

Wild Justice – A briefing on Woodcock.

‘LIMIT THE SHOOTING SEASON OF WOODCOCK’

Petitions Committee Debate, Monday 27 February 2023.

Why the shooting season for Woodcock (Scolopax rusticola), should be shortened to run from December 1st – January 31st.

What’s a Woodcock?

Woodcock are a type of wading bird, found most often in woodland habitat. It has a long beak, big inky-black eye and beautiful mottled chestnut, brown and buff feathers, which help with its camouflage. They’re nocturnal, and probe soggy patches of earth for worms at night. Their breeding display in spring and summer is a sight and sound to behold – flying in big circles at dusk, creaking and grunting as they go.

Woodcock are also classified as game birds. They can be shot in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between October 1st and January 31st. They can be shot in Scotland from September 1st until January 31st.



Woodcock. Photo taken by Mark Hamblin

What’s the issue with Woodcock in 100 words?

We have a resident population of Woodcock, and a migratory one; resident ones stay year round and breed here. This UK population is declining and Red-Listed – it’s thought to be ~55,000 pairs. Migratory Woodcock arrive here in early December from places like Scandinavia, Russia and Asia. They swell the population considerably – some 800,000 to 1.3million birds. Currently the shooting season allows Woodcock to be shot from October 1st (Sept 1st in Scotland). This means any birds shot in Sept/Oct/Nov are likely from our threatened breeding population. By moving the shooting season start to December 1st, we’re removing that risk.

FAQs:

1. Why should the season be shortened?

By shifting the start of the Woodcock shooting season to December 1st, this reduces the chances that any shot bird will belong to the threatened UK breeding population. It’s more likely that a bird shot in December will belong to the migrant population, coming from areas where Woodcock populations are not threatened like they are in the UK.

We say that the shooting seasons are there for a purpose (principally to protect breeding populations) and there is a very clear and agreed reason for changing the opening date of the Woodcock shooting season in this case.

2. Shooters say they’re already voluntarily refraining from shooting Woodcock before December, so what’s the point in changing the opening date of the Woodcock shooting season?

We think there are two reasons why the opening date of the Woodcock shooting season should still be changed:

- a) Whilst many shooters abide by the guidance supplied, we know Woodcock are still being shot before December 1st. Evidence of this has been published in the *Shooting Times* as recently as November 2022, and web pages advertising shooting before December 1st are still online (see just three examples [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Changing the opening date of the Woodcock shooting season guarantees no Woodcock can be shot legally before the advised date.
- b) We know the date is already supported by large shooting organisations and shooters – so it seems like a no-brainer. **If lots of shooters are already abiding by guidance, why not change the open season?**

3. What do involved parties think?

Parties from different organisations – both non-shooting and shooting communities - agree that shooting Woodcock before migrant populations arrive is a bad idea. Here's what they have to say:

- **British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) say to their members:**
“Refrain from shooting Woodcock until the migrant population arrives to reduce the chance of a resident bird being taken. As a guide, don't shoot Woodcock until late November. Do allow migrant birds at least a week of good weather to recover from their journey before shooting.”
- **Game and Wildlife Conservation trust (GWCT) say to their supporters:**
Woodcock should not be shot when: It's too early in the season and the first migrants have just arrived. Whilst every shoot will be different, generally we recommend not shooting Woodcock before 1st December.
- **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) have said:**
“The RSPB supports the call for an alteration to the start of the Woodcock hunting season (to 1 December) as an emergency precautionary measure to reduce the probability that a shot Woodcock originates from the threatened UK breeding population, now that the species is Red-listed in Britain and Ireland. We see this as a proportionate measure in the context of the wider climate and nature emergency and declines in the UK breeding woodcock population.” We would review this position only if the conservation status of the UK breeding population improves.

4. Who would be affected by a change in the season?

As we've seen, GWCT and BASC guidance already asks supporters to refrain from shooting Woodcock before December 1st. We know lots of shooters abide by this. The only people who'd be affected by a change in the shooting season are people who choose to ignore the guidance set by their industry and by conservationists.

Wild Justice is calling for:

The shooting season for Woodcock in the UK to be shortened – starting on December 1st each year and ending on January 31st.

For more information, please contact admin@wildjustice.org.uk.