



**WOODPIGEON
SHOOTING IN THE UK**
A CODE OF PRACTICE



1. INTRODUCTION

The woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*) is a major agricultural pest in the UK. It is legal to shoot woodpigeons throughout the year in accordance with the terms and conditions of relevant, current general licences. The woodpigeon produces high-quality meat for all to enjoy.

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 achieve best practice; 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 in order to achieve best practice – any deviation from which would need justification.

THE FOLLOWING GOLDEN RULES APPLY:

1. It is your responsibility to ensure you abide by the law.
2. You must clearly identify the quarry before shooting.
3. You must ensure that you have established safe arcs of fire.
4. Always have respect for the countryside, consideration for others and due regard to health and safety.



2. WOODPIGEON SHOOTING

Decoying

Woodpigeon decoying is the art of building a hide on a field where pigeons are feeding and using artificial or dead bird decoys to attract pigeons to within effective shotgun range. To achieve the best results requires reconnaissance, considerable patience, knowledge and fieldcraft.

Hides may be built using camouflage nets, straw bales or natural cover. When using bales, remember to ask the farmer's permission before you move them and always replace them after you have finished shooting. Natural hides are made with materials found on the farm and should be dismantled at the end of the shooting day. Do not cut into hedgerows or otherwise damage the farmer's property without permission. The hide should be large enough to accommodate the shooter, any dogs and equipment. It should have as level a floor as possible, leaving sufficient room to shoot safely.

Flighting

Shooting pigeons on flightlines is very popular. Reconnaissance will determine the line of flight, allowing Guns to stand concealed on the edges of woods or in hedgerows and shoot passing birds without the aid of decoys.

Roost shooting

Normally practised during late winter, Guns position themselves before dusk in woods where pigeons are known to roost and wait for the birds to return from their day's feeding. Mixed woods of conifers and hardwoods are the most popular and pigeon droppings under the trees will show the best places to stand.

In the field

Permission from the relevant landowner/farmer must be sought:

- before shooting;
- before driving across fields;
- before inviting a companion to shoot;
- before taking a dog with you;
- before retrieving shot birds on neighbouring land.

Try to get permission in writing. BASC has a pest control permission slip which can be downloaded from our website: basc.org.uk/game-and-gamekeeping/shooting-leases-and-shooting-agreements

Where relevant, check with the gamekeeper/farmer to avoid interfering with gamekeeping or farming activities.

When walking through fields of growing crops, take care to do as little damage as possible. Respect hedges and fences and leave gates as you find them.



You should not:

- disturb nesting birds when building a hide;
- shoot at birds where it may not be possible to retrieve them;
- leave dead birds lying in fields or in ditches.

You should:

- Ensure that any damaged birds or birds unfit for human consumption are disposed of responsibly.
- Retrieve wounded birds immediately after they are shot. Whenever possible, dogs should be used to ensure all shot pigeons are retrieved, particularly from thick cover, as quickly as possible. A priest or specially designed humane despatcher is recommended for despatching wounded birds.
- Always tidy up, ensuring you remove any litter, spent cartridges and decoys.
- Ensure the welfare of your dog(s).

Remember to offer the farmers and landowners some of the bag; any surplus should either be eaten, given away or sold.

3. SAFETY

Great care should be exercised when siting a hide. Make sure you are aware of all public rights of way, roads and dwellings, and that the arcs of fire are safe before starting to shoot.

Consider where your spent shot will fall; remember shot can travel some 350 yards with a strong wind behind it. Avoid shot landing on neighbouring land where you do not have permission to be (check the relevant trespass/access legislation for your country).

Boundaries must be respected, and shooting should not be undertaken without consideration of nearby buildings, houses or neighbouring land. Always consider the potential noise disturbance when shooting in the vicinity of livestock, horses and residents. Prior notification of your activity to nearby residents, horse owners, etc., may be appropriate.

Be aware of other countryside users – such as walkers, horse riders and vehicles – and take care not to cause fear or alarm or in any way endanger them. Don't forget that you may be concealed from them. It is worth considering that during the holiday periods and at weekends the likelihood of people visiting the countryside is higher.

Shooting from a hide often involves taking shots at birds approaching the decoys at or near ground level. It is vital that the pellets from your shot do not land anywhere you cannot see to be safe. In addition, consideration must be given to the possibility of pellets ricocheting off the ground. Do not shoot towards livestock.

It can be dangerous for two people to be shooting from a hide at the same time. If two people are sharing a hide, one gun should always be kept in a slip, and it must always be unloaded. The person not shooting should be behind the person shooting.

Shooting near overhead power lines or insulators can result in severe injury or death. The main points to remember are:

- Do not shoot at or near power lines or insulators. Familiarise yourself with the location of power lines and equipment on land where you shoot. Do not use lofting poles near overhead power lines – remember electricity can jump across a considerable distance.
- Be especially careful in wooded areas where power lines may not be as visible.
- Do not use the poles or towers supporting power lines as a hide and do not use them to support equipment used in your shooting activity.
- Take notice of warning signs and keep clear of electrical apparatus.

If accidental damage does occur, dial 999 or 112 for the emergency services, contact your local electricity company on 105 and KEEP WELL CLEAR.





4. GUNS AND CARTRIDGES

To achieve a consistently high kill rate, a well-fitting gun of any bore can be effective, provided it is used with the shooter's ability in mind. Additionally, the limitations of the choke/cartridge combination need to be considered.

The range at which you can expect your gun to kill pigeons cleanly is influenced by a combination of pellet size and pattern density, together with your accuracy. The pattern density required is a minimum of some 140 pellets within a standard 30" circle at your personal maximum range. To check the cartridges deliver the minimum pellet density, at least five should be patterned, counted separately and the results averaged. Traditionally, size no. 6 pellets are used but at longer ranges larger pellets may also be used.

Further information on patterning can be found on the [BASC website](#).

If shooting on or over the English or Welsh foreshore or certain Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), it will be necessary to use non-lead shot cartridges. If shooting in Scotland or Northern Ireland, non-lead shot cartridges must be used on or over wetlands.

Steel shot is the most cost-effective alternative to lead for pigeon shooting. Its lower density means you should use pellets at least one or two sizes larger (i.e., no. 4 or no. 5 if changing from lead no. 6). When using steel shot, you still need a pattern density of at least 140 pellets in a 30" circle at your personal maximum range.

Steel shot is now available with a biodegradable wad, and these have proven to be very effective. **The shooting sector is phasing out the use of lead shot and single-use plastic wads for live quarry shooting by 2025 – now is the time to try sustainable ammunition. More information can be found on the BASC website.**

Hearing protection should be worn when shooting and some form of eye protection may be appropriate.

For security reasons, a gun should never be left unattended. Remember that a gun must not be taken onto neighbouring land for any reason without permission, except when gaining access via a public right of way to your shooting land (when the gun is in a slip). In Scotland, a gun, which should be in a slip, can be carried where the person is crossing land or water to immediately access land or water or return from such, where the shooting rights are granted, held, or held in trust by any person authorised to exercise such rights.





5. THE LAW

The shooting of woodpigeons is permitted under the authority of relevant general licences issued by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) for England, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) for Wales, NatureScot for Scotland, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in Northern Ireland, and the Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture (DEFA) on the Isle of Man.

No individual application is required for these licences; however, it is essential that you comply fully with the terms and conditions of any relevant general licence. Details of general licences can be found at basc.org.uk/gl

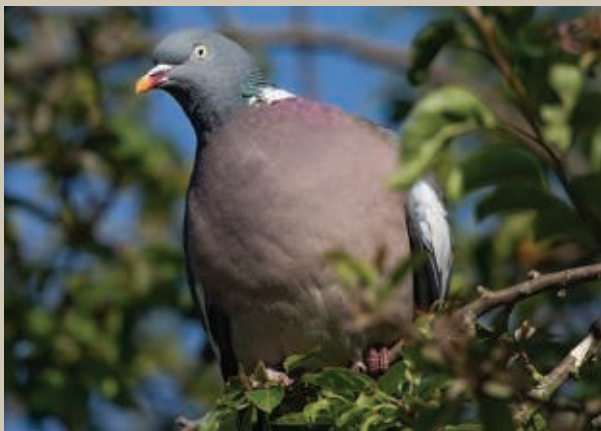
General licences authorise the control of specified species for defined purposes listed on the relevant licence, such as 'preventing serious damage'. If a species, location or reason for control is not covered by a general licence, an individual licence must be applied for from the relevant authority.

Depending on which home country you are operating in, on certain designated sites the use of a general licence may not be applicable (there are details around any such site restrictions listed on each relevant licence). Permission (known as 'consent') from the relevant government agency may also be required.

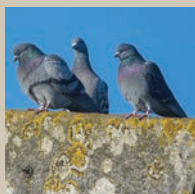
The species listed on the general licences and the purposes for which the licences are issued, can vary between countries. BASC strongly recommends that anyone wishing to control woodpigeons under the authority of a general licence should read the advice available online at basc.org.uk/gl

Note: Wild-living, former racing and homing pigeons often fly with feral pigeons, but these birds are strictly protected as they are still regarded as the property of their original owner. While they normally have leg rings to show their ownership, identification in the field can be difficult. **If in doubt, do not shoot.**

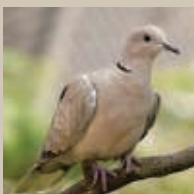
6. FIELD IDENTIFICATION



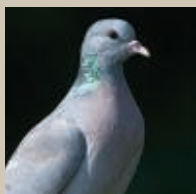
Woodpigeon



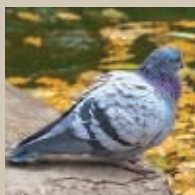
Feral pigeon



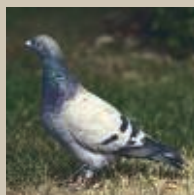
Collared dove



Stock dove



Rock dove



Racing pigeon



Turtle dove

Woodpigeon (authorised for control under general licences)

The largest of our pigeon species can be seen singly and in small and large flocks. They are predominantly grey with a white patch on each side of the neck of adults, and a characteristic broad white bar on the wings of both adults and juveniles. This is one of the best ways of identifying the woodpigeon in the field, as no other pigeon or dove has these wing bars. Wings often make a clattering noise when they take flight.

Feral pigeon (authorised for control under general licences)

Similar to the stock dove (see below) but highly variable in colour. Usually in flocks which are often found in and around farms and other buildings, and near urban areas.

Collared dove (not authorised for control under general licences)

Much smaller than the woodpigeon, slender, and grey/sandy in colour, collared doves have a wide terminal white band on their tail and a black neck band bordered with white. Usually seen in pairs or small flocks and rather tamer than other species of pigeon. In flight, the dark primaries contrast with the light plumage. Juvenile birds lack the black neck band.

Stock dove (not authorised for control under general licences)

Smaller and sleeker than the woodpigeon and fly with a faster wingbeat. Their plumage is rather uniformly grey with green patches on the neck and partial black wing bars which can be seen at close range. Often in small flocks mixing freely with woodpigeons, they can be distinguished by their smaller size, darker colour, and absence of white patches or bars. The stock dove is often mistakenly called the 'blue rock'. Great care must be taken, as these birds often fly with woodpigeons and feral pigeons and come readily to decoys.

Rock dove (not authorised for control under general licences)

Similar to the stock dove but paler and with a pronounced white upper rump and two black bars on the wings. Flight is very fast. Usually occurs in small flocks on the western coasts of Scotland.

Racing pigeon (not authorised for control under general licences)

Very similar in appearance to feral pigeons. Occurs both singly and in a flock. Identifying characteristics can include presence of leg rings, and their fast, straight, often low flight paths.

Turtle dove (not authorised for control under general licences)

Much less common and much darker than the collared dove, especially the wings which have brown-black patterned feathers. They have white patches with black neck stripes (not in juveniles). The tail is very dark with white edging.

7. TRAINING

BASC runs a one-day course called 'Introduction to Woodpigeon Shooting'.

Contact the BASC training and education department on 01244 573 018 for further details on available courses.

8. INSURANCE

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

9. FURTHER INFORMATION

For further help and advice, call your BASC regional office. Contact details can be found on the BASC website: basc.org.uk/in-your-area

Suggested further reading:

- *Code of Good Shooting Practice*
- *BASC's Handbook of Shooting*
- *BASC's Shotgun Safety Code of Practice*
- *BASC's Trapping Pest Birds Code of Practice*

Useful website addresses:

- basc.org.uk
- basc.org.uk/lead
- basc.org.uk/gl

Always follow the appropriate code of practice for the type of shooting you are engaged in.

BASC is the largest representative body for sporting shooting in the UK.

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