and Critically Endangered UK breeding population. An extension to the close season will reduce the risk of resident birds being shot before the arrival of the migrant population.
- Support conservation of the species in line with its overall population Critically Endangered GB IUCN assessment and Amber BoCC5 status.
- Apply the precautionary principle given long-term declines in both Welsh and UK wintering numbers; and
- Ensure that shooting pressure, where it occurs, falls during the period when the population is dominated by continental migrants rather than native breeders.

In **Scotland**, pintail is legal quarry outside the closed season of 21 February to 31 August (below high water mark) and 1 February to 31 August (above high water mark).

The Scottish government is proposing to extend the close season of pintail for below and above the high-water mark to 30 September so that shooting may not begin until 1 October instead of 1 September.

A full rationale for this proposal based on NatureScot's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

The Welsh government is proposing to extend the close season for Pintail to 30 November in Wales.

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural Resources Wales scientific advice can be found [here](#).

Q 4C1: Do you agree the close season for the pintail should be extended in Scotland to 30 September for below and above the high-water mark?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 4C2: Do you agree the close season for the pintail should be extended in Wales to 30 November?

- Yes

- No
- Do not know

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Ci): Removal of Pintail from Schedule 2.1 in England

Natural England recommended to the UK government that the current Schedule 2.1 status for pintail should be maintained and unchanged in England, based on its assessment of negligible benefits of removal to the species' future as shooting/hunting pressure is not likely to be a main driver for any decline in its population. Natural England's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

The UK government recognises an alternative view however that argues pintail has such a small breeding population in England it should be removed from Schedule 2.1 as a precautionary measure. The UK government is using this consultation as a means of testing this view.

Q 4C3: Do you agree the pintail should be removed from Schedule 2.1 in England?

- Yes
- No – its current status should be maintained
- Do not know

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 4C4: Can you provide more recent evidence on the number of pintail that are shot in England, Scotland and/or Wales?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 4C5: Can you provide evidence on the proportion and destination (for example private domestic consumption, sold, given to third parties, etc..) of shot pintail birds?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 4C6: Can you provide evidence on what is the market price of pintail both wholesale and retail?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

D): Removal of Pochard from Schedule 2.1 in England, Scotland and Wales

The pochard (*Aythya ferina*) is an omnivorous diving-duck which breeds on a variety of undisturbed still and slow-moving waters. The relatively small numbers of largely resident British pochard are joined in winter by much larger numbers of birds that have bred in countries across northern and eastern Europe and into Russia.

This species is considered “Endangered” in Britain under the IUCN assessment, and Red-listed under BoCC5 because of this assessment, as well as other factors including severe declines in the UK non-breeding population over 25 years; and moderate declines in the breeding population.

Long term monitoring has identified substantial declines in the UK, with similar downward trends evident across the constituent nations including a decline in the non-breeding population in England of 64% over a 25-year period (1995/96 to 2020/21). The UK breeding population is estimated to be 720 pairs with an extremely small Scottish breeding population of around two to four breeding pairs.

The UK, Scottish and Welsh governments are proposing to remove pochard from Schedule 2.1 in England, Scotland and Wales.

Research by Aebischer (2019) estimates 370 pochard were shot in the UK in 2016.

Removal from Schedule 2.1 is proposed in order to:

- a) reduce any impact of shooting on the UK's rapidly declining breeding and non-breeding populations and on the small, moderately declining, 'Vulnerable' GB breeding population and 'Endangered' non-breeding population.
- b) Comply with the UK's commitments as a signatory to the [Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds](#) (AEWA). Under the Agreement, Contracting Parties are obliged to prohibit hunting of the pochard due to its vulnerable conservation status. The UK is currently exempt from this obligation due to a legacy EU reservation. The Netherlands and Czech Republic have lifted this reservation.

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural England's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

A full rationale for this proposal based on NatureScot's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural Resources Wales scientific advice can be found [here](#).

Q 4D1: Do you agree the pochard should be removed from Schedule 2.1 in England, Scotland and/or Wales?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

If "Yes",

- All three nations
- England
- Scotland
- Wales

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 4D2: Can you provide more recent evidence on the number of pochard that are shot in England, Scotland and/or Wales?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 4D3: Can you provide evidence on the proportion and destination (for example private domestic consumption, sold, given to third parties, etc.) of shot pochard birds?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 4D4: Can you provide evidence on what is the market price of pochard both wholesale and retail?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

E): Extending the Close Season for Common Snipe in England and Scotland

The common snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) is a long-billed wading bird which breeds throughout Britain. Snipe show a preference for marshy, boggy habitats, particularly when breeding, and will utilise a wide range of wet meadows and grazing marshes, heathlands and moorlands where suitable conditions occur.

Common snipe is an Amber-Listed species in the BoCC5 assessments while the non-breeding population is considered to be 'Vulnerable' in the last GB IUCN assessment due to a reduction (30-50%) in population size from 1995/96 to 2020/21. Our resident breeding snipe are joined in the autumn by birds from northern Europe.

Research by Aebischer (2019) estimates 85,000 common snipe were shot in the UK in 2016.

Section 2(4)(b) of the WCA defines the close season in the case of common snipe as 1 February - 11 August. This species is known to have a prolonged breeding season (from late March to mid-August), so there is a high risk that birds shot in August and September will have dependent young. Shooting birds in such a circumstance goes against the principles of 'wise/sustainable use' of bird populations generally and migratory waterbirds in particular. A number of international multilateral agreements all state that recreational hunting should not take place during the pre-nuptial migration and breeding periods of quarry species.

The UK and Scottish governments are proposing to extend the close season of common snipe in England and Scotland respectively so that shooting may not begin until 30 September instead of 12 August and this proposal is based on reasons of animal welfare as well as species conservation.

This change would offer greater protection to the species by:

- a) reducing any possible impact of hunting on the largely resident and declining English breeding population and their offspring
- b) facilitating recovery of the breeding population
- c) ensure ongoing protection and reduce the risk to the resident breeding population in Scotland

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural England's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

A full rationale for this proposal based on NatureScot's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

The Welsh government meanwhile is proposing to remove common snipe from Schedule 2.1 in Wales.

Q 4E1: Do you agree the close season for the common snipe should be extended in England and/or Scotland to 30 September, for reasons of both conservation and animal welfare?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

If "Yes",

- Both nations
- England only
- Scotland only

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Ei) Removal of Common Snipe from Schedule 2.1 in Wales

The UK supports an estimated 66,500 breeding pairs of common snipe, with around 1 million wintering individuals. In Wales, the breeding population is much smaller, estimated at **1,100 pairs** and evidence indicates long-term declines in both lowland and upland sites.

Snipe is listed as Amber in both the UK and Wales under Birds of Conservation Concern and is assessed as Vulnerable in the GB IUCN Red List. The UK wintering population has declined by 37% over 25 years, although Welsh wintering numbers show greater variability.

While the sizeable harvest of common snipe is considered sustainable at a UK scale, the lack of accurate bag recording and the small size of the Welsh breeding population create uncertainty. Shooting early in the season poses a greater risk to resident birds, as migrant arrivals peak later in autumn.

The Welsh government is therefore proposing to remove common snipe from Schedule 2.1 in Wales.

Removal from Schedule 2 is proposed in order to:

- reduce the likelihood of shooting resident breeding birds and their offspring, given the **small and declining Welsh breeding population**;
- apply the precautionary principle in light of long-term declines in breeding distribution, climate-related habitat pressures, and limited monitoring data; and
- support recovery of breeding populations alongside wider habitat management measures.

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural Resources Wales scientific advice can be found [here](#).

Q 4E2: Do you agree the common snipe should be removed from Schedule 2.1 in Wales?

- Yes
- No

- Do not know

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 4E3: Can you provide more recent evidence on the number of common snipe that are shot in England, Scotland and/or Wales?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 4E4: Can you provide evidence on the proportion and destination (for example, private domestic consumption, sold, given to third parties, etc..) of shot common snipe birds?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 4E5: Can you provide evidence on what is the market price of common snipe both wholesale and retail?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

F) Extending the Close Season for Woodcock in England, Scotland and Wales

The woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) is a largely nocturnal wader that breeds mainly within woodlands with a well-developed shrub understorey layer. It uses its long bill to probe the ground for a wide range of invertebrate prey. Due to its elusive nature and erratic flight, the woodcock is a prized quarry for the challenge they present to shooters.

In autumn-winter, the resident, Red Listed British population, estimated at 50,750 breeding males, is bolstered by around one million 'immigrant' woodcock flying in from northern Europe. The October-December timing of their arrival depends on the weather. At a global level, the woodcock is not endangered and is considered to be of "least concern" as a species.

Research by Aebischer (2019) estimates 140,000 woodcock were shot in the UK in 2016, and in 2019 (**unpublished research**).

The current shooting season for woodcock in England and Wales is 1 October – 31 January.

The UK and Welsh governments are proposing to extend the close season, which currently ends on 30 September, to 30 November as it applies in England and Wales respectively.

In Scotland the current shooting season for woodcock is 1 September – 31 January.

The Scottish government is proposing to extend the close season, which currently ends on 31 August, to 14 November in Scotland. The close season in Scotland will continue to end earlier than in the rest of the UK to accommodate the earlier arrival of migratory birds.

If the close season is extended as proposed, this should minimise the likelihood of any shot birds being rare, British breeding residents, since a much greater proportion of the woodcock population present in Britain at this time of year will be migrant birds.

Woodcock is a Red listed species under both UK and Wales [Birds of Conservation Concern](#) meaning this species is a high conservation priority. Furthermore, breeding woodcock is GB IUCN Red Listed as 'Vulnerable' and considered at risk of extinction.

The number of breeding males in England is estimated to have declined overall by 22.5% between 2003 and 2023². The Welsh breeding population declined by 36% over the same survey periods. There are no reliable trend estimates for the UK or Welsh non-breeding population.

This proposed amendment would help to protect the resident, British breeding population by:

- a) reducing any possible impact of hunting on the largely resident and declining British breeding population.
- b) support conservation of the species in line with its **Vulnerable** GB IUCN assessment and UK and Wales **Red listing** Birds of Conservation Concern status
- c) minimising the likelihood of any birds shot being British residents as a much greater proportion of the population in Britain at this time of year will be migrants.

This proposal is intended to strengthen the voluntary moratorium on shooting woodcock before December which is already widely promoted by members of the shooting community.

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural England's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural Resources Wales scientific advice can be found [here](#).

A full rationale for this proposal based on NatureScot's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

Q 4F1: Do you agree the close season for the woodcock should be extended in England and/or Wales to 30 November in order to protect our native breeding population?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

If "Yes",

- Both nations
 - England only
 - Wales only
-

² Hoodless et al. 2009; Heward et al. 2015, 2024

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 4F2: Do you agree the close season for woodcock should be extended in Scotland to 14 November in order to protect its native breeding population?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 4F3: Can you provide more recent evidence on the number of woodcock that are shot in England, Scotland and/or Wales?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 4F4: Can you provide evidence on the proportion and destination (for example, private domestic consumption, sold, given to third parties, etc..) of shot woodcock birds?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 4F5: Can you provide evidence on what is the market price of woodcock both wholesale and retail?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

G) Adding Woodpigeon to Schedule 2.1 in England, Scotland and Wales

The British population of woodpigeon is largely resident and non-migratory. It is a common bird found throughout most of Britain and datasets³ show a 36% increase in breeding abundance since 1995.

Woodpigeon are shot in large numbers. Research by N.J. Aebischer (2019) estimates 1,900,000 woodpigeon were shot in the UK in 2016. In theory, all the woodpigeon shooting in England is carried out under general licence 42 (GL42); in Scotland under general licence GL02; and in Wales under general licence GL001 to prevent damage to crops. General licences enable people to carry out activities – such as lethal shooting - that would otherwise be illegal on species protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 without the need to apply for an individual licence. Users of them do not need to apply for general licences but must abide by their conditions. GL42, GL02 and GL001 allow all-year round control, including during the woodpigeon's breeding season, meaning little thought needs to be given by hunters as to whether dependent young are in the nest.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest some woodpigeon shooting is carried out for recreation and/or food rather than explicit crop protection.

The UK, Scottish and Welsh governments all propose the hunting of woodpigeon for recreation and harvest for food should be distinguished in law from control carried out to manage crop damage. This distinction can be given effect by adding the woodpigeon to Part I of Schedule 2 of the WCA and by providing an appropriate close season in section 2(4) to give some protection on animal welfare grounds to the species during its breeding season.

While the introduction of a close season will not end the practice of shooting in the breeding season (nor eliminate adverse welfare outcomes for dependent young when adult birds are killed during this period), it will reinforce the distinction between action that is necessary to manage serious damage and recreational hunting. Only the former will be

³ British Trust for Ornithology

justified in the breeding season and we expect the introduction of a close season will lead to less recreational hunting during the breeding season.

The UK, Scottish and Welsh governments are therefore proposing to add woodpigeon to Schedule 2.1 as it applies in England, Scotland and Wales respectively with a close season of 1 February to 31 August. This would introduce legal provision for the shooting of this species for recreational or harvesting purposes. While neither the UK government, the Scottish government nor Welsh government have plans to remove GL42, GL02, or GL001 respectively we believe that introducing a close season for woodpigeon promotes higher standards of animal welfare; anticipating that fewer adult birds will be shot at a time when they have dependent young.

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural England's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

A full rationale for this proposal based on NatureScot's scientific advice can be found [here](#).

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural Resources Wales scientific advice can be found [here](#).

Q 4G1: Do you agree to adding woodpigeon to Schedule 2.1 in England, Scotland and/or Wales?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

If "Yes",

- All three nations
- England
- Scotland
- Wales

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 4G2: Can you provide more recent evidence on the number of woodpigeon that are shot in England, Scotland and/or Wales?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 4G3: Can you provide evidence on the proportion and destination (for example, private domestic consumption, sold, given to third parties, etc..) of shot woodpigeon birds?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

Q 4G4: Can you provide evidence on what is the market price of woodpigeon both wholesale and retail?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish) [OBJ]

5. Proposed changes to Schedule 2 Part 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as it applies in Wales only

A) Removal of Coot from Schedule 2.1 in Wales

The coot (*Fulica atra*) is a widespread waterbird that breeds across the UK on still and slow-moving freshwater bodies. In winter, resident Welsh (and British more widely) birds are joined by individuals from north-west Europe, leading to peak numbers between October and December. The species is predominantly sedentary, with many individuals remaining at or near the same sites year-round.

Coot is assessed as Vulnerable in the GB IUCN Red List for both breeding and non-breeding populations, and is Amber-Listed in Wales BoCC due to long-term breeding declines. Monitoring shows a 28% decline in the UK wintering population over 25 years, (1997/98-2022/23) with a larger 35% decline in Wales over the same period.

Although coot is a legal quarry species, it is taken only infrequently, and no UK-level bag estimate is available. Evidence suggests that any coot shot is likely to come from the resident breeding population, as resident and wintering birds are largely the same individuals. While shooting pressure is low, the declining conservation status indicates that applying the precautionary principle is appropriate in Wales.

The Welsh government is therefore proposing to remove coot from Schedule 2.1 in Wales.

Removal from Schedule 2 is proposed in order to:

- reduce any potential impact of hunting on declining UK and Welsh breeding and wintering populations;
- support conservation of the species in line with its Vulnerable GB IUCN assessment and Welsh Amber BoCC status.

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural Resources Wales scientific advice can be found [here](#).

Natural England and NatureScot meanwhile do not recommend changing the Schedule 2 status for coot in England or Scotland given the lack of shooting pressure on the species.

Q 5A1: Do you agree the coot should be removed from Schedule 2.1 in Wales?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 5A2: Do you agree the Schedule 2.1. status of the coot should not be changed but maintained as it is in England and/or Scotland?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 5A3: Can you provide more recent evidence on the number of coot that are shot in England, Scotland or Wales?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

B) Removal of Golden Plover from Schedule 2.1 in Wales

The golden plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*) is a partially migratory wader that breeds on upland heather moorland, blanket bog and acidic grassland across Britain, with wintering birds widespread on coastal habitats, estuaries and lowland farmland. In winter, the UK population is made up of both resident breeders and migrants from Scandinavia, Iceland and western Siberia.

The UK supports an estimated 32,500–50,500 breeding pairs, with around 400,000 wintering individuals. In Wales, the breeding population has undergone a severe long-term decline, falling from 250–300 pairs in the late 1970s to **fewer than 40 pairs** by 2008, and likely now **under 30 pairs**, representing less than 0.1% of the UK total.

Golden plover is listed as **Red** on *Birds of Conservation Concern Wales* due to major declines in breeding and non-breeding populations and shows a **58% decline in Wales** over the past 25 years (1997/98 to 2022/23) in the wintering population. UK-wide winter numbers have declined by 26% over the same period.

Golden plover is a legal quarry species, although relatively small numbers are shot. UK estimates for 2016 suggest **870 birds** were shot (Aebischer, 2019). While this level is considered sustainable at a UK scale, the small size of the Welsh breeding population means any additional mortality could have a disproportionate impact.

The Welsh government is therefore proposing to remove golden plover from Schedule 2.1 in Wales.

Removal from Schedule 2 is proposed in order to:

- reduce the potential impact of hunting on the **very small and declining Welsh breeding population**;
- support conservation of the species in line with its Welsh **Red BoCC** status.
- support recovery of wintering populations, which are in long-term decline in both Wales and the UK; and
- take a precautionary approach given major uncertainties around harvest levels, population status and wider pressures including habitat change and climate impacts.

A full rationale for this proposal based on Natural Resources Wales scientific advice can be found [here](#).

Natural England and NatureScot meanwhile do not recommend changing the Schedule 2.1 status for golden plover in England or Scotland. The decline in golden plover in Wales as described above does not apply in England or Scotland.

Q 5B1: Do you agree the golden plover should be removed from Schedule 2.1 in Wales?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 5B2: Do you agree the Schedule 2.1. status of the golden plover should not be changed but maintained as it is in England and/or Scotland?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

Please provide any reasoning or evidence to support your response

Q 5B3: Can you provide more recent evidence on the number of golden plover that are shot in England, Scotland or Wales?

- Yes
- No

(Please provide further information to support your response and attach supplemental evidence if you wish)

6. Current species on Schedule 2.1

The current Schedule 2.1 includes the following species of wild bird:

Species	Notes and proposed changes through this consultation
Capercaillie	Listed for England and Wales only. Although its Schedule 2.1 listing means it is theoretically 'hunnable' in England and Wales, the species has been extinct in these nations for centuries. In Scotland (where there is a wild population) it has been removed from Schedule 2.1. If you consider this species should be removed from Schedule 2.1 in England and/or Wales please indicate this in the text box directly below this table.
Coot	The Welsh government is proposing to remove this species from Schedule 2.1 as it applies in Wales as part of this consultation. No changes proposed in England or Scotland.
Duck, Tufted	No changes proposed
Gadwall	No changes proposed

Goldeneye	The UK government and Welsh government are proposing to remove this species from Schedule 2.1 as it applies in England and Wales respectively as part of this consultation. The Scottish government is proposing to extend its close season in Scotland.
Goose, Canada	No changes proposed
Goose, European White-fronted	Listed for England and Wales only. The UK government and Welsh government are proposing to remove this species from Schedule 2.1 as it applies in England and Wales respectively as part of this consultation.
Goose, Greylag	No changes proposed
Goose, Pink-footed	No changes proposed
Grouse, Black	Listed for Scotland only, where there is currently a voluntary moratorium on shooting in place while population levels are low. No changes proposed in this consultation. Huntable under the Game Act 1831 in England and Wales rather than Schedule 2.1 listing.
Grouse, Red	Listed for Scotland only. No changes proposed in this consultation. Huntable under the Game Act 1831 in England and Wales rather than Schedule 2.1 listing.
Mallard	No changes proposed
Moorhen	No changes proposed
Partridge, Grey	Listed on Schedule 2.1 in Scotland only, with proposal for voluntary moratorium on shooting while population levels are low in

	areas where there are no releases. No legislative changes are proposed in this consultation. Hunttable under the Game Act 1831 in England and Wales rather than Schedule 2.1 listing.
Partridge, Red-legged	Listed for Scotland only. No changes proposed in this consultation. Hunttable under the Game Acts in England and Wales rather than Schedule 2.1 listing.
Pheasant, Common	Listed for Scotland only. No changes proposed in this consultation. Hunttable under the Game Acts in England and Wales rather than Schedule 2.1 listing.
Pintail	The Scottish government and Welsh government are proposing in this consultation to extend the close season for this species in Scotland and Wales. The UK government is proposing to remove it from Schedule 2.1 in England.
Plover, Golden	The Welsh government is proposing to remove this species from Schedule 2.1 as it applies in Wales as part of this consultation. No changes are proposed for England or Scotland.
Pochard	The UK government, Scottish government and Welsh government are proposing to remove this species from Schedule 2.1 as it applies in England, Scotland and Wales as part of this consultation.
Ptarmigan	Listed on Schedule 2.1 in Scotland only, with proposal for voluntary moratorium on shooting while population levels are low. No legislative changes proposed in this consultation. Extinct in England and Wales.
Shoveler	No changes proposed

Snipe, Common	The Welsh government is proposing to remove this species from Schedule 2.1 as it applies in Wales as part of this consultation while the UK government and Scottish government are proposing to extend its close season in England and Scotland.
Teal	No changes proposed
Wigeon	No changes proposed
Woodcock	The UK government, Scottish government and Welsh government are all proposing to extend the close season of this species in England, Scotland and Wales respectively.

Q 6.1 Do you think any other species should be removed from Schedule 2.1 in England, Wales or Scotland?

Please give evidence or reasoning to support your answer in the box below:

Q 6.2 Should other amendments (for example an extension or shortening of a close season be made with regard to any other species listed on Schedule 2.1 in England, Scotland or Wales?

Please give evidence or reasoning to support your answer.

Q 6.3 Should any other species be added to Schedule 2.1 in England, Scotland or Wales?

Please give evidence or reasoning to support your answer.

7. What happens next?

The closing date for this consultation is 17th May 2026. Responses received by this date will be analysed and taken into account by Ministers in their consideration of future policy and legislative changes. A summary analysis of the responses to this consultation and the government response will be published within 12 weeks of the closure of this consultation on Defra's website at www.gov.uk/defra.

If the decision is made to proceed with legislative changes, we will deliver these amendments in due course.

During the consultation, if you have any enquiries, please email us at WildlifeManagementAndCrime@defra.gov.uk or write to us as at the address below:

Wildlife Crime & Management Team,

Defra,

Seacole Building,

2 Marsham Street,

London, SW1P 4DF

The Welsh Government has also requested views on the following standard questions regarding the Welsh language. If you do not have an opinion, please leave blank. They are:

Question 8.1: What, in your opinion, would be the likely effects of the proposals in this consultation on the Welsh language? We are particularly interested in any likely effects on opportunities to use the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English.

Do you think that there are opportunities to promote any positive effects?

Do you think that there are opportunities to mitigate any adverse effects?

Question 8.2: In your opinion, could the proposals within this document be formulated or changed so as to:

- have positive effects or more positive effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English; or

- mitigate any negative effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English?