

Schedule 2 Species Assessment Proforma – Wood pigeon

Species	Wood pigeon <i>Columba palumbus</i>
Conservation status	BOCC 5: AMBER (changed to Amber from Green at 5 th BOCC assessment). Note: Amber listing is based on the international importance (i.e. UK holds at least 20% of the European population) of the breeding population IUCN GB: Least concern (breeding population) (Stanbury et al. 2021) GLOBAL: Least Concern (BirdLife International, 2023)
Habitat and diet	Habitat: Woodland, deciduous or coniferous, fringing or penetrated by well-vegetated open spaces. Although they nest and roost in woodland and hedges/isolated tress, they are largely dependent on open land in the farmed and built environments for foraging. Avoids bare rocky mountain areas, densely vegetated wetlands, treeless landscapes and exposed coasts. Diet: chiefly plant material: green leaves, seeds, berries, buds, flower and root crops. Occasionally, invertebrates. They are widely regarded as the most important avian pest of arable farmland.
Migratory behaviour and movements	The British population is largely resident and non-migratory – the vast majority of birds ringed in Britain have been recovered in Britain (the few foreign recoveries have mostly been in northern France – Wernham et al. 2002). There is some immigration from Europe, but its relevance to population status is likely to be small (Cramp et al. 1985, BTO 2023). However, from late October and through most of November, large flocks (sometimes numbering in the tens of thousands) can be seen on migration, flying high and south on clear, sunny days. Where they are going is not known with any certainty, but many thousands arrive in the Iberian Peninsula at this time. This may involve birds that nest in northern Europe that are known to winter in southern France and Iberia, and there are well-documented passages of birds in both spring and autumn recorded at English coastal watchpoints, especially in the south and east (Murton & Ridpath 1962).
Population status (abundance and distribution)	Britain: 5,050,000 (4,750,000–5,350,000) breeding pairs estimated in 2016 (Woodward et al. 2020). Found throughout Britain, with the exception of the higher mountain zones of Scotland and some northern and western islands offering little woodland cover. Highest densities occur in the arable eastern lowland regions, with marginally lower abundance in the more heavily wooded regions of southeast England and still lower abundance in pastoral areas (Harris et al. 2022). Map of distribution¹ Global: 51,000,000-73,000,000 mature individuals. Europe, western and central Asia and north Africa (BirdLife International, 2023). Note that the data quality for this population range is noted by BirdLife International as ‘poor’ and ‘estimated’.

¹ Map of distribution: <https://app.bto.org/mapstore/StoreServlet?id=270>

<p>Population trends</p>	<p>All available English and UK datasets show a large long-term increase in population abundance since the mid-1960s, as follows: BBS trends for England (also see Annex A for trend graph):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 28 year change +37.8% (1995 – 2023). Confidence limit 29.4% - 46.1%. • 10 year change –3% (2013 – 2023). Confidence limit –7% - -0.3%. <p>BBS trends for the United Kingdom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 28 year change +36.2% (1995 – 2023). Confidence limit 28.3% - 43.4%. <p>10 year change –1.7% (2013 – 2023). Confidence limit –4.5% - 1.3%.(Heywood et al., 2025)</p> <p>Combined CBC/BBS trend for the period 1967-2023 shows an increase of +158% (see Annex A) (BTO, 2025. BirdTrends 2024: trends in numbers, breeding success and survival for UK breeding birds. www.bto.org/birdtrends)</p> <p>Relatively few changes in distribution (see Annex B) are evident. Changes have occurred mostly at the north-western periphery of range in Scotland (Harris et al, 2022).</p> <p>Global: appears to be increasing (BirdLife International, 2023)</p>
<p>Breeding season</p>	<p>Wood pigeon have a very long breeding season and have been recorded nesting in every month of the year (BTO 2023). The median date of first clutch is 30 April with a range of 22 February – 20 August (BTO 2023²). Birds typically have 1-2 broods annually.</p> <p>The species appears to be readily able to adapt the timing of breeding according to trends in food availability: O'Connor & Shrubbs (1986) found that the breeding season had advanced in response to the switch from spring to autumn sowing (and thus earlier ripening) of cereals, with more pairs nesting in May and June, and relatively fewer during July-September. Climate change may have also permitted earlier nesting. However, more recent data indicate that the species is now nesting almost three weeks later, on average, than it did in the 1960s (BTO 2023).</p>
<p>Drivers of population change</p>	<p>There is good evidence linking the increase in wood pigeons with the widespread adoption of intensive winter cereal and rape production in England, which has increased food availability over winter (and thus reduced overwinter mortality), reflecting the species' ability to subsist on green vegetable matter, unlike most other granivores.</p> <p><u>Further information on causes of change</u></p> <p>There are few studies specifically examining demographic and ecological drivers of the long-term increase in this species but the spread of intensive arable cultivation, especially of oilseed rape and winter-sown cereal, which has been shown to reduce overwinter mortality, may explain the rise in numbers (Gibbons et al. 1993, Inglis et al. 1997). Inglis et al. (1997) conducted fieldwork to provide good evidence that, in their study area in Cambridgeshire, the overwintering population size was determined by the</p>

² The source of these dates is incorrectly cited as Joys and Crick 2004 by BTO (2023).

	<p>area of oilseed rape. Inglis et al. state that, since the introduction of oilseed rape, the number of fledged young produced has a more important effect upon the Woodpigeon population size than does overwinter mortality from starvation, i.e. winter food availability no longer limits the population.</p> <p>According to the BTO (2023), there is some evidence that the increase in this species has been due to the spread of intensive winter cereal and rape cultivation, probably by increasing food availability over winter, reflecting the species' ability to subsist on green vegetation, unlike other granivores. Conservation actions targeted at declining farmland bird species which increase the availability of seeds in winter, may also benefit this species. See BTO (2023) for fuller analysis.</p>
<p>Impacts from climate change</p>	<p>An analysis of climate change impacts indicates that wood pigeon populations may experience a modest benefit (Pearce-Higgins, 2021). The wood pigeon's resilience in the analysis reflects its ability to utilize a wide range of habitats. Peak breeding period is expected to move forward in the year, and it may extend further, if food availability permits.</p>

RECOMMENDATION

1. It is recommended that:

- the wood pigeon is added to Schedule 2 Part I of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 ("the 1981 Act")
- a close season period is introduced covering its main reproductive period³. This is provisionally recommended as 1 February to 31 August, which is the default closed season for species listed on Schedule 2. A shorter closed season which protects the period of peak of breeding activity may be acceptable as an alternative. It is recommended that available information is analysed to determine if there is a clear peak period can be easily defined. The onset of the close season could be delayed until 21 February under current legislation. A shorter period would require legislative amendment.
- any control that is necessary to manage serious damage and other problems during the closed season continues to be derogated by way of licences.

SUMMARY

2. As a matter of policy, hunting practices should comply with the principles of sustainable utilization (also referred to as 'wise use') and should promote high standards of animal welfare. This proposal seeks to deliver these objectives for the wood pigeon; the only wild bird hunted in England as a quarry species that is not protected by laws giving effect to these principles.
3. To this end, the hunting of wood pigeon for recreation and harvest for food should be distinguished in law from control carried out to manage crop damage and other problems. This distinction can be given effect by adding the wood pigeon to Part I of Schedule 2 of the 1981 Act and by providing an appropriate close season in section 2(4) to protect the species during its breeding season.

³ See 'Definitions' section below

4. This amendment will make it legal, for the first time since the early 1990s, to hunt wood pigeon solely for the purposes of recreation or for harvesting for food by providing a defined period during which this hunting can take place. Where it is necessary to control wood pigeons outside this period, for example to manage crop damage or other problems, then this can continue to be authorised by way of licence.
5. This approach is consistent with the recommendations of the Law Commission review of 2015 and the legal model already used for other quarry species (such as greylag geese and Canada geese). This model is also used widely to regulate hunting practice for wood pigeon elsewhere in Europe.
6. Currently, recreational shooting currently takes place throughout the reproductive period under the pretext of contributing to control. The active promotion of recreational shooting in this period and the lack of conditions in the general licence aimed at limiting control in the breeding season mean that we cannot be certain that all hunting in this sensitive period is justified. 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 allow the tightening of conditions for shooting under licence and reinforce the distinction between action that is necessary to manage serious damage and recreational hunting. Only the former is justified in the breeding season.
7. At this stage we are recommending adoption of the default close season for species on Schedule 2 (1 February to 31 August). This covers most of the reproductive period of the wood pigeon. With additional evidence it may be possible to set a close season that is more narrowly focused on the wood pigeon's peak reproductive period, although the shortest period that can currently be prescribed by an order is 21 September to 31 August. It is recommended that the British Trust for Ornithology is commissioned to review nest record scheme data to identify whether there is a clearly defined and predictable peak reproductive period.
8. It is also recommended that the period and duration of any close season is reviewed periodically and that there is flexibility to adjust its period based on new scientific evidence, for example, if the peak reproductive period changes in response to changes in climate or arable crop production patterns.

DETAILED REVIEW

Rationale for reviewing status of wood pigeon

9. Wood pigeons are shot in large numbers, perhaps as many as 2 million annually (Aebischer, 2019). Shooting is motivated principally by either a need to manage damage caused by pigeons to agricultural interests and/or as a recreational sport.
10. This review of the regulation of wood pigeon shooting has been undertaken because its current legal status is problematic. Currently:
 - a. The law makes no provision for people to lawfully hunt wood pigeon for recreational or harvesting purposes even though hunting is a popular, widely practiced pursuit that is supported by government policy and within international law.
 - b. People wanting to hunt can do so legally only if they comply with the terms and conditions of a licence issued to prevent serious damage to crops, fruit, vegetables and feedstuffs for

livestock and to prevent the spread of disease in livestock⁴. Compliance with the licence constrains opportunities for hunting (e.g. geographically to locations where there are vulnerable crops), although whether this is the case in practice is uncertain.

- c. The general licence relied upon by hunters allows all-year round control and, in practice, this encourages or, at least, facilitates recreational hunting all year round, including during the wood pigeon's breeding season. This may be viewed favourably by (some) hunters but hunting at this time leads to adverse welfare outcomes when parent birds with dependent young are killed. This practice is also inconsistent with sustainable hunting practice – which seeks to avoid hunting of quarry species during periods of migration and reproduction.
 - d. The extent to which wood pigeon hunting taking place in the breeding season is strictly necessary to prevent serious damage is unclear. Advertisements offering recreational shooting opportunities in the breeding season suggest motivation to shoot pigeons at this sensitive time is not driven solely by a need to protect crops.
 - e. Because hunting can only be carried out legally under licence, and it is government policy to allow hunting, the general licence used by hunters lacks conditions reinforcing the importance of avoiding control in the breeding season unless strictly necessary to avoid serious damage⁵.
11. The introduction of an open and close season for hunting wood pigeon could address these issues by:
- a. Providing a clearly defined period when shooting for recreation and harvesting is lawful and removing the need for hunting at this time to satisfy the conditions of licences issued to prevent serious damage.
 - b. Allowing control to continue in the breeding season under the conditions of licences where it is genuinely necessary to prevent serious damage.
 - c. Bringing the treatment of wood pigeon in policy and law into line with other quarry species, including other species that are also managed to prevent serious damage.
12. The following sections of this review consider the implications of the introduction of open and close seasons for the wood pigeon and appropriate periods for each.

Definitions

13. In this review:

- 'breeding season' follows the definition in Cramp & Simmons (1997): the breeding season is the period during which a species lays and incubates its eggs and rears its young to the flying stage.
- 'ecologically balanced control' implies that the measures taken should be ecologically sound and in proportion to the problem to be solved taking into account the conservation status of the species involved.
- 'reproduction period' covers the breeding season but also includes the occupation of the breeding areas as well as the period of dependence of young birds after leaving the nest.⁶

⁴ General licence GL42: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wild-birds-licence-to-kill-or-take-to-prevent-serious-damage-gl42/gl42-general-licence-to-kill-or-take-certain-species-of-wild-birds-to-prevent-serious-damage>

⁵ This is only a recommendation that control during the breeding season is avoided wherever possible.

⁶ This follows the approach in EU 2008 paragraph 2.5.5, reaffirmed in EU 2021

- ‘hunting’ refers to killing or taking for the primary purpose of recreation or harvesting (e.g. for food) whereas ‘control’ is used where the primary purpose is to manage any problems caused by wood pigeons (e.g. serious damage to crops, etc).
- ‘sustainable utilisation’ follows the definition given in The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD): “*the use of components of biological diversity in a way and at a rate that does not lead to the long-term decline of biological diversity, thereby maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of present and future generations.*” It is considered to have the same meaning as ‘wise use’, which is used in the EU Birds Directive and Hunting Guidance (EU, 2008)⁷ and by shooting organisations in the UK (e.g. GWCT, 2023).
- ‘wise use’ see ‘sustainable utilisation’ (above).

Current legal status of the wood pigeon with reference to hunting

14. As a wild bird⁸, the wood pigeon is fully protected at all times by the provisions of section 1 of the 1981 Act. It is, therefore, unlawful to kill or take wood pigeons except in circumstances where that protection is derogated.
15. The hunting of wild birds is permitted through a derogation of protection by provisions in section 2(1) of the 1981 Act⁹. This lists species that can be killed or taken listed in Schedule 2¹⁰. Part I of the schedule lists species that may only be killed or taken outside a close season. The period of the close season varies between species and is specified in section 2(4). Aside from temporal restrictions¹¹ there are no restrictive conditions on killing or taking, so long as lawful means are used. There is no requirement for a person to apply or register for permission to act under this derogation, or to report on action taken.
16. The wood pigeon was listed on Schedule 2 when the 1981 Act was enacted. It was listed under Part II of the schedule rather than Part I. This allowed wood pigeon to be taken or killed at all times (there is no close season for species listed in Part II of the schedule). The wood pigeon, along with 12 other species¹², were subsequently removed from Schedule 2 in 1993¹³ to properly transpose the requirements of the EU Birds Directive. There was the opportunity at this point to list the wood pigeon (and the 12 other species) on Part I of Schedule 2. Rather than doing this, a decision was taken to introduce a series of new general licences. These licences allowed control to continue at all times. This solution avoided the constraints on hunting and control associated with a close season.
17. This regulatory solution does, however, mean that the hunting of wood pigeon is lawful only if it satisfies the terms and conditions of a general licence. As there is no licensing purpose in the 1981 Act permitting hunting for recreation or harvesting purposes, hunting can only take place

⁷ See paragraph 2.4.9 of EU 2008

⁸ “wild bird” means any bird of a which is ordinarily resident in or is a visitor to the United Kingdom or the European territory of any member State in a wild state but does not include poultry or, except in sections 5 and 16, any game bird” see [section 27](#)

⁹ Section 2: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/section/2>

¹⁰ Schedule 2: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/schedule/2>

¹¹ Which, in addition to the close season, also include a prohibition on shooting on Christmas Day and, if stated in an order, on Sundays (section 2(3)) or during other periods (sections 2(5) and (6))

¹² 5 crows, 3 gulls, 2 pigeons, the starling and house sparrow. These are widespread and common species were all regarded as ‘pests’, even in published literature (e.g. Parkes and Thornley, 1997)

¹³ By the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (Variation of Schedules 2 and 3) Order 1992, which came into effect on 1 January 1993: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1992/3010/contents/made>

where it satisfies a purpose for which a licence can be issued, such as preventing serious damage to crops¹⁴ or preserving public health or safety¹⁵.

18. The conditions that licences impose on pigeon shooting were poorly understood by many members of the public and shooting community (e.g. Payne, 2021)¹⁶ and this may have resulted in non-compliance with licences. One outcome of the legal challenge brought by Wild Justice in 2019 was an increase in awareness of the legal provisions associated with licensed shooting. In part, this was due to efforts within the shooting industry to highlight the importance of complying with licence conditions (e.g. Payne, 2021).
19. Non-compliance remains a potential issue. The timing and location of recreational hunting appears to be primarily driven by the ease and availability of wood pigeon to shoot rather than the need to protect crops when they are most vulnerable to pigeon damage (e.g. The Field, 2023). Shooters are even directed to hunt birds when they are feeding on wild foods (The Field, 2023)¹⁷ despite the fact that shooting is only lawful to prevent serious damage to crops and one of objective of control (both lethal and non-lethal) is to displace pigeons away from commercial crops towards wild foodstuffs. There is also no evidence that the level of shooting is significantly constrained by anything other than availability of birds to shoot¹⁸, which is a potential concern where shooting occurs in the breeding season.
20. The regulatory solution adopted in 1993 contrasts with the regulatory approach for geese species that are both hunted for recreation and controlled due to damage problems. Greylag and Canada geese are listed on Schedule 2 Part I – so may be hunted outside their close season – and they are also listed on licences permitting targeted control to prevent serious damage during the close season where this is justified¹⁹. It is a model that was available, but not used, for the wood pigeon.
21. In terms of its status under international law and conventions, the wood pigeon is one of 11 bird species listed on Annex III of the Bern Convention²⁰. As such, our obligations to protect this species under this Convention are less exacting than for most wild birds, but there is, alongside the duty in Article 2 to maintain populations, an explicit requirement to keep populations out of danger by regulating exploitation, including by use of close seasons²¹.
22. The wood pigeon is also listed on Annex II of the EU Birds Directive. This annex lists species whose population level, distribution and reproductive rate are sufficient to justify hunting. Hunting is permitted so long as it complies with the principles of wise use and ecologically

¹⁴ Currently general licence GL42: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wild-birds-licence-to-kill-or-take-to-prevent-serious-damage-gl42/gl42-general-licence-to-kill-or-take-certain-species-of-wild-birds-to-prevent-serious-damage>

¹⁵ The wood pigeon is no longer listed on the general licence for public health and safety but is listed on a class licence for air safety.

¹⁶ This was also evident from responses of shooters, stakeholders and the media to Natural England's public consultations on general licences in 2009 & 2014.

¹⁷ The advice for shooting in October directs shooters to pigeon feeding on wild foods such as acorns and beech mast. This advice is repeated elsewhere, for example at: <https://shootingsh.com/pigeon-shooting>

¹⁸ For example, most commercial shoots do not set limits on the number of wood pigeon that may be shot, and in one instance a bag of 400 birds in a day by one shooter has been reported: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcf66CSfdYI>

¹⁹ The control of Canada goose and greylag geese to prevent serious damage to crops etc is permitted by general licence and individual licence, respectively.

²⁰ The birds listed on general licences in 1993 included all 11 species listed on Annex III. <https://rm.coe.int/168097eb57>

²¹ Requirements are set out in Article 3: <https://rm.coe.int/1680078aff>

balanced control. This includes measures to prevent hunting during periods of breeding and migration (i.e. through use of close seasons)²². European Court of Justice case law²³ and published guidance on interpretation of the directive (EU, 2008²⁴) requires a hunting period that ensures the complete protection of the species concerned (i.e. the closed season should fully encompass all the migration and reproductive periods). However, the guidance also recognises that for species with prolonged reproductive periods (such as the wood pigeon) there is scope for flexibility²⁵.

23. Under the provisions of the 1981 Act, the Secretary of State may by order add the wood pigeon to Schedule 2 Part 1²⁶. A close season of 1 February to 31 August applies unless the order stipulates a specific close season for the wood pigeon. Under current provisions, the minimum period that may be prescribed for a close season shall commence on a date not later than 21st February and end on a date not earlier than 31st August.
24. In its 2015 review of wildlife law²⁷, the Law Commission recommended that all bird species listed on Annex II of the EU Birds Directive, including the wood pigeon and other species listed on the general licences, should be regulated under the same provisions as other huntable species. In the context of the current regulatory framework, that means adding the wood pigeon to Schedule 2 Part I and setting an appropriate close season²⁸. The net outcome would be to adopt the same approach for this species as for geese, described above, using licences to allow action to manage damage to crops or other problems where this is necessary during the close season.
25. The wood pigeon is also listed on Schedule 3 Part II²⁹ of the 1981 Act. This permits the sale of dead wood pigeon at all times.

Situation of wood pigeon elsewhere in Europe

Of the 29 European countries examined in this review, all but one regulates hunting of wood pigeon by way of a hunting seasons (see Annexes E and F). The control of wood pigeon to manage damage and other problems during the close season is generally permitted by specific derogations (what we refer to as a licence) to prevent serious damage etc.

Impacts of hunting on population

Number of birds killed or taken

26. The number of wood pigeons shot in the UK in 2016 has been estimated at 1,900,000 (95% confidence limits 1,400,000-2,600,000; Aebischer, 2019). This is the most recent estimate publicly available. A breakdown for England, derived using a similar methodological approach,

²² Provisions for hunting are set out in Article 7: https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/birds-directive_en

²³ See Court of Justice Ruling 1994 case C-435/92, ECR 1994, p.67 paragraph 13. Commission/Italy, Case C-157/89, ECR 1991 is also relevant.

²⁴ EU 2008 paragraph 1.7.4

²⁵ In particular, see paragraphs 3.4.31-34 (inclusive) of EU 2008

²⁶ See Sections 22(1) and (2)

²⁷ Review of Wildlife Law: <https://www.lawcom.gov.uk/project/wildlife-law/>

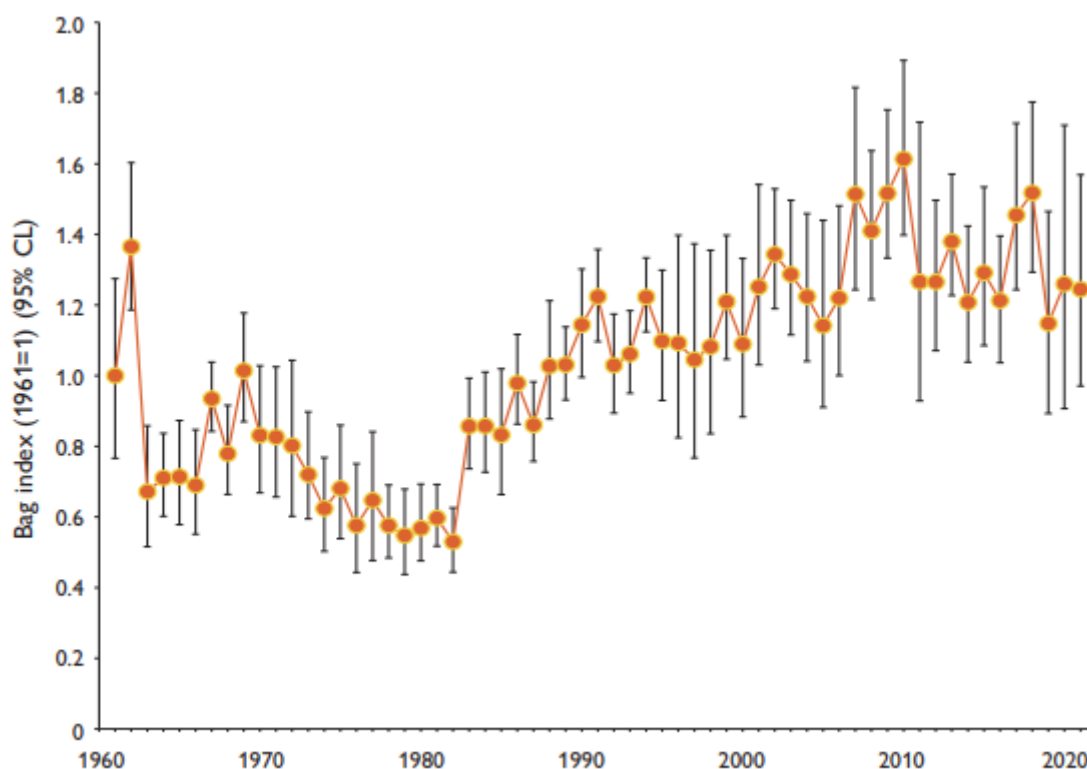
²⁸ Recommendation 48. See paragraphs 4.100 – 4.112 for discussion. Paragraph 4.110 references wood pigeon and general licences.

²⁹ Schedule 3: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/schedule/3>

but as yet unpublished, estimates that the number of wood pigeon shot in England in 2016 and 2019 was 1,700,000 and 1,400,000, respectively (*pers. comm.* M. Ellis).

27. In the absence of mandatory reporting of hunting, the scale of hunting is based on an analysis of gamebag records voluntarily contributed by up to 900 estates to the National Gamebag Census³⁰. These bag records have been adjusted to provide national estimates using independent surveys of recreational hunting activity (see Aebischer, 2019). This methodology may underestimate numbers killed as the surveys used to extrapolate the sample of bag records to a national hunting bag report the numbers killed by ‘shooting sports participants’ (i.e. predominantly unpaid participants in recreational shooting) is likely to underestimate the contribution of people involved in wildlife management as part of their employment or livelihood, such as gamekeepers or farmers.
28. National Gamebag Census records show a long-term upward trend in wood pigeon shooting (+55%, 95% CI 8 – 120% between 1966 and 2016) which plateaus between 2004-2016 (0%, 95% CI -18 – 19%; Aebischer, 2019, and see Figure 1 below). This pattern is similar to the trend in population, but slightly delayed (Annex A) and most likely reflects changes in wood pigeon abundance.

Figure 1 Index of the numbers of woodpigeon shot per square kilometre in the UK, 1961-2021



³⁰ National Gamebag Census: <https://www.gwct.org.uk/research/long-term-monitoring/national-gamebag-census/> which is run by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust: <https://www.gwct.org.uk/>

Source: [Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust Annual Review, 2022](#)

Are hunters shooting the birds (i.e. native breeding population) that are in decline and need protecting?

29. The quarry of hunters is the native breeding population of wood pigeon. This population is not, however, in decline (see Annex A) or in need of conservation measures (see BTO, 2023).

Proportion of shot birds that enter the human food chain

30. Uncertain, but likely to be relatively high. Wood pigeon is a popular game meat and is available from many larger supermarkets, butchers and in restaurants. Currently, the only domestic source of wood pigeons for human consumption is shooting under the authority of general licences.

Economic value of shooting this species

31. There is no comprehensive account of the economic value of wood pigeon.

32. A shooting industry report (PACEC, 2014) stated that 54% of shooters surveyed shot woodpigeons and 'other avian pests' and during the survey period (August 2012 – July 2013) this accounted for 510,000 days-worth of shooting. The economic value of wood pigeon shooting is uncertain. The report gives a total gross value added³¹ financial benefit for shooting as a whole. Allocated on a simple pro rata basis according to days of shooting, the shooting of wood pigeon and other avian pests is worth approximately £93 million.

33. Shot wood pigeons can be sold to game dealers for about £0.3 – 0.5 per bird in feather while prepared birds are sold to the public for about £1.50 (data for 2016; source: Payne, 2016).

34. Recreational wood pigeon shooting is expected to provide an economic benefit to farmers through its contribution to the management of wood pigeon populations. A review of evidence (Fera, 2010) concluded that the level of damage to crops caused by wood pigeon is widespread and 'major' (defined in the report as £1-10 million pa) but mostly limited to the January – March period, when alternative food sources are low. A shooting industry report (PACEC, 2014) cites a National Farmers Union estimate that without control the damage to oilseed rape crops from pigeons in east Anglia alone would amount to more than £45 million. The evidence underpinning this estimate is not explained, nor is the relative contribution of hunting to control.

Evidence to suggest shooting/hunting might bring benefits to the species

35. There is no evidence that hunting wood pigeon benefits the conservation status of this species. Unlike game and wildfowl shooting, habitat is not managed, nor natural predators controlled to encourage the growth of wood pigeon populations.

Evidence to suggest shooting/hunting might have deleterious effects on the species

36. The effect of hunting and control on wood pigeon populations in the UK has not been subject to detailed investigation. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that current hunting and

³¹ Gross value added is defined in the report as the standard monetary measure of the value of economic activity. Equal to the sum of employment costs plus profits. Equivalent to the value of goods and services produced minus the inputs (raw materials, services etc) required to produce them.

control levels are having a deleterious effect on the conservation status of this species. The recent change from Green to Amber listing in the Birds of Conservation Concern 5 (Stanbury et al, 2021) reflects the international importance of the UK population, rather than any decline in the favourable status of the UK population.

37. Hunting wood pigeons during the breeding season has adverse welfare consequences for their dependent young. While this is unavoidable outcome of control undertaken to prevent serious damage to crops, it is avoidable where the primary motivation of hunting is recreation and / or exploitation for commercial sale. Since the 2019 judicial review of general licences, shooting wood pigeons is now more clearly promoted as an activity contributing to control efforts (e.g. The Field, 2023). It is, however, evident from advertisements and guidance published online that recreationally focused shooting takes place and continues to be actively promoted during this sensitive period (e.g. Anglia Sporting, 2023; Thames Valley Pigeon Shooting, 2023).

Implications of adding the species to Schedule 2

Is inclusion of a species on Schedule 2 appropriate?

38. Yes, the inclusion of the wood pigeon in Schedule 2 Part I is appropriate.

- This species is already hunted (under the pretext of damage control) and its inclusion on Schedule 2 is not expected to significantly change the overall level of hunting;
- It will, however, incentivise a shift in the timing of hunting away from the breeding season, which is the most sensitive period (from the perspective of animal welfare and the conservation of the species);
- It will resolve the current disconnect between a national policy – which supports hunting – and the law – which currently does not allow recreational hunting for its own sake, and
- It is consistent with practice elsewhere in Europe, where hunting seasons are an almost universal feature of hunting practice and law for wood pigeon (28 of 29 countries reviewed; see Annex E & F).

Appropriate close season

39. Hunting seasons that fulfil the principles of ‘wise use’ aim to protect birds during periods of breeding and migration. Although there is some evidence of migratory behaviour in wood pigeons in Britain (BTO, 2023) it is the breeding season, rather than the any migratory period that a close season would principally aim to protect in this species.
40. The reproduction period of the wood pigeon is long, potentially as much as eight months in a year (Annex D and EU, 2008³²). The peak period of breeding is, however, typically shorter, although its timing can vary between urban and rural areas (Cramp, 1985³³) and in response to patterns of crop production (O’Connor & Shrubbs, 1986). Given that hunting is most likely to take place in rural areas, it is the reproductive period in rural areas that is most relevant to the timing of any close season.
41. While the overall period during which breeding is reported in the literature has remained relatively constant (i.e. February to October), between the late 1950s and the 1980s the peak

³² In particular, see paragraphs 3.4.31-34 (inclusive) of EU 2008 for a discussion of this issue.

³³ p.325

period shifted from July-August to May-July, possibly in response to changing crop production patterns (O'Connor & Shrubbs, 1986). More recent British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) data suggests that the onset on breeding has since moved progressively later over time (Annex C). The most likely explanation is changing crop patterns, possibly in this case related to the availability of autumn sown wheat and oil seed rape as a food source for fledged young.

42. The hunting period for wood pigeon across Europe varies considerably but typically covers the period from mid-August to either November (about 3 months) or February (about 6 months). Details of open seasons for 29 European nations are provided in Annexes E and F.
43. Given the overall abundance and favourable conservation status of the wood pigeon there is no need from a conservation or sustainable hunting perspective to protect the entire duration of the potential reproductive period of this species. However, without better information on the peak period of breeding in rural environments it is difficult to recommend a shorter period that effectively encompasses the peak period. In view of this, and because it maintains consistency with other quarry species³⁴, a **provisional** close season period of **1 February to 31 August** is proposed. This provides an open season of five months (1 September to 31 January).
44. A close season that is tailored to the reproductive period of the wood pigeon or which aims to protect only its peak breeding period could be introduced as an alternative. Efforts to develop a bespoke period would benefit from an improved understanding of current breeding behaviour. To this end, it is recommended that the British Trust for Ornithology is commissioned to review nest record scheme data. It may also be helpful to invite stakeholders to contribute any other relevant evidence that they hold.
45. A later start to the close period, such as 1 April, would allow hunting during the peak damage period (January to March; identified in Fera, 2010) while still avoiding the peak reproductive period reported during the 1960-1980s (April – to August; O'Connor & Shrubbs, 1986), which more recent data suggests has since moved even later (see Annex C).

Consequences of addition to Schedule 2 for this species

46. The change is expected to reduce the level of shooting during peak period of breeding season and through doing so have a positive effect on animal welfare by reducing the number of adult birds killed with dependent young.
47. Although there are no concerns about the current scale of shooting on abundance or distribution of wood pigeon, the introduction of a close season provides a means to protect pigeon populations, if at any time in the future this becomes necessary, by altering the conditions of licences. This change therefore provides a safeguard that can be employed to ensure shooting remains sustainable in the long-term.
48. Implications for wood pigeon populations in the short-medium term are expected to be negligible. Any reduction in hunting during the breeding season is likely to be balanced by increased hunting outside the close season. This is consistent with the aim of the change which is to avoid shooting in the breeding season unless strictly necessary to manage serious damage problems and not to increase pigeon abundance.

³⁴ See WCA 1981 section 2(4)(d) <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/section/2>

Consequences of addition to Schedule 2 for hunting and management

For control of serious damage

49. The inclusion of the wood pigeon is not expected to affect the management of wood pigeon populations to prevent serious damage to agricultural interests. This can continue outside the close season with fewer restrictions, and during the close season, under the authority of a licence. This more restrictive regime applies at all times currently. The situation will be directly comparable to the management of damage problems caused by Canada geese (where a general licence is retained – the most likely recommended option for wood pigeon) or greylag geese (where an individual licence is required).
50. While it may be argued that shooting by recreational hunters contributes significantly to control efforts during the breeding season, an assessment by the Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera, 2010) concluded that the peak period of damage occurs between January – March, which is either before or early in the reproductive period. Shooting during or, ideally, before this period (whether for control or hunting purposes) is likely to provide greatest benefit in terms of reducing damage, while reducing the need for control during the most sensitive period of breeding.

For recreational hunting and harvesting for food

51. Introduction of a hunting season applies the principle of ‘wise use’ to wood pigeon shooting in a way that is consistent with the treatment of other quarry species.
52. It is expected to have two key effects on hunting activity, linked to the timing of hunting:
- **Outside the close season** it will reduce regulatory burden on wood pigeon shooting by removing the constraints imposed by licences issued for specific purposes. At present, pigeon control is only permitting to prevent serious damage to certain agricultural interests. It also removes the requirement to comply with the conditions of licences (such as Condition 1, which requires reasonable endeavours to use alternative lawful methods).
 - **During the close season** hunting will be lawful only where it contributes to control that is permitted under the authority of a licence and is conducted in accordance with the conditions of that licence. While these are the same terms under which all hunting takes place currently, a close season provides the opportunity to strengthen conditions so that any hunting in this period more clearly and demonstrably contributes to the purpose of the licence (for example, there could be a requirement that vulnerable crops are present in the immediate locality or on the land in question). The implications of a close season for recreational hunting will depend on the extent to which such hunting currently contributes in a meaningful way to genuinely necessary control. **If all current hunting contributes to damage control – as legally it must - then there will be no negative implications for recreational hunting.**
53. The introduction of a new regulatory regime that relaxes controls on shooting during an open season but strengthens controls during the close season is likely to have consequences for shooting businesses that have commercialised recreational wood pigeon shooting. These businesses typically offer clients wood pigeon shooting throughout the year, including during the breeding season (e.g. Anglia Sporting, 2023, Thames Valley Pigeon Shooting, 2023). The effects of a close season on these businesses will depend on the timing of the close season, on the conditions that apply to licensed control during this period and on how well their current

Schedule 2 Review: Wood pigeon *Columba palumbus*

operations contribute to crop protection. It is notable, and perhaps significant, that commercial wood pigeon shooting appears less common in May and June (central months of any likely close season) due to reported difficulties of shooting birds at this time (e.g. The Field, 2023; Anglia Sporting, 2023).

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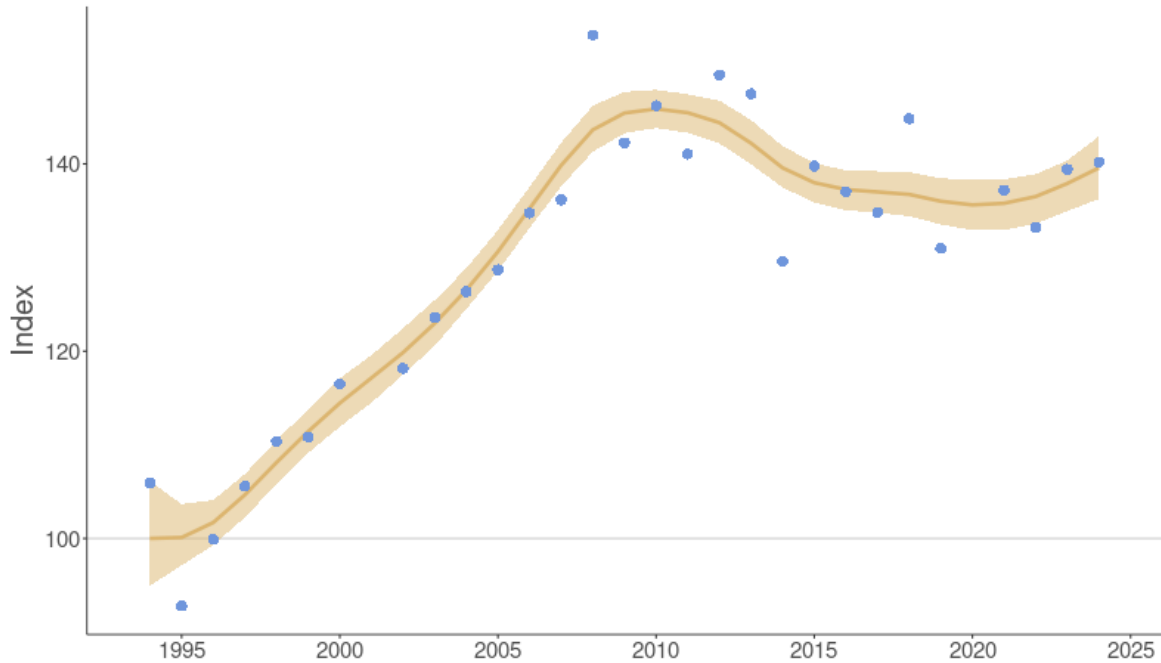
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Annex A – Long term trends in woodpigeon abundance in England and the UK

Woodpigeon population abundance in England

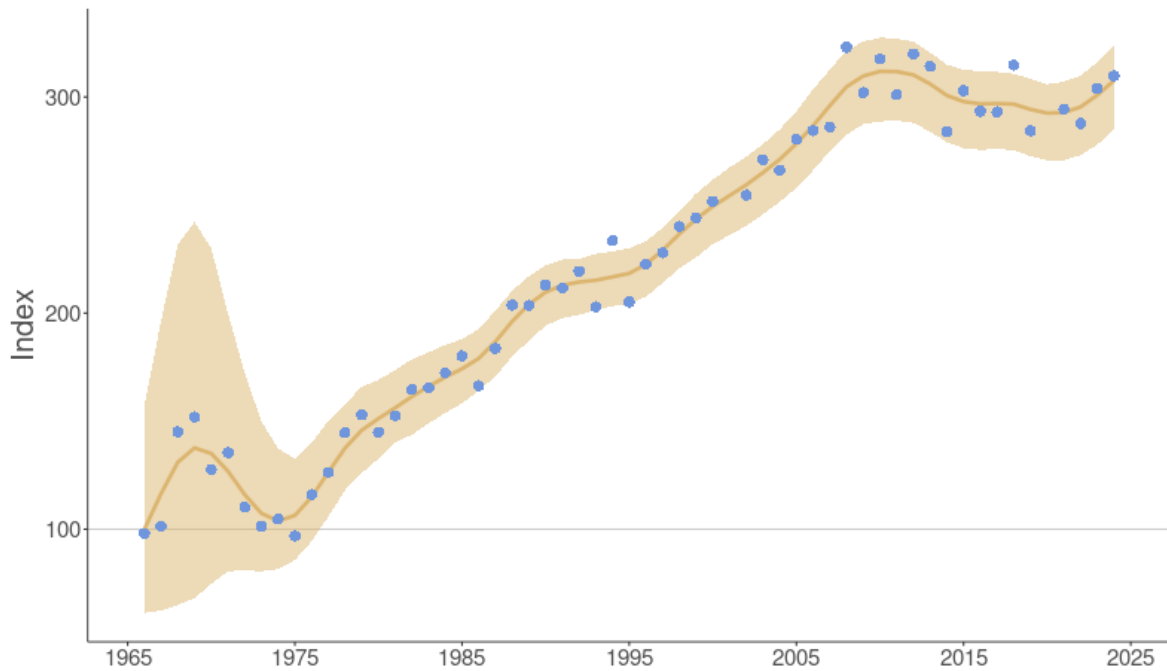
Long-term trend (1994–)



The smoothed trend line shows how the number of birds has changed through time. To make it easier to compare among species, this is expressed as an 'index', set to 100 in the first year. An easy way to interpret this is to say for every 100 birds that were present in the first year, the trend line shows how many were present in any subsequent year. The shaded area shows uncertainty around the trend line (based on 85% confidence limits) and values for individual years are shown as dots.

https://data.bto.org/trends_explorer/?species=Woodpigeon

Woodpigeon population abundance in United Kingdom Long-term trend (1960s–)



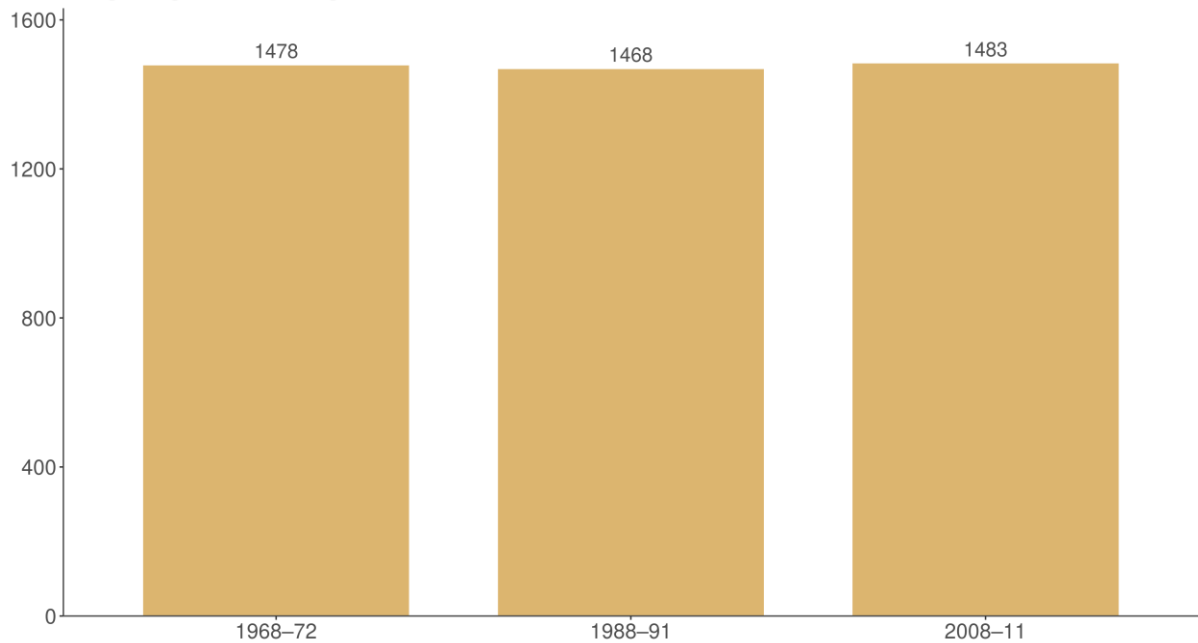
The smoothed trend line shows how the number of birds has changed through time. To make it easier to compare among species, this is expressed as an 'index', set to 100 in the first year. An easy way to interpret this is to say for every 100 birds that were present in the first year, the trend line shows how many were present in any subsequent year. The shaded area shows uncertainty around the trend line (based on 85% confidence limits) and values for individual years are shown as dots.

https://data.bto.org/trends_explorer/?species=Woodpigeon

Annex B

Woodpigeon distribution

Breeding range size in England



Downloaded from www.bto.org on 26 May 2023. CC-BY-NC

The number of 10-km squares occupied and with evidence of breeding, during periodic breeding distribution atlases. For country totals, 10-km squares are counted if they contain any land in the chosen country. Only species confirmed to breed in at least one 10-km square in the UK are available to view.

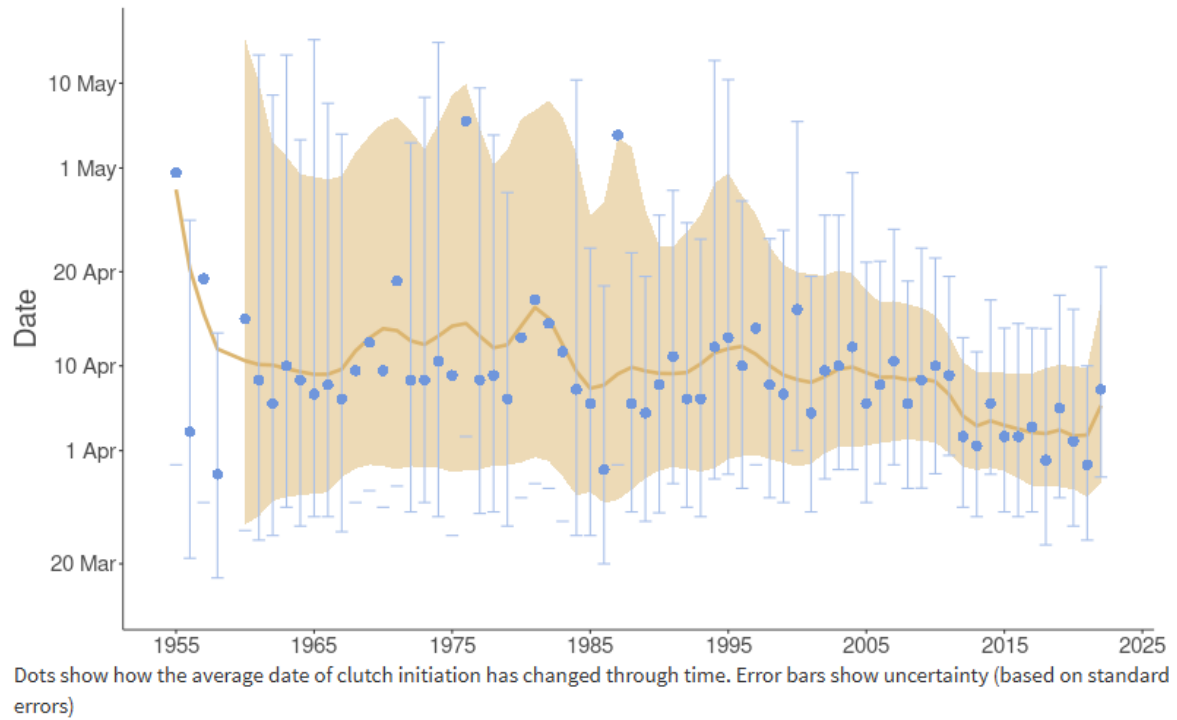
Reference: Balmer, D.E., Gillings, S., Caffrey, B.J., Swann, R.L., Downie, I.S., Fuller, R.J. (2013) Bird Atlas 2007-11: The Breeding and Wintering Birds of Britain and Ireland. British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford.

Annex C

<https://www.bto.org/birdtrends>

Woodpigeon timing of life cycle events in United Kingdom

Timing of breeding



BTO, 2024. BirdTrends 2023: trends in numbers, breeding success and survival for UK breeding birds. <https://www.bto.org/our-work/science/publications/reports/birdtrends>

Annex E: Close seasons for wood pigeon hunting in Europe

Close seasons are based on information in Annex F (cross-hatching indicates regional variation). Intervals are based on decades (10-day periods)

Month	J	A	N	F	E	B	M	A	R	A	P	R	M	A	Y	J	U	N	J	U	L	A	U	G	S	E	P	O	C	T	N	O	V	D	E	C		
Decade	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5	6		
United Kingdom																																						
Austria		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
Belgium																																						
Bulgaria																																						
Croatia																																						
Cyprus	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
Czechia																																						
Denmark																																						
Estonia	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
Finland	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
France																																						
Germany																																						
Greece																																						
Hungary																																						
Italy																																						
Latvia	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
Lithuania	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Luxembourg																																						
Malta																																						
Netherlands																																						
Norway	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
Poland																																						
Portugal																																						
Romania																																						
Rep Ireland																																						

Annex F: Wood pigeon open hunting seasons in Europe

The primary source used for this review of open seasons are the country profiles available from Bird Life International (<http://datazone.birdlife.org/country/>; accessed on 26/05/2023). Profiles were last updated in 2014-2016. National legislation or other sources (cited where relevant) were used to clarify periods if a country profile was imprecise or unclear. For some countries, regional variation in open seasons or a lack of accessible information has limited precision of the periods stated).

Country	Hunting season	Duration	Months (approx.)	Comments	Source
Austria	Y	Varies regionally. Longest: 1 July – 15 Apr. Shortest: 1 Nov – 31 Jan	3 – 9.6	Regional differences, including two discrete open seasons in one region.	http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Austria.pdf
Belgium	Y	1 Oct – 10 Feb	4.4	This is for Wallonia. Unclear if there is an open season for Flanders	http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Belgium.pdf
Bulgaria	Y	2 nd Saturday Aug - 2 nd Sunday Feb	6.4		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Bulgaria.pdf
Croatia	Y	1 Aug – Jan 31	6.1		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Croatia.pdf https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2010_05_67_2068.html
Cyprus	Y	Mid Aug – mid Oct	2		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Cyprus.pdf
Czechia	Y	1 Aug – 31 Oct	3		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Czech_Rep.pdf
Denmark	Y	1 Nov – 31 Jan	3		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Denmark.pdf
Estonia	Y	1 Aug to 31 Oct	3		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Estonia.pdf
Finland	Y	10 Aug – 31 Oct	2.7		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Finland.pdf
France	Y	Aug/Sep - 10 Feb	5.4 - 6.4	Open seasons are managed at a regional level and the season opening dates vary. The opening date for wood pigeon follows the general opening date for hunting birds in a region ('département').	http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_France.pdf https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000020128976 https://www.thelocal.fr/20200910/when-does-hunting-season-start-in-your-part-of-france

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Germany	Y	1 Nov – 20 Feb	3.7		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Germany.pdf
Greece	Y	20 Aug - 28 Feb	6.4		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Greece.pdf
Hungary	Y	15 Aug – 31 Jan	5.6		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Hungary.pdf
Italy	Y	3 rd Sunday of Sep - 31 Jan	4.6		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Italy.pdf
Latvia	Y	1 Aug – 15 Nov	3.5		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Latvia.pdf
Lithuania	Y	1 Sep - 1 Dec	3		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Lithuania.pdf
Luxembourg	Y	1 Aug – 31 Jan	6.1	A shorter period, starting 15 Sep is permitted in wooded areas.	http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Luxembourg.pdf
Malta	Y	1 Sep – 31 Jan	5.1		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Malta.pdf
Netherlands	Y	15 Oct – 31 Jan	2.6		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Netherlands.pdf https://business.gov.nl/regulation/applying-hunting-licence-fauna-management-exemption/
Norway	Y	21 Aug – 23 Dec	4.1	Not huntable in some regions	http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Norway.pdf
Poland	Y	15 Aug – 21 Dec	4.3		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Poland.pdf
Portugal	Y	3rd Sunday of Aug - 20 Feb	6.3		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Portugal.pdf
Romania	Y	1 Sep – 10 Feb	5.4		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Romania.pdf
Republic of Ireland	Y	1 Nov – 31 Jan	3		https://www.npws.ie/legislation/irish-law/open-seasons-order
Slovakia	Y	1 Aug – 31 Oct	3		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Slovakia.pdf
Slovenia	N	n/a	0	It is uncertain if any wood pigeon shooting is authorised under specific derogations (e.g. to prevent serious	http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Slovenia.pdf http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=URED3478

Schedule 2 Review: Wood pigeon *Columba palumbus*

				damage) but available evidence suggests this is not the case.	
Spain	Y	Mid Oct – early Feb	4.1	No nationally set period. Set regionally. Regional data was not accessible in period of this review, so the figure used is one quoted widely as typical for hunting.	http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Spain.pdf https://www.justlanded.com/english/Spain/Articles/Travel-Leisure/Hunting-in-Spain#:~:text=The%20hunting%20season%20for%20small%20game%20runs%20from,geese%2C%20bustard%2C%20water%20fowl%2C%20pigeon%2C%20hare%20and%20rabbit.
Sweden	Y	16 Aug - 31 Dec	4.6	Different periods apply in some regions	http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Sweden.pdf
Switzerland	Y	1 Aug – 15 Feb	6.6		http://datazone.birdlife.org/userfiles/file/hunting/HuntingRegulations_Switzerland.pdf https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/1988/506_506_506/de