

WILDFOWLING IN THE UK

A CODE OF PRACTICE



1. INTRODUCTION

Wildfowling is the pursuit of wild ducks, geese and waders. It is carried out during the nominated season from 1 September to 31 January inland (above the height of an ordinary spring tide) and from 1 September to 20 February on the foreshore (below the height of an ordinary spring tide).

Wildfowling normally takes place at dawn and dusk but can occur at any time of day or night (apart from Northern Ireland, where night shooting is prohibited). The skill is to make the most of the opportunities presented through an understanding of the quarry's natural movement. Ducks and geese generally move both to and from feeding and roosting grounds at dawn and dusk. They will also move on the tide and at times around a full moon when the moonlight improves visibility and allows extra feeding time.

The aim of this code of practice is to give clear guidelines as to what is acceptable conduct, both for the newcomer to the sport and experienced wildfowlers. It also describes the general areas of the law relating to wildfowling, but it is not a full study of all relevant legislation in this area. It is vital that every wildfowler knows and understands the law relating to the sport. For clarification on specific laws relating to wildfowling, contact BASC head office, country or regional offices.

The wild ducks, geese and waders which are the legal quarry of wildfowlers, are largely migratory and overwinter in the UK, particularly in coastal areas. Through sound conservation we can all work to ensure plentiful quarry species while benefiting the wider environment. As some of the quarry species are in decline throughout their migratory transit route, it is essential to shoot responsibly and carry out conservation work in the form of habitat creation and predator control where possible. This work will also benefit an array of other species. In addition to this, wildfowlers should record their bag and manage shooting levels to ensure the take and level of activity is sustainable. Most clubs require bag returns either as a condition of their lease or consent, or to assess and file for their own future reference.

High standards underpin public and political support for shooting, now and in the future.

This code provides advice at two levels:

- Advice that **must** be followed in order to deliver sustainable shooting. Unless otherwise stated, the term 'must' only applies to meeting the standards set by this code of practice and does not refer to a legal obligation.
- Advice that **should** be followed to achieve best practice – any deviation from which would need justification.

THE FOLLOWING GOLDEN RULES APPLY:

1. In order to ensure the future of the sport, wildfowlers must abide by the law and meet the standards described in this code, and show respect for the countryside, due regard to health and safety and consideration for others.
2. The use of lead shot for all wildfowling has been made illegal in England and Wales, and for all shooting on or over wetlands (including foreshore) in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
3. BASC strongly recommends the use of a competent gundog when wildfowling.
4. Ensure that you can recognise legal quarry species; if in doubt, don't shoot.
5. Ensure you have permission, either through club membership or landowner authorisation, and adhere to the boundaries set. In Scotland, the right to public recreation exists so wildfowling club membership is not always required. For more information on specific sites, contact the BASC wildfowling dept or BASC Scotland.

REMEMBER – ignorance of the law is no excuse. If in doubt, always ask.



2. BEHAVIOUR IN THE FIELD

Planning

- When wildfowling at a site for the first time, either go in daylight or with someone who knows the area to familiarise yourself with the features of the marsh.
- Make sure you know the safe access and exit routes, marsh boundaries and any inherent dangers such as areas of soft mud or sand.
- Make sure you know all the local rules for the management and control of wildfowling. For example, not all clubs allow crow or pigeon shooting on their grounds. Always ask if there are any restrictions in place.
- Always consult relevant tide tables before going onto the marsh, and make any necessary adjustments for location. If British Summer Time is in operation, add one hour to GMT.
- Remember that the height and timing of tides is affected by the prevailing weather conditions, both locally out to sea and further upriver. In certain conditions this can mean that the tide can be several feet higher and appear hours earlier than predicted.
- Always tell someone when and where you are going wildfowling, and do not forget to tell them that you have returned safely.
- Always plan your exit route, particularly when a big tide is expected. Never wait until the last moment to leave the marsh when the incoming tide is approaching. Channels fill quickly and in a very short time they become a torrent; you can easily be cut off by creeks flooding behind you.

Above all, be safe and be sensible

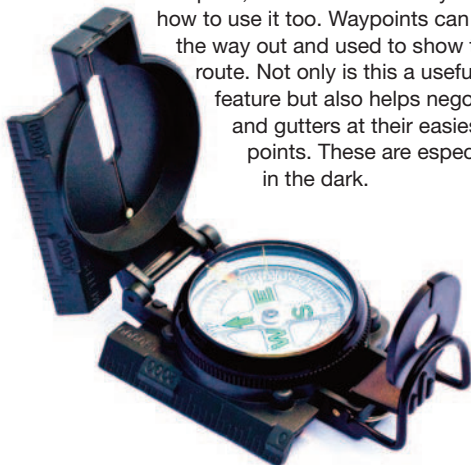
Useful equipment

- Always carry a waterproof wristwatch; it is essential for timing the predicted state of the tide. Don't always rely on your mobile phone which can easily get wet and become useless.

- A wading stick is vital for walking on the marsh. It is used to test soft mud or quicksand, or the water depth of creeks, gutters and crossing places.
- If you are out all day, carry some food and a thermos containing a hot drink.
- Wear comfortable, inconspicuous, warm and waterproof clothing.
- Thigh or chest waders are normally recommended.
- A large bag or rucksack is useful to carry equipment and to sit on.
- It is good practice to have an up-to-date copy of your shotgun certificate with you, along with any local permits and your club membership card.
- Binoculars will enhance the day and are useful for bird identification as well as marking shot quarry.
- Don't forget to take supplies for your dog, especially if you are out for extended periods of time. Neoprene coats are useful for both keeping your dog warm and helping it dry out after swimming, as well as assisting with camouflage.

Safety equipment

- In an emergency, a mobile phone will enable you to summon assistance by dialling 999/112, or 101 in Scotland, and asking for the coastguard. However, do make sure there is a signal for reception out on the marsh – many rural locations have poor or no mobile phone reception. Ensure that the battery is fully charged and the phone is stored in a waterproof case before taking it on to the marsh.
- The what3words mobile app can help the emergency services pinpoint your location should you need emergency assistance.
- A compass is an essential piece of equipment to carry – it could, for example, be the only reliable way of making it off the marsh in fog. Make sure that you are familiar with how to use it before venturing out on the marsh.
- A pocket GPS receiver is an effective, modern equivalent to a compass, but make sure that you understand how to use it too. Waypoints can be plotted on the way out and used to show the return route. Not only is this a useful safety feature but also helps negotiate creeks and gutters at their easiest crossing points. These are especially useful in the dark.



- Flashing a torch nine times – three short flashes, then three long flashes, then three more short flashes – is the SOS morse code signal. Distress flares might also be used for attracting attention.
- Always carry a jointed cleaning rod, hide pole or slim bamboo cane as it is all too easy to get mud or snow in the muzzle of your gun. Never fire a shot to try and clear an obstruction in the barrels.

On the marsh

- Do not disturb residents near access points by making a noise or banging car doors when arriving early in the morning or leaving late at night.
- Never arrive on the marsh late or depart early and so risk disturbing the shooting of those who have taken the trouble to get into position in good time and those who wish to stay.
- Park sensibly and considerately. Do not block access to fields or private land.
- Do not shoot in the immediate vicinity of houses adjoining the shore; be aware of footpaths and never shoot in a way that endangers people using them.
- Avoid disturbing or shooting towards livestock.
- There are no statutory bag limits in the UK, but some clubs impose limits for their own marshes. Your personal limit may depend on the local conditions and, indeed, your own experience. Shooting excessive numbers of birds is considered by the majority of wildfowlers to be unacceptable and unsporting. Ensure all shot quarry is put to good use.
- Ensure that your dog is comfortable – if you sit on your game bag, make sure your dog has a dry seat too.
- Regularly look through your gun barrels to make sure that they are clear of any obstruction. Semi-automatic and pump action shotguns are not easy to check (in low light, unload your gun and use your torch to check the barrel is clear).
- Judging range when wildfowling can be particularly difficult. Try to identify nearby features that can be used as reference marks so that you do not shoot beyond the limitations of your cartridge and gun or your own shooting capabilities. Learn what size a goose appears in relation to your barrel when it is in range. Remember, just because another shooter can drop a bird at a certain range, it doesn't mean you can do the same; they may be using a bigger calibre, a heavier load or both. Shooting at out-of-range quarry is unethical and will often be reported to club officials.
- Ensure that you can recognise legal quarry species; if in doubt, don't shoot.
- Never leave cartridge cases and rubbish behind. Leave the marsh as you found it. Pick up any spent cases and rubbish you find, even if it is not yours.

Respect for quarry

- BASC strongly recommends the use of a competent gundog when wildfowling.
- All shot quarry should be retrieved and, if necessary, immediately and humanely despatched.
- If necessary, shoot a wounded bird again to ensure that it can be retrieved quickly and safely (provided it is safe to do so).
- Do not leave a wounded bird unretrieved to shoot at another.
- If you do not have the use of a gundog when wildfowling, go with someone who does or only take shots which will result in birds falling where you can reach them. Retrieve all shot birds immediately.
- Don't shoot at birds while your dog is on a retrieve.
- Always allow time for the retrieval of all shot birds before being pushed off by time or tide and having to leave the marsh.



Leaving the marsh

- On leaving the marsh, your dog may be cold and wet – attend to its needs before your own. Dry your dog properly (there are some fantastic fleece jackets available that not only dry the dog and keep it warm but also contain the dirt while travelling).
- Do not waste the birds that you shoot. For a wide range of appetising game recipes, visit tasteofgame.org.uk
- When leaving the marsh, try to keep shot birds covered, or hidden in a bag, particularly if using public access routes.
- Pay special attention to cleaning your gun – saltwater, mud and sand will quickly corrode it. Check for faults which may need rectifying before the gun is used again.
- Always complete any required bag returns for your day's shooting and return any permits within the required time constraints. This may be a condition of the lease for the foreshore you shoot. Accurate bag data is imperative to ensuring that wildfowling remains for the future.

3. QUARRY SPECIES AND SEASONS

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 provide for waterfowl shooting in the United Kingdom, with respect to quarry species, seasons and other aspects of the sport.

DUCK	GEESE	WADERS	OTHERS
Gadwall	Canada goose	Common snipe	² Coot
Goldeneye	Greylag goose	Golden plover	² Moorhen
Mallard	Pink-footed goose	¹ Jack snipe	
Pintail	³ European white-fronted goose	Woodcock	
Pochard			
¹ Scaup			
Shoveler			
Teal			
Tufted duck			
Wigeon			

Notes: ¹Northern Ireland only, ²England, Wales and Scotland only, ³As of 01/04/2020 Greenland white-fronted geese have been removed from quarry list.

The current status for white-fronted geese is as follows: We were asked by Defra to consider a moratorium in England similar to Wales to honour our obligations with AEWA. You will remember this request went out to clubs in the north of the country.

Unfortunately a moratorium didn't provide the level of protection AEWA required and as such white-fronted geese were removed from the quarry list. We campaigned for European white-fronted geese to be added, and this was successful.



It is now the responsibility of the shooter to ensure they can identify their quarry. As there is no way of identifying the difference between Greenland white-fronted and European white-fronted geese when in flight, we would recommend wildfowling continue to honour the moratorium in the north of England to ensure they remain legal. For more details, contact the wildfowling team direct.

Wildfowling seasons (all dates are inclusive):

- England, Wales and Scotland: 1 September – 31 January (above high-water mark of ordinary spring tides)
- England, Wales and Scotland: 1 September – 20 February (below high-water mark of ordinary spring tides)
- Note that duck and goose species only (no waders) can be shot after 31 January when below the high-water mark of ordinary spring tides
- Northern Ireland: 1 September – 31 January.
Further advice on this can be obtained from wildfowling clubs in the area, BASC head office and country and regional offices.

SPECIES	ENGLAND AND WALES	SCOTLAND	NORTHERN IRELAND	ISLE OF MAN
Duck and goose inland	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Ducks - Sep 1 – Jan 31 Geese* - July 1 – Mar 31
Duck and goose below HWM (see below)	Sep 1 – Feb 20	Sep 1 – Feb 20	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Ducks - Sep 1 – Jan 31 Geese* - Jul 1 – Mar 31
Common snipe	Aug 12 – Jan 31	Aug 12 – Jan 31	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Sep 1 – Jan 31
Jack snipe	Protected	Protected	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Protected
Woodcock	Oct 1 – Jan 31	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Oct 1 – Jan 31	Oct 1 – Jan 31
Golden plover	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Protected
Coot/moorhen	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Sep 1 – Jan 31	Protected	Protected

Isle of Man: *Geese can only be shot under general licence, under the Wildlife Act 1990

Full details of open seasons for all legal quarry species are available from BASC. Please contact head office, country or regional offices, or visit basc.org.uk



4. GUNS AND AMMUNITION

Guns

- A double-barrelled 12 bore is a suitable all-round shotgun for wildfowling. If your fieldcraft is good you can be very successful with a standard 70mm (2¾ inch) chambered gun and cartridge. Traditionally, however, wildfowling have often preferred a 76mm (3 inch) chambered gun which enables them to shoot heavier loads with more pellets in their pattern.
- Many wildfowling now choose to use an 89mm (3½ inch) chambered shotgun, in either double-barrelled or, more commonly, semi-automatic forms. This type of gun is designed to handle large steel pellets in modern wildfowling loads (provided the gun is steel shot proofed).
- Big-bore guns, such as 10, 8 and 4 bore shotguns, are designed to fire large shot loads effectively, but some may find them cumbersome or, indeed, a burden.

If you are unsure whether your gun is capable of handling steel loads, check the BASC website: basc.org.uk/lead

Effective loads

- The measure of potential effectiveness is the count of pellets in the traditional 30-inch circle placed over the centre of the pattern printed on a pattern plate or large sheet of paper. For example: Geese need a minimum 55 pellets in that circle; large ducks need 90+; small ducks 140. Effective pellet sizes vary according to the size of the quarry - they require enough energy to ensure penetration of the vital organs. Remember, the smaller the number, the bigger the pellet size.

Recommended shot sizes

Shot sizes for ducks: 5, 4, 3

Shot sizes for geese: 3, 2, 1, BB

- We strongly recommend that you pattern your gun/cartridge combination to make sure it will deliver the appropriate killing load – provided, as ever, you can consistently centre your pattern on the target.

Non-lead shot

- Following the ratification of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) by the UK Government in 1999, the use of lead shot for all wildfowling has been made illegal in England and Wales, and for all shooting on or over wetlands (including foreshore) in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- The range of non-lead shot alternatives is growing and information on suitability for use in shotguns is available from BASC.

5. WILDFOWLING AND THE LAW

Prohibited methods

- Numerous methods of killing or taking wild birds are prohibited. These include gin, spring, leg and pole traps, snares, nets, electrical scaring devices, poisonous substances, bows or crossbows, explosives (other than firearm ammunition), artificial light, mirror or dazzling devices, devices for illuminating a target or sighting device for night shooting, automatic or semi-automatic weapon (unless it is incapable of holding more than two rounds in the magazine) and shotguns with an internal diameter at muzzle more than 1¾ inches.
- The use of sound recordings, and live decoy birds tethered, blinded or maimed is illegal. It is also an offence to cause or permit such methods to be used.
- It is an offence to use any mechanically-propelled vehicle – including boats – in immediate pursuit of a wild bird to kill or take it.

Shooting on Sundays and at night

- **England and Wales:** Before the passing of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, orders prohibiting the shooting of wildfowl on Sundays were made under the Protection of Birds Act 1954. These orders have not been rescinded and so in the following counties/part counties the shooting of wildfowl is prohibited on Sundays: Anglesey, Brecknock, Caernarfon, Carmarthen, Cardigan, Cornwall, Denbigh, Devon, Doncaster, Glamorgan, Great Yarmouth County Borough, Isle of Ely, Leeds County Borough, Merioneth, Norfolk, Pembroke, Somerset and North and West Ridings of Yorkshire.
- There may be local restrictions on shooting at night. Ensure club rules are checked.
- **Scotland:** Wildfowl and waders may not be shot on Sundays and on Christmas Day.
- **Northern Ireland:** All wild birds are protected on Sundays, Christmas Day and at night (defined as commencing one hour after sunset on any day and ending one hour before sunrise the next day).

Severe weather

- Under exceptional circumstances of prolonged severe weather, the relevant Government Minister may protect by order any species of duck, goose, wader, snipe, woodcock, coot and moorhen for certain periods, normally of not more than 14 days. The Minister will act in accordance with criteria and procedures previously agreed by Government and shooting and conservation organisations.
- Any such suspensions are widely publicised. Typically, a statutory suspension comes into force after 14 days of severe weather (as defined) and can be imposed separately in any of the UK countries.
- Please note – after seven days of severe weather, BASC may well call on all waterfowl shooters to exercise restraint in their shooting if it appears that birds are under pressure from the weather conditions.
- Full details of the severe weather procedures, how any voluntary restraint measures can be put in place, and when and where any statutory suspensions are in force, will be published on the BASC website and updated frequently.

6. INSURANCE

It is advisable to have adequate liability (third-party) insurance when shooting. Membership of BASC includes insurance for recreational sporting activities: basc.org.uk/join-basc/basc-members-insurance

7. FURTHER INFORMATION

References

- *The Code of Good Shooting Practice*
- *BASC Handbook of Shooting*
- *BASC Shotgun Code of Practice*

**BASC is the largest representative
body for sporting shooting.**

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