



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

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*) is both the UK's major agricultural bird pest and one of the most popular species providing sporting shooting. It is legal to shoot the bird throughout the year under the current general licence arrangements. The woodpigeon produces high-quality meat for all to enjoy.

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

### **The 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. You must ensure that you have established safe arcs of fire.
2. You must clearly identify the quarry before shooting.
3. It is your responsibility to ensure you abide by the law.
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 (20 to 35 yards). To achieve the best results requires reconnaissance, considerable patience and knowledge of field craft.

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, the dog and equipment, and should have as level a floor as possible leaving sufficient room to shoot safely.

### **Flighting**

Shooting pigeons on flight lines 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. Be ready to move if flight lines change.

### **Roost shooting**

Normally, during the 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. As it will be almost dark before the shoot ends it is important to retrieve wounded birds immediately after they are shot.

### **In the field**

Permission from the relevant landowner/farmer should be sought for the following actions:

- 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
- Before using cartridges with plastic wads

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

Check with the gamekeeper/farmer to avoid interfering with game or farming.

When walking through fields with 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. 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.
- leave dead birds lying in fields or in ditches. Any damaged birds or birds unfit for human consumption should be disposed of responsibly.

### **You should:**

- remember to take water for the dog(s) especially in summer.
- always tidy up ensuring to remove any litter, spent cartridges and decoys.

Farmers and landowners should always be offered some of the bag and any surplus should either be eaten, given to friends or sold to a game dealer.

### 3. SAFETY

Great care should be exercised when siting a hide to make sure you are aware of all footpaths, bridleways, 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 No.6 lead 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.) Farm and other boundaries must be respected and shooting should not be undertaken without consideration of 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 or other 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 taking into account that during the summer 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 so it is vital that your shot does not end up anywhere you cannot see to be safe. In addition care must be taken over the possibilities 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 unloaded. To ensure safety 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. Avoid the use of 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 and contact your local Electricity Company and KEEP WELL CLEAR.

## 4. FIELD IDENTIFICATION

### Woodpigeon

The largest of our pigeon species can occur both singly and in small and large flocks. They are predominantly grey with a white patch on each side of the neck of adults, and characteristic broad white bar on wing 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

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

### Collared Dove – PROTECTED IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Much smaller than woodpigeon, slender and grey to sandy coloured, with wide terminal white band on tail and 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 – PROTECTED

They are smaller and sleeker than woodpigeon and fly with a faster wing beat. 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 woodpigeon, they can be distinguished by their smaller size, darker colour, and absence of white patches or bars.

### Rock Dove – PROTECTED

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





### **Racing pigeon – PROTECTED**

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

### **Turtle Dove – PROTECTED**

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



## **5. GUNS AND CARTRIDGES**

To achieve a consistently high kill rate a well-fitting gun of any bore can be effective, provided it is used within the shooter's ability. 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 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. At least five cartridges should be patterned, counted separately and the results averaged, to check they deliver the minimum pellet density. Traditionally no.6 is used but at longer ranges larger pellets may 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 (SSSI) 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 two sizes larger (i.e. no. 4 rather than lead no. 6). You still need a pattern density of at least 140 of such pellets. Note that steel shot normally comes in plastic wads and that farmers may not want them on their land.

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

For reasons of security, 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 (and 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 or by any person authorised to exercise such rights.

## 6. THE LAW

Currently the shooting of woodpigeon is controlled by general licences issued by Natural England (NE) for England, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) for Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) for Scotland and in Northern Ireland by the Department of the Environment (DOE) No individual application is required for any licence; however it is important that you comply fully with the terms and conditions of the relevant general licence. Details of how to download your relevant licenses can be found here <http://basc.org.uk/shooting/general-licences/>

The general licences authorise shooting for specific purposes such as: preventing serious damage to crops, vegetables, fruit and foodstuffs for livestock, and for the purpose of preserving public health or public safety. In England, Wales and Scotland the shooting of collared dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) and the feral pigeon (descended from *Columba livia*) is also permitted all year round. The stock dove (*Columba oenas*), rock dove (*Columba livia*) and turtle dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) are all protected species and may not be shot at any time.

In Northern Ireland all doves are protected at all times. Woodpigeon and feral pigeon are listed on the general licences but under the terms of these licences cannot be shot at night or on Sundays.

On the Isle of Man the woodpigeon can be shot under the terms and conditions of their general licence for the prevention of damage and disease only, the feral pigeon for public health and public safety and the turtle dove is fully protected.

The stock dove is often mistakenly called the 'blue rock' and great care must be taken as these birds often fly with woodpigeons and feral pigeons and come readily to decoys.

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 so, if in doubt, do not shoot.

## 7. TRAINING

A Lantra Award Level 2 "Wild Game Meat Hygiene" certificate is required to sell pigeons to an Approved Game Handling Establishment.

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

Contact BASC Sporting Services department on 01244 573 018 for further details.

## 8. INSURANCE

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

<http://basc.org.uk/join-basc/basc-members-insurance/>

## 9. FURTHER INFORMATION

Remember that good relations with landowners and farmers are essential, not only for the future of woodpigeon shooting, but also for many other shooting opportunities.

### BASC recommended reading

- *The Pigeon Shooter*; John Batley, first published 1996 by Swan Hill Press
- *Pigeon Shooting*; Archie Coats, first published 1963 by Andre Deutsch
- *Shooting Pigeons*; John Humphreys, published 1988 by David & Charles
- *The Book of the Woodpigeon*; Colin Willock, published 1995 by Colt Books
- *The Woodpigeon. The Ultimate Quarry*; Peter Theobald and Paul Smith, published 1996 Ultimate Press
- *Woodpigeons, Woodpigeon Shooting and Agriculture*; John Harradine and Nicola Reynolds, published 1997 by BASC
- *Will's Pigeon Shooting*, published 2012 by Quiller
- Code of Good Shooting Practice
- *The BASC Handbook of Shooting*, first published 1983 by Quiller
- *BASC Shotgun Safety Code of Practice*
- *BASC Respect for Quarry Code of Practice*
- *BASC Trapping Pest Birds Code of Practice*

**[www.basc.org.uk](http://www.basc.org.uk)**

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.**

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