



Benefits of General Licences (England)



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Until 25th April 2019, people could use three general licences issued by Natural England (NE) to kill or capture certain wild birds (including removing or destroying eggs and nests) to:

- prevent the spread of disease or stop serious damage to livestock, food, crops, growing timber, fisheries or inland water (GL04).
- preserve public health and safety (GL05).
- conserve wild birds and flora and fauna (GL06).

With these licences revoked by NE, the UK now faces the threat of:

- A fall in populations of wild birds like the red-listed curlew, when their young are predated by corvids.
- Higher food prices because of:
 - More livestock being killed or seriously injured such as newborn lambs being attacked by crows and other corvids.
 - Lower crop yields as more damage is done to crops including brassicas, peas, cereals and potatoes by pigeons, corvids and geese.
- Increased risk to the health of people and animals from problem species such as geese and pigeons which can transmit disease, toxins and cause illness.
- Increased risk to human health and safety from more aircraft bird strikes, damage to buildings from nesting birds, and fouling of public spaces.
- Public sites like football grounds, arenas and sports stadia failing to meet the standards within their safety certificates (which they require to operate), if they require the control of wild birds to reduce disease and/or the risk of slipping and falling.

The general licences covered control of these wild birds:

Feral pigeon
Woodpigeon
Collared dove
Crow
Jackdaw
Jay
Magpie
Rook
Lesser black-backed gull
Herring gull
Canada goose
Egyptian goose
Monk parakeet
Ring-necked parakeet
Sacred ibis
Indian house-crow

Headline facts and figures

- BASC estimates woodpigeon damage to brassica, pea and oilseed crops in the UK costs around **£115 million** annually.
- Predator control (including control of crows) has been shown to lead to an average **threefold** increase in the breeding success of lapwing and curlew (both red-listed).
- Crows and magpies use the begging calls of songbird chicks to find and eat them. For blackcaps, jays can be responsible for **46%** of nest losses.
- Red-listed curlew have declined by **65%** between 1970 and 2015 across the UK and their breeding attempts are at risk from predators including corvids.
- Up to **63%** of nightjar nest failures can be due to corvid predation.
- A study in Scotland found that **17%** of dead lambs were attacked by corvids when they were alive, and corvids attacked the eyes of ewes who had rolled onto their backs and could not right themselves.
- Bacteria found in Canada geese droppings pose a health risk to humans and can survive and multiply in droppings for **up to a month**.
- Livestock feed can become contaminated by **up to 42** wild bird droppings per square metre per month and transmit disease and infection.
- Wild bird droppings can cause disease, infection and illness in **humans, livestock and domestic animals** like chickens and dogs.
- Urban pigeons and gulls nest around our homes and businesses, and **over 80%** of pigeon and gull nesting sites test positive for the disease cryptococcosis.
- **Up to 50%** of urban pigeons can carry *C. jejuni*, the most common cause of food poisoning.
- A Civil Aviation Authority report shows that in the UK between 2012-2016, pigeons and doves were responsible for **800** reported aircraft bird strikes or near misses, crows were responsible for **300** and gulls over **1,300**.
- BASC estimates that without shooting, aircraft strikes or near-misses from woodpigeon could be expected to increase by **7%** per year.
- Pest control by UK shooters amounted to the equivalent of **3,100** full-time jobs annually.
- A pest control business has reported losses of **£1,000** per day after the general licences were revoked.
- Wild birds nesting in buildings and structures can cause **safety issues** including structural damage and power outages that could lead to increased fire risk.

Consequences of removing the three general licences

Crop damage and destruction

- Wild birds feeding on agricultural crops reduce yields which means food prices could rise.
- Woodpigeon is a widely known major crop pest. Corvids, Egyptian geese and ring-necked parakeets can also cause severe damage to crops including brassicas, cereals, potatoes and oilseed rape.^{1,2,3}
- Growers estimated their annual financial loss from woodpigeons at £125/hectare for oilseed rape, £250/hectare for peas and £330-£1,250 for brassicas.¹⁰
- BASC estimates woodpigeon damage to oilseed, brassica and pea crops in the UK costs around £115 million annually.^a There are no comparable data for cereal crops, but they account for over 80% of arable crops by area.⁴
- The NFU estimates that without control the damage to oilseed rape crops from pigeons in East Anglia alone would amount to more than £45 million.⁵
- There are over five million breeding pairs of woodpigeon across the UK⁶ and their population increased by 134% between 1970 and 2011,⁷ partly due to increased overwinter survival because of crop availability.⁸
- On Islay alone, an increasing Canada goose population has been estimated to result in significant additional year round damage to crops.⁹
- Pest and predator control complements other wildlife management techniques and can increase their effectiveness. For example, combining shooting with visual scaring methods can maximise the deterrent effect on pigeons raiding crops.¹⁰

^a The average cost of woodpigeon damage was £125/hectare for oilseed, £250/hectare for peas and (using a midpoint) £790/hectare for brassicas.¹⁰ In 2018 there were 627,000 hectares of oilseed in the UK according to [Defra](#) and in 2014 [Defra](#) reported there were 54,000 hectares of legumes and 29,000 hectares of brassicas in the UK.

Declining populations of wild birds

Bird species in this section are shown in the colour that represents their [UK conservation status](#). Under this scheme breeding and wintering birds are assessed against a set of objective criteria and placed on the green, amber or red list - indicating an increasing level of conservation concern.

- Corvids (like crow, jackdaw or magpie) and gulls are avian predators whose numbers are increasing.¹¹ They take mainly eggs or small chicks of wild birds⁴⁷ and can even use nestling begging calls as a cue to find bird nests.¹²
- The nests of upland ground-nesting waders like **curlew**, **lapwing**, **redshank** and **golden plover** are particularly vulnerable to nest predation by corvids. Reducing predators like crows can increase breeding numbers of **lapwing**, **curlew**, **golden plover** and **red grouse**, which decline in the absence of predator control.¹³
- Predator control (including control of crows) has been shown to lead to an average threefold increase in **lapwing**, **curlew**, **golden plover**, **red grouse**, and **meadow pipit** breeding success.¹³
- The UK supports around a quarter of the global breeding population of red-listed **curlew**. However their breeding attempts are at risk from predators including corvids, and curlews have declined by 65% between 1970 and 2015 across the UK.^{13,14,15}
- **Golden plover** breeding on a moor in north-east Scotland declined to extinction in the 1970s/1980s, suffering heavy losses mainly due to predation.¹⁶ Between 1981 and 1984, 71% of golden plover nests were predated upon, two-thirds by crows and gulls.¹⁷ **Lapwings** have been found to decline most in areas with the highest carrion crow abundance, and crow predation might be a key factor in driving population declines.¹⁸
- Predator control improves nest success in songbirds. Systematic predator reduction (including magpie and crow) had a positive effect on **blackbird**, **chaffinch**, **dunnock**, **song thrush** and **yellowhammer**.¹⁹ Jays can be responsible for 46% of nest losses in **blackcap**.²⁰
- A study by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust showed that hedgerow-nesting songbirds were 10 percent down on sites where predator control was not used.²¹ Also, breeding numbers of small perching birds (passerines) increase when game management including predator control takes place.²²
- The key cause of **nightjar** nest loss at study sites in Dorset was predation (60% of all nests failed, 93% of those due to predation). Evidence suggested that 63% of failed nests were predated by corvids.²³
- Ring-necked parakeets may displace native species and/or compete with them for food or nest sites, impacting **nuthatch** species.³
- When combined with habitat management, predator control can maximise productivity and help counteract climate change impacts in **black grouse**.²⁴

Aircraft bird strikes

- A Civil Aviation Authority report shows that in the UK between 2012-2016, pigeons and doves were responsible for 800 reported aircraft bird strikes or near misses, crows were responsible for 300 and gulls over 1,300.²⁵
- BASC estimates that without shooting, aircraft strikes or near misses from woodpigeon could be expected to increase by 7% per year.^b

Human disease and illness

- Breathing dust or water droplets containing contaminated bird (e.g. pigeon, dove, parakeet) droppings can lead to bacterial infections in humans such as Psittacosis and Salmonella.^{26,27,28}
- Urban pigeons and gulls nest around our homes and businesses, and over 80% of pigeon and gull nesting sites test positive for cryptococcosis.²⁹
- A cryptococcal disease linked to pigeon droppings was a "contributing factor" in the death of a child at a Glasgow hospital.³⁰
- Up to 50% of urban pigeons can carry *C. jejuni*, the most common cause of food poisoning.³⁹
- Bacteria found in Canada geese droppings pose a health risk to humans and can survive and multiply in droppings for up to a month.^{31,32}
- Gulls can transmit pathogens and parasites through contamination of water sources.³³
- Pigeons can transmit dermatitis and pruritus via red blood mites and the pigeon tick – both of which can migrate into human living space.^{34,35}
- Ground staff of major stadiums and arenas are concerned that without the ability to control wild birds they will not be able to operate within the terms of their safety certificates^c and games or events will be cancelled.
- The Health and Safety Executive state that owners of sites and venues have a legal duty to make sure they are safe for people working there,³⁶ and bird droppings require guidance for harmful micro-organisms to be followed under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations.³⁷ Bird droppings can also constitute a slip hazard.

^b The annual woodpigeon bag in the UK is at least 1.1 million as estimated by [PACEC](#) and the [RSPB](#) lists the population as 5.4 million pairs. This equates to around 16.5 million birds and a bag of 6.66%.

^c Local authorities are required to issue safety certificates to designated sports grounds – see [Sports Grounds Safety Authority](#) guidance

Animal (including livestock) disease and illness

- Livestock feed can become contaminated by up to 42 wild bird droppings per square metre per month which can pass diseases and infections such as paratuberculosis, salmonella and cryptosporidiosis.³⁸
- Pigeons can pass bacterial infections to other birds, domestic dogs and livestock.^{39,40}
- Psittacosis has been described in many species of birds including parakeets, pigeons and doves. Infections can cause economic loss to the poultry and pet bird retail industry.²⁸
- Wild geese can spread egg drop syndrome to domestic stock, including chickens.⁴¹

Livestock injury and death

- The UK is the largest producer of sheep meat in Europe. The total value of the sheep industry in the UK was £2,216m in 2015.⁴²
- Crows and other corvids can cause injury or death to young lambs as reported on frequently in the national media.^{43,44,45}
- A study in Argyll, Scotland, found that 17% of dead lambs were attacked by corvids when they were alive. In addition, corvids were reported to attack the eyes of ewes who had rolled onto their backs and could not right themselves.⁴⁶ Corvids can also take the eggs and young of gamebirds.⁴⁷

Damage to buildings and structures

- Gulls can cause damage to buildings through nesting material and waste.³³
- Ring-necked parakeets have been known to damage buildings and structures when nesting, and if nesting material gets wet power outages can occur³ or fire risk could increase.

Public nuisance

- Other issues arising from birds that were on the general licences can include noise, fouling, bird aggression and nest building.

Job and income loss

- It is estimated that pest control in the UK by shooters amounts to the equivalent of 3,100 full time jobs annually.⁴⁸
- A roofer and pest bird contractor claims he lost around £1,000 per day after the general licences were revoked.⁴⁹

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Contacts

These departments are here to help you.
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