

Supplementary Guidance: applying for an individual licence to release gamebirds on European Sites and their buffer zones in England

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When is a licence needed to release gamebirds?

You need a licence if you plan to release gamebirds within a European Site and/or within 500m of its boundary.

A 'European site' is a site designated for the protection of species and habitats. It has the meaning given in [Regulation 8 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017](#) (as amended) and includes Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).

A licence is required for any release pen/area that:

- ❖ is located in a SPA and/or SAC,
- ❖ is located within 500m of the boundary of a SPA and/or SAC (aka its buffer zone) or,
- ❖ extends partially into the buffer zone of a SPA and/or SAC.

The licence you need will depend on the exact nature and location of your planned gamebird releases.

If you are not releasing gamebirds on a European Site, or within 500m of its boundary, you do not need a Natural England licence.

Natural England recommends that applicants should always consider whether they can move their release pen/area outside of the licensable area, to avoid the need for a licence.

Licences and SSSI Consent

If you are releasing gamebirds on a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), you may need consent from Natural England before you release gamebirds or carry out other gamebird management activities on the SSSI.

Getting consent is different to applying for a licence; having one does not mean you have the other. It is your responsibility to ensure that SSSI Consent -if required- is in place before carrying out any activities that require it.

[Guidance on finding out whether you need SSSI Consent and how to apply is available on Gov.uk.](#)

GL43 - General licence to release gamebirds on certain European sites or within 500m of their boundary

If you are releasing gamebirds on a SAC, and/or within 500m of its boundary **AND** there is no SPA-designated site within 500m of the planned release pen/area, Natural England recommends first reading the conditions of GL43 to determine if you can rely on them.

[The conditions of GL43 can be viewed on Gov.uk.](#)

You do not need to apply for GL43 and can act under it as long as you meet all terms and conditions of that licence. **Important Note:** As of 22 April 2025, Defra has not yet published the GL43 for 2025. You will need to check the .GOV.UK website to ensure the licence has been issued before you rely on it.

Natural England recommends that, when releasing gamebirds on a SAC or within 500m of its buffer zone, applicants should always consider whether they can alter their planned release to meet the conditions of GL43, before applying for an individual licence.

Why apply for an individual licence?

If you propose to release on a SPA or within its buffer zone, or cannot meet the conditions of the general licence, you may need to apply for an individual licence in order to release gamebirds at your planned location.

❖ You should apply for an individual licence (IL) only if:

- You are releasing gamebirds (common pheasants and/or red-legged partridges) within **any** Special Protection Area (SPA) and/or within 500m of the boundary of any SPA (aka the buffer zone);

OR

- You are releasing gamebirds (common pheasants and/or red-legged partridges) within any Special Protection Area (SPA) and/or within 500m of the boundary of any SPA **AND** a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and/or within 500m of the boundary of a SAC (aka the buffer zone)

OR

- You are releasing gamebirds (common pheasants and/or red-legged partridges) within a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and/or within 500m of the boundary of a SAC (aka the buffer zone) **AND** you wish to deviate from the conditions set out in the general licence (GL43).

To understand this process further please see: [Annex A - Decision tree to help applicants understand their requirements for licensing](#)

- ❖ Applicants should be aware that applying for an IL in order to deviate from GL conditions does not guarantee a different licensing outcome. Natural England may advise that planned releases are altered to meet the GL conditions instead of granting an IL.
- ❖ Before filling out the application form, Natural England recommends you review the locations of your planned release pens/areas to determine whether you need a licence.
- ❖ You can review your pen locations using [Magic Maps](#) to confirm their position in relation to site boundaries. See the Using Magic section of this document for more guidance on using Magic Maps.

Releasing on or within 500m of a SPA – Check the likelihood a licence will be granted if you apply

- ❖ If you are applying for a licence to release gamebirds on or within 500m of an SPA, then before you submit your licence application to Natural England, you should review the list included in [Annex B](#) – SPAs and Likely Release Licence Application Outcomes of this document to check the likelihood that a licence will be granted.
- ❖ As part of our strategic assessment and approach to gamebird release licensing for 2025, Natural England has provided Annex B as an indicative list of SPAs and the likely licensing outcomes for each. This assessment process included consideration of disease risk modelling using tools as developed by Defra / APHA colleagues to help inform our assessment of the risk from Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) to SPA bird populations. The intention of this list is not to pre-judge applications but to inform applicants' decision-making on whether to submit an application for gamebird release.
- ❖ Applicants should be aware that an individual licence is not guaranteed. Where an SPA is not listed in the table included in Annex B, Natural England is likely to refuse any licence applications for gamebird releases on that SPA.

Applying for an Individual Licence - Introduction

- ❖ Natural England will consider each application as a 'project' under the Habitats Regulations and the relevant tests under those regulations will apply to the granting of any licence. Published advice on Habitats Regulations Assessments can be found here: [Habitats regulations assessments: protecting a European site - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/habitats-regulations-assessments-protecting-a-european-site).
- ❖ If releasing on a SPA or within its buffer zone, applicants should consider the potential impacts of gamebird release on the transmission of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) to SPA protected bird features. For example, HPAI can be transmitted both directly (through contact between gamebirds and the SPA protected features) and indirectly (through both gamebirds and the protected features coming into contact with contaminated surfaces e.g. feeders, water, and soil, or through 'bridging' species that come into contact with both gamebirds and other protected features).
- ❖ Where possible, Natural England recommends submitting your application via the online form available [by clicking this link](#).
- ❖ If you cannot use the online form - for example, because you have more than 10 release pens/locations associated with a single European Site - a stand-alone document application form can be provided on request to gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk. Wherever possible digital/typed application forms should be submitted rather than handwritten. This will help make the processing of your application faster.
- ❖ An applicant can expect Natural England to:
 - Assess all applications against the same methodology.
 - Process their application as efficiently as possible whilst considering the need to make an accurate assessment of impacts to the relevant European Site(s) using the best available evidence.
- ❖ Natural England expects the applicant to:
 - Provide as much relevant information and evidence as reasonably possible in your application. If releasing on or near a SPA, you should show how you have considered how your proposed activity may impact the risk of HPAI transmission between gamebirds and SPA protected features.
- ❖ A comprehensive application will:
 - Clearly define the proposed gamebird releases by answering the questions on the application form.
 - Consider how the release could affect the European Site's protected features directly and indirectly, on a temporary and permanent basis, making use of the best

available evidence. This information should be provided in the 'Further Information' section of the application form or can be provided within supplementary documents and evidence.

- **Please note that submission of additional information once assessment of the application has started may significantly increase the processing time of your application.**
- See the [Supplementary Information & Exceptional Circumstances](#) section of this document for more information on appropriate details to include and how to submit additional documents.

- ❖ **Please note, the application form is only to be used to apply for an individual licence to release gamebirds on or near a European Site. Where gamebird releases will take place on land designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) – including where this is within a SPA/SAC - you may also need consent from Natural England. Further information is available here: [Give notice and get consent for a planned activity on a SSSI - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#).**
- ❖ **If you are not the landowner, you should have the landowner's written permission to carry out the activity before applying for this licence.**

Release sites information

- ❖ When submitting pen/release area location data, Natural England requires the location of the centre of your pen/release area – this should be accurate to at least the nearest 10m:
 - If submitting an OS grid reference, make sure it is at least 8 figures including the 2-letter prefix (i.e. in the format: AB 1234 5678).
 - Alternatively, you can use the online tool [What3Words](#) to generate a precise location.
 - Magic Maps, online grid reference finders, and What3Words can all be used to obtain location references for inclusion in a licence application.
- ❖ When submitting pen/release area size data, Natural England requires you to submit data in the appropriate units:
 - If carrying out a hard release, you must provide the size of the area you are releasing gamebirds into, in hectares
 - If carrying out a soft release, you must provide the approximate area of your release pen, in m².
- ❖ The maximum density of gamebirds that will be permitted under an individual licence will likely remain consistent with the maximum densities permitted under GL43:

- The density of common pheasants released must be no more than 700 birds per hectare of release pen within the European Site, or 1000 birds per hectare of release pen within the buffer zone, or lower if so required by [SSSI consent](#).
- The density of red-legged partridges released must be no more than 700 birds per hectare of land they inhabit within the European Site, or 1000 birds per hectare of land they inhabit within the buffer zone, or lower if so required by SSSI consent.
- All releases, including single or trickle releases, must not exceed these limits.
- **Where any gamebirds are shot or killed, you must not release further birds where this would exceed the allowed limit.**

❖ Please see the table below for an example of appropriate gamebird densities based on pen/area size and location.

Number of CP being released	Number of RLP being released	Release in buffer or SPA.	Size of release pen (ha)	Size of release area (ha)	Birds/ha
2000	0	Buffer	2	N/A	1000
350	0	SPA	0.5	N/A	700
0	2000	Buffer	N/A	2	1000
0	350	SPA	N/A	0.5	700

Consents Information

If you already hold relevant SSSI consents, you will be asked to provide the following information within your individual licence application form:

- ❖ Name of the SSSI your consent relates to,
- ❖ Name of the consent holder,
- ❖ Date of issue,
- ❖ Expiry date (if relevant),
- ❖ File reference number (if relevant),
- ❖ The upper limits to the number of common pheasant and/or red-legged partridge that your consent permits you to release (if specified).

Authorised persons

- ❖ If the licence holder needs to delegate authority/responsibility as licence holder to another individual, the individual(s) should be included in the application as authorised persons. Authorised persons do not include individuals who might be working under the direction and control of the licence holder.
- ❖ All practitioners that will have delegated authority/responsibility for gamebird releases should be listed here in full.

Supplementary Information & Exceptional Circumstances

In this section you should provide any further information which you consider relevant to your application that you would like Natural England to consider as part of your licence application.

This may include details of any specific site and/or gamebird management activities you are undertaking to reduce the risk of avian influenza transmission between gamebirds and SPA bird features, or, information on any exceptional circumstances applicable to your application that would reduce or avoid potential transmission of avian influenza.

Natural England discourages the submission of applications for release on or within 500m of SPAs where licensing is highly unlikely (see [Annex B](#) – SPAs and Likely Release Licence Application Outcomes of this document). If you are submitting an application for any of these SPAs and relying on exceptional circumstances, you should clearly set these out in your application form in the relevant section. Natural England does not consider that there are any exceptional circumstances that would change the likely licensing outcome for the SPAs listed in Annex B; however, we will review any information provided as part of a release licence application.


Information and evidence you provide could include:




- advice from an ornithological expert or consultant – Natural England will consider all information and evidence you give, including from practitioners, but they will give appropriate weight to expert opinion
 - any topographical aspects of the release site that may reduce the risk of gamebirds interacting with protected species, such as cliffs or rivers
 - your plan for shoot days, including the location of shooting pegs, direction you will drive gamebirds, and how you will move gamebirds between pens and covers (such as using mobile feeders and whistles)
 - your management activities, including habitat and wildlife management, that will lower the risk of bird flu transmission to SAC or SPA protected species
 - actions you can offer to take to reduce the risk of bird flu transmission on your release site, for example carcass removal
- ❖ **Given the need to process licences in a timely manner, Natural England will not be able to visit shoot locations as part of the licence assessment process. Therefore, it is essential that applicants provide sufficient and accurate information about the proposed activity in their initial application.**

Submitting additional documents to support an application

- ❖ The submission of additional documentation is not mandatory. Where required to support your application, you can send Natural England relevant photos, maps, and/or other evidence.
- ❖ If submitting an application form via email, you should attach any additional documents alongside your application form when submitting it to Natural England.
- ❖ The online application form has a free text box near the end of the questions for provision of further information. However, it is unable to directly accept additional document attachments at the current time.
- ❖ If you apply online and intend to submit any photos, maps or documents to support your gamebird release application, you will need to email these to Natural England once you have completed the online application form. Following submission of your application, you will receive an acknowledgement email informing you of your application reference number- please respond to this email to provide any additional documents. Alternatively, please email Natural England at gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk to provide the additional documents. You should include your name, application case reference number, and the date in the subject line of your email.
- ❖ Please consider including any additional documents within one PDF file attached to your email, to enable easy and efficient handling. If you do not have specific software this can be done via an online PDF tool.
- ❖ You should submit any supplementary information via email as soon as possible after you have received acknowledgement of your application. Any delay could significantly increase the time it takes Natural England to process your application.

Using Magic Maps

- ❖ Magic maps can be accessed here: [Magic Map Application](#)
- ❖ To find out the locations of relevant protected sites, open the Map Layers menu. It will have symbol that looks like this: 
- ❖ Select the following options from the Map Layers menu, ensuring the relevant tick box is ticked at each step:
- ❖ Designations > Land-based designations > Statutory.
- ❖ In the 'Statutory' drop-down menu, select the following:
 - Sites of Special Scientific Interest (England)
 - Special Areas of Conservation (England)
 - Special Protection Areas (England)
- ❖ To view the 500m buffer zone, select the following options from the Map Layers menu, ensuring the relevant tick box is ticked at each step:
- ❖ Designations > Habitats and Species > Habitats > Other > Common Pheasant and Red-legged Partridge releases – European sites and 500m buffer zones as at 31 May 2021.

- ❖ This tool will place a 500m buffer zone around the boundary of SPA and SAC sites.
- ❖ After you turn on the correct layers, the map will update to show locations of protected sites and their buffer zones. The name of a protected site should be visible if you zoom in on it.
- ❖ To search for a location, you can select one of the following from the drop-down box in the top left corner:
 - country, place, or postcode,
 - regions, or
 - coordinates/positions (note this only uses 6 figure grid references, therefore if you wanted to test you have selected the correct grid reference you would need to check manually or on an online grid reference finder).
- ❖ To find the grid reference of a position on the map, select the 'Where am I?' icon (). Once selected click on the centroid of your pen and it will provide you with a grid reference.
- ❖ To measure distance or the area of your pen, select the ruler icon () which will offer two measurement tools to either measure the size of an area (e.g., your pen) or the distance from two points (e.g., your pen and the European Site boundary).
- ❖ You can obtain further help by clicking the '?' icon () which will show the help library.

What happens next?

On the online form, once you click the 'submit' button, your application will be submitted to Natural England.

If filling out the alternative application form document, once completed, your application should be submitted by email to gamebirds@naturalengland.org.uk. Include any supplementary documents as attachments in the same email as your application form, wherever possible.

Natural England will undertake a triage check against criteria to see if your application contains the basic information necessary for it to move on to the next stage of processing. It is important to make sure that you provide all necessary information to allow us to reach a decision.

If you fail to meet the criteria¹, you will be contacted by email and will be allowed 10 working days to improve your application. Your application will be reviewed against the following criteria:

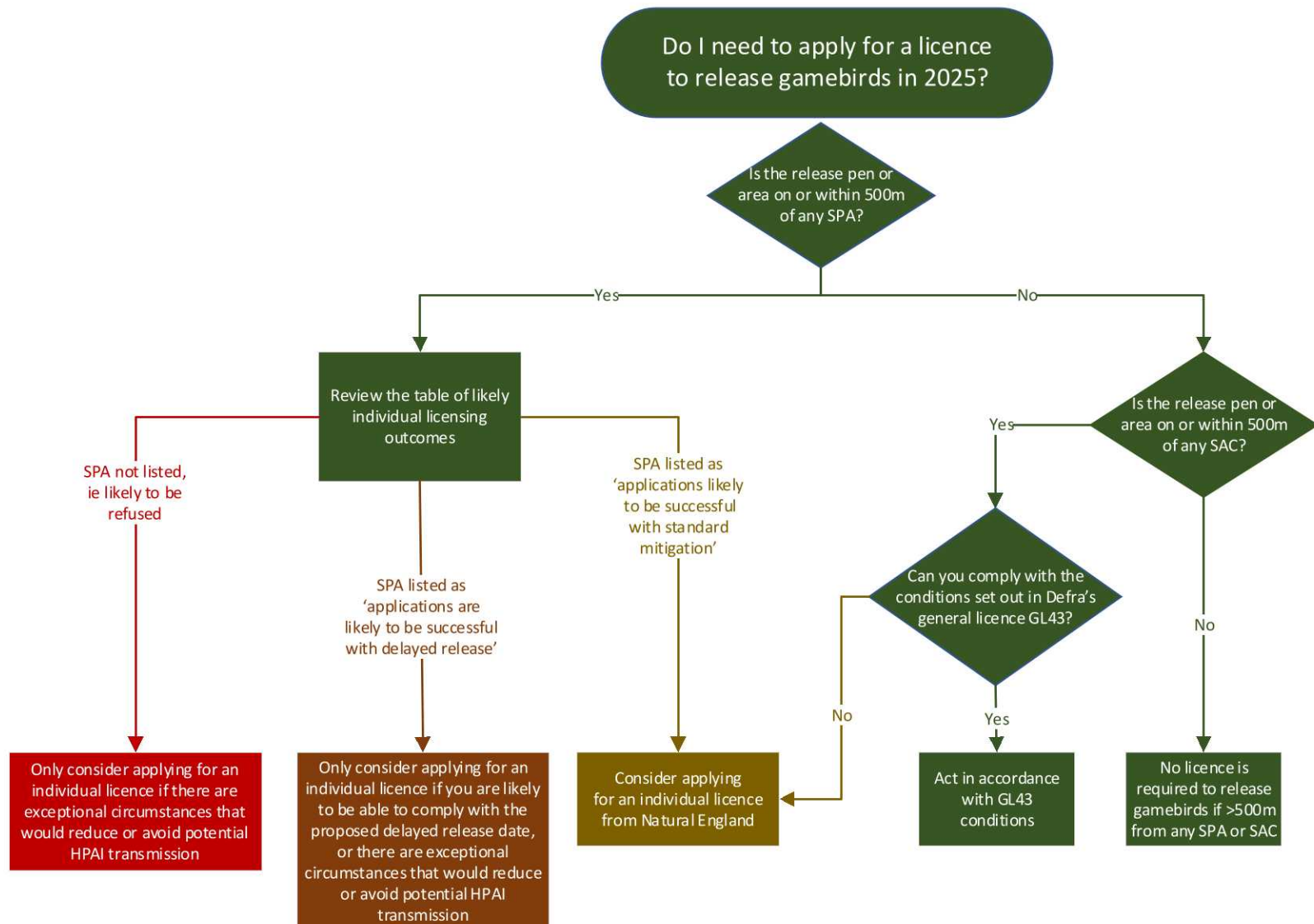
- A licence is likely required and relevant to the project.
- Is any key information missing.
- It is legible (where hand written).
- Includes OS grid references to no fewer than 8 figures (XX 1234 5678) OR What3words reference.
- Includes appropriate bird densities consistent with those outlined above.
- The declaration box is ticked (PDF Form)

Natural England will confirm acceptance of your application, and your licence application reference, once it has been checked against the application criteria.

You will be notified of the outcome of your licence application in writing (by email). If your application is approved, then your licence will be issued via email. If your application is refused, you will receive a letter (by email) explaining why.

¹ Applicants should note that where applications are in line with the criteria there may still be insufficient information for a decision maker to rule out adverse effect on the integrity of the European Site and grant a licence.

Annex A - Decision tree to help applicants understand their requirements for licensing



Annex B – SPAs and Likely Release Licence Application Outcomes

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
Important Notes:	
<p>a. Where an SPA is not listed in the above table, Natural England is likely to refuse any licence applications for gamebird releases on that SPA.</p> <p>b. The above outcomes are intended only to act as an indication as to the likely outcome of a licence application made for a particular SPA. It does not prejudice Natural England's decision and any application will be assessed on its merits.</p> <p>c. 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>d. 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>	

Glossary of Terms

- ❖ **'Cover crops'** - a block or strip of cereal, brassica or other seed-bearing crops that have been established to provide cover, shelter or food for released gamebirds.
- ❖ **'CP'** - Common pheasant.
- ❖ **'Hard Release'** - Gamebirds released into the landscape directly from traveling crates from the game farm rather than into a release pen.
- ❖ **'HPAI'** - Highly Pathogenetic Avian Influenza (aka 'bird flu')
- ❖ **'HRA'** - Habitats Regulations Assessment.
- ❖ **'Licensable area'** - A European Site and its 500m buffer zone.
- ❖ **'Release'** - DEFRA defines gamebirds as released when gamebirds can range freely in the landscape. If gamebirds are kept in an open top release pen they are considered released as soon as they are placed inside of the pen. If gamebirds are kept in a closed top release pen they are considered released as soon as the pop holes are first opened to allow them to range freely outside of the pen.
- ❖ **'RLP'** - Red-legged Partridge.
- ❖ **'SAC'** - Special Area of Conservation.
- ❖ **'Soft Release'** - Gamebirds released from a release pen into the wider landscape, whether this be via gamebirds being able to jump over the fence or walk through the pop holes.
- ❖ **'SPA'** - Special Protection Area.
- ❖ **'Unimproved habitats'** - areas of land characterised by native plant and animal species that have never been intensively farmed or been subject to modern agricultural cultivation.
- ❖ **'Wildlife offence'** - an offence under the following legislation: [Part 1 of the 1981 Act](#), [Part 3 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017](#), [Protection of Badgers Act 1992](#), [Deer Act 1991](#), [Hunting Act 2004](#), [Wild Mammals \(Protection\) Act 1996](#), [the Pests Act 1954](#), [the Animal Welfare Act 2006](#) and [the Protection of Animals Act 1911](#)