

Gamebird Licensing Bulletin

14 April 2025



Dear gamebird licensing stakeholders,

As you may already be aware, Defra has transferred responsibility to Natural England for individual licences for gamebird release. In addition, Defra Ministers have not approved general licence GL45 to be issued in 2025, as it is currently not possible to rule out the risk of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) (which remains very high) spreading to the bird features present on SPAs.

We recognise the importance of providing as much clarity as possible, as early as possible, on the individual licensing arrangements for this year. The table at **Annex A** identifies the likely individual licensing outcomes for proposed gamebird releases on or within 500m of SPAs in 2025. There are three categories:

- a) SPAs where applications are likely to be successful with standard mitigation;
- b) SPAs where applications are likely to be successful with delayed release;
- c) SPAs where gamebird release is highly unlikely to be permitted for the coming season unless there are exceptional circumstances that could reduce or avoid the risk of avian influenza transmission.

We encourage shoots to make suitable adjustments to their business arrangements depending on the likely licensing outcome. Anyone ordering gamebirds for release on European sites or their buffer zone before they have licensed authority to release, does so at their own risk.

Our approach and likely licensing outcomes have been significantly influenced by the avian influenza outbreak, which is currently categorised at the highest level of risk for wild birds in GB. The table below is the product of a detailed 'appropriate assessment' that has considered a range of potential measures for each SPA to mitigate the transmission of avian influenza between gamebirds and wild bird populations.

Defra will shortly publish an updated GL43 licence and guidance for 2025 for release of gamebirds on and within 500m of areas that are SAC but not SPA. Where customers are unable to comply with the conditions of GL43 they should consider applying for an individual licence.

A simple decision tree-diagram is provided **at Annex B** to help customers decide whether or not to apply.

A Q&A is provided overleaf.

You are receiving this bulletin as you are a Gamebird Licence holder or stakeholder, or you have asked to be added to our mailing list. If you wish to stop receiving these bulletins, please contact us at gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk to unsubscribe.

Q&A

When and how can I apply and when can I expect a decision?

Natural England expects to open for applications on 22nd April. We will publish updated guidance on [Gamebirds: licences to release them - GOV.UK](#), and applicants will be advised as follows:

If you need to apply for an individual licence to release gamebirds on a SAC or SPA or its 500m buffer zone, email Natural England at gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk stating which site you are interested in, the number of release pens you are proposing, and whether you intend to also submit supplementary documents. Natural England will then send you a link to an online application form, and/or a pdf version, along with supplementary guidance on the process and information required.

We will aim to determine applications within 15 working days. The assessment clock will stop where additional information is required from applicants.

We would encourage gamebird managers to submit licence applications with all required information as soon as possible, to allow for timely decisions to be made in advance of the release season. We would like to issue most decisions by the end of May to help provide certainty to gamebird managers prior to the main release season.

What would constitute 'exceptional circumstances' that could reduce or avoid the risk of avian influenza transmission.

An example would be compelling evidence that there will be separation in time and/or space between gamebirds and SPA bird features.

Will the assessment of SPAs be revisited later in the summer?

Natural England do not intend to revise our over-arching strategic Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) and its conclusions, unless there are significant, unforeseen developments with regards to avian influenza. We have understood from previous stakeholder feedback that early clarity is crucial for shoots to be able to plan ahead.

Can I delay applying or apply anyway in case the avian influenza situation improves?

Natural England discourages the submission of speculative applications for SPAs where licensing is highly unlikely. Delaying submission of applications in the hope that avian influenza situation might improve is also highly unlikely to make any difference to the licensing outcome. Avian influenza risk status for wild birds is currently 'very high' and we have based our assessments on a 'realistic worst-case scenario' that risk levels will remain very high, or return to very high in the autumn / winter. This is based on our assessment of the unpredictable variation of avian influenza levels in recent years.

Will licence assessments take into account benefits of gamebird management?

We have considered whether we can take into account associated benefits such as predator control or habitat management, but have concluded that these cannot reduce or avoid the direct impact of increased risk of avian influenza transmission.

In order to issue a licence for activities affecting an SPA, Natural England need to conduct an Appropriate Assessment of the impact to the site and the features the site is designated for. In making this assessment, we consider the direct impacts of the licensable activity, which is the proposed gamebird release, and mitigation measures directly aimed at avoiding or reducing harmful effects, such as enhanced biosecurity or delayed release.

We recognise that there is some evidence of benefits from management activities associated with gamebirds, including predator control and habitat management. However, the potential benefits of these associated activities cannot be considered to directly reduce or avoid the risk from avian influenza to the SPA features, and therefore cannot be considered within an Appropriate Assessment.

Glossary

GL43 – the General Licence that will be re-issued by Defra in 2025 for release of gamebirds on or within 500m of SACs

GL45 – the General Licence that was issued in 2024 for release of gamebirds on or within 500m of SPAs, but which will not be re-issued in 2025 due to the risk from avian influenza

HPAI – highly pathogenic avian influenza, also known as bird flu, abbreviated in this bulletin as avian influenza

HRA – Habitats Regulations Assessment, a statutory process for considering potential impacts of plans and projects on the features of SPAs and SACs. For further information see [Habitats regulations assessments: protecting a European site - GOV.UK](#)

SPAs – Special Protection Areas

SACs – Special Areas of Conservation

Annex A: Table of Likely Licensing Outcomes for Proposed Gamebird Releases on or within 500m of SPAs

SPAs where applications are likely to be successful with standard mitigation	
Falmouth Bay to St Austell Bay	
SPAs where applications are likely to be successful with delayed release	
SPA name	Likely delayed release date (may vary)
Ashdown Forest	1st September
Breckland	1st October
East Devon Heaths	1st September
Great Yarmouth North Denes	1st October
Greater Wash	1st October
North York Moors	1st September
Northumberland Marine	1st October
Outer Thames Estuary	1st October
Peak District Moors (South Pennine Moors Phase 1)	1st September
Porton Down	1st October
Sandlings	1st September
Solent and Dorset Coast	1st October
South Pennine Moors Phase 2	1st September
Thames Basin Heaths	1st October
Thorne and Hatfield Moors	1st September
Thursley, Hankley and Frensham Commons (Wealden Heaths Phase 1)	1st September
Wealden Heaths Phase 2	1st September
SPAs where gamebird release is highly unlikely to be permitted for the coming season unless there are exceptional circumstances that could reduce or avoid the risk of HPAI transmission.	
All SPAs not listed above	
Important Notes:	
<p>a) The above table indicate the likely outcome of a licence application made for a particular SPA. This does not prejudge Natural England's decision, and any application will be assessed on its merits.</p> <p>b) Where a licence is issued for an SPA, the 'delayed release' column indicates the likely date after which gamebirds can be released (where applicable). The delayed release approach is designed to limit the interaction between gamebirds and breeding SPA birds; by ensuring releases only take place once these SPA birds have left the site. This helps to minimise the potential for significant avian influenza transmission to SPA bird populations.</p> <p>c) It is recognised that delayed release dates may not be practical for all gamebird managers. Where it is not possible to adhere to a specified delayed release date, it is likely that an application will be refused.</p>	

Annex B: Simple decision tree for deciding whether to apply for an individual licence

