

Bulletin: Wild Bird Control General Licences



November 2025

Dear stakeholders,

Defra has transferred responsibility to Natural England for issuing the three general licences (GLs 40-42), permitting wild bird control for the purposes of:

- Conservation
([Wild birds: licence to kill or take for conservation purposes \(GL40\) - GOV.UK](#))
- Preserving public health and safety
([Wild birds: licence to kill or take for public health or safety \(GL41\) - GOV.UK](#))
- Preventing serious agricultural damage
([Wild birds: licence to kill or take to prevent serious damage \(GL42\) - GOV.UK](#))

The current licences (linked above) were issued by Defra on 1 January 2024 and will expire on 31 December 2025. Natural England is preparing to issue the next set of these licences on 1 January 2026.

We recognise the importance of providing as much clarity as possible, as early as possible, for users of these general licences. Below we highlight the changes you can expect to see in the 2026 licences.

Natural England has conducted a light-touch review, taking into account the latest evidence, our wider licensing approach, and the previous review work led by Defra. As a result, we are making the following changes:

Structure and wording: The licences will be brought in line with other Natural England licences, with some improvements to the clarity and layout of conditions and advice.

Licence expiry date: These three general licences will last for one year and will end on 31 December 2026. Since they're being moved to Natural England and updated, we will be issuing them for a single year so it's easier to make changes if needed after this time. We'll keep this timeframe under review.

Methods you can use under the licences: We're reinstating the ability to use artificial light for feral pigeon control under GL41 (preserving public health and safety). We'll also add a note to the standard licence conditions for trapping wild birds ([GL33](#)), flagging that decoy birds must be added to the poultry register.

European sites: Small changes to the safe working distances to avoid disturbance to certain bird species, resulting in small changes to some European site buffer zones.

Birds that can be protected under GL40: GL40 permits the control of certain target species for purposes including the conservation of wild birds of conservation concern. Previously this licence has referred to red- and amber-listed bird species. From 2026, the licence will include a more refined list of species which this licence can be used to protect. We believe that this will be clearer for licence users.

The list of woodland bird species for which jay can be controlled remains unchanged from the current version of GL40.

New condition to reduce the risk of avian influenza transmission: In light of the ongoing avian influenza outbreak, Natural England has considered potential risks of increased avian influenza transmission as a result of licensed activities.

For these three general licences, we are adding a new condition that users must avoid excessive disturbance of certain species or types of birds associated with protected sites. The licences include advice on what this means in practice and allow users flexibility to determine how to avoid excessive disturbance on their site. Importantly, there are no locations or times when licensed action is specifically prohibited.

Further Information

Provided overleaf are a Q&A, some new definitions to be used in the licences; the list of birds that can be protected under GL40; and planned wording of the new condition and advice to reduce risk of avian influenza transmission. Please note that, while we are not anticipating any further significant changes to the 2026 licences at this stage, they remain draft and subject to change until their publication on 1 January 2026.

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Q&A

Why is Red Grouse listed as a bird of conservation concern?

Although Red Grouse and some other birds on the list are classed as 'green-listed', Natural England has included them on this licence because of expert opinion that their favourable status may depend on continued predator control. Also, in 2024 the Red Grouse was formally recognised as a species endemic to Great Britain (& Ireland) found nowhere else in the world.

Does bird control spread bird flu and is a condition needed?

Natural England has considered the potential for licensed activities to result in bird flu spreading in wild bird populations, beyond expected spread in the absence of those activities. We consider the risk of increased spread is high enough in certain circumstances to require measures to reduce that risk.

Will I be able to see the links to related information in a printed version of the licence?

Yes. Users wishing to print the licences should use the 'Print this page' option on the left-hand side of the webpage. This will show all links in full, allowing you to look up the information as you require.

Draft new condition and advice to reduce risk of avian influenza transmission

For awareness, the inverted commas (") temporarily used below indicate where we'll likely substituted these with footnote links to definitions words and terms. For transparency, these draft definitions are also shared below.

Condition 6: When you are operating under this licence, avoid displacing wild birds to beyond their 'home range'. This condition only applies to any of the following types of wild birds: –

Any 'significant flocks' of 'wildfowl' at any time of the year

Any significant flocks of 'waders' at any time of the year

Any significant flocks of gulls at any time of the year

Any breeding colonies of 'seabirds'

Any harrier species

This condition only applies to operations on or 'next to' Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

To comply with this Condition, follow definitions and guidance provided in 'Advice for Condition 6'.

Advice for Condition 6: restrictions to reduce the spread of bird flu

Bird disturbance as a method to support licensed activities continues to be allowed under this licence. However, for operations on or next to protected sites for wild birds listed in Condition 6, disturbance must not directly result in those birds dispersing beyond their home range. Causing birds to mix or scatter to places they would not normally go to should be avoided. This is to reduce the risk of spreading bird flu among the wild bird populations of most conservation importance.

You may therefore need to manage operations to reduce or avoid disturbing these birds. Disturbance distances are not given for Condition 6 instead you will need to assess your proposed operation in each situation appropriately in order to comply with the condition.

Use [MAGIC](#) to view a map of all SSSIs in England. To do this click on 'Map Layers' – 'Designations' – 'Land-Based Designations' – 'Statutory' – then on the list click Sites of Special Scientific Interest (England).

Definitions

Stakeholder representatives have confirmed their preference is to retain the existing numbered footnotes to jump to definitions of words and terms used in these licences.

The new definitions below relate to the new bird flu licence condition. They are worded purposefully to allow licence users to exercise some flexibility and to be proportionate when complying with the enforceable commitment to avoid excessive disturbance.

'Home range' is defined as places that a bird routinely moves within on a day-to-day basis, which can mean its breeding territory, or the places it, and other birds it usually associates with, go to feed, roost and rest.

'Significant flock' is defined as any relatively large number of birds close together. In this licence when referring to wildfowl, waders and gulls, this usually means a flock of more than a hundred birds.

'Wildfowl' are defined as any bird species of the family *Anatidae*, i.e. all wild ducks, geese and swans

'Waders' are defined as any bird species of the orders *Charadriiformes* and *Pelecaniformes*, including Avocet, all egrets, herons, Oystercatcher, plovers, sandpipers and similar species.

'Seabirds' are defined as any bird adapted for life in the marine environment, including all auks, Cormorant, Fulmar, Gannet, gulls, petrels, Shag and all shearwaters

'Next to', when used in this licence as 'next to protected sites', is defined as any place where birds of that protected site could be disturbed by activities permitted under this licence. Next to can be the same as buffer zones stated in Condition 5 for those protected sites listed.

Anticipated list of birds that can be protected under GL40

Woodland birds of conservation concern

The control of Jay is limited to the protection of woodland birds of conservation concern only.

Species	Scientific name
Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula
Dunnock	Prunella modularis
Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris
Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus
Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes
Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Dryobates minor
Marsh Tit	Poecile palustris
Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos
Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca
Redpoll	Acanthis flammea
Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos
Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus
Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata
Tawny Owl	Strix aluco
Tree Pipit	Anthus trivialis
Willow Tit	Poecile montanus
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus
Wood Warbler	Phylloscopus sibilatrix
Woodcock	Scolopax rusticola

All birds of conservation concern

Species	Scientific name
Arctic Tern	Sterna paradisaea
Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta
Baillon's Crake	Zapornia pusilla
Barnacle Goose	Branta leucopsis
Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica
Bearded Tit	Panurus biarmicus
Bee-eater	Merops apiaster
Bewick's Swan	Cygnus columbianus
Bittern	Botaurus stellaris
Black Grouse	Lyrurus tetrix
Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus

Black-necked Grebe	Podiceps nigricollis
Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus
Bluethroat	Luscinia svecica
Brent Goose	Branta bernicla
Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula
Caspian Gull	Larus cachinnans
Cattle Egret	Ardea ibis
Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs
Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax
Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus
Common Gull	Larus canus
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos
Common Tern	Sterna hirundo
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra
Corncrake	Crex crex
Crane	Grus grus
Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus
Curlew	Numenius arquata
Dartford Warbler	Curruca undatae
Dipper	Cinclus cinclus
Dotterel	Charadrius morinellus
Dunlin	Calidris alpina
Dunnock	Prunella modularis
Eider	Somateria mollissima
Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris
Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis
Gannet	Morus bassanus
Garden Warbler	Sylvia borin
Garganey	Spatula querquedula
Glaucous Gull	Larus hyperboreus
Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus
Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus
Grasshopper Warbler	Locustella naevia
Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus
Great Bustard	Otis tarda
Great White Egret	Ardea alba
Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus
Greenfinch	Chloris chloris
Greenshank	Tringa nebularia
Grey Partridge	Perdix perdix
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola
Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea
Greylag Goose	Anser anser
Guillemot	Uria aalge*

Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes
Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus
Herring Gull	Larus argentatus
Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus
House Martin	Delichon urbicum
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus
Iceland Gull	Larus glaucoides
Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus
Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla
Knot	Calidris canutus
Lapland Bunting	Calcarius lapponicus
Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus*
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Dryobates minor
Linnet	Linaria cannabina
Little Bittern	Botaurus minutus (formerly Ixobrychus minutus)
Little Ringed Plover	Thinornis dubius (formerly Charadrius dubius)
Little Tern	Sternula albifrons
Long-eared Owl	Asio otus
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos
Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus
Marsh Tit	Poecile palustris
Marsh Warbler	Acrocephalus palustris
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis
Mediterranean Gull	Ichthyaetus melanocephalus
Merlin	Falco columbarius
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus
Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus
Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus
Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos
Nightjar	Caprimulgus europaeus
Osprey	Pandion haliaetus
Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus
Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca
Pink-footed Goose	Anser brachyrhynchus
Pintail	Anas acuta
Pochard	Aythya ferina
Puffin	Fratercula arctica
Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea
Purple Sandpiper	Calidris maritima
Quail	Coturnix coturnix
Razorbill	Alca torda
Red Grouse	Lagopus scotica
Red-backed Shrike	Lanius collurio
Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator

Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>
Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>
Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i> (formerly <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>)
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Shore Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Spotted Crake	<i>Porzana porzana</i>
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>
Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
Taiga Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>
White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>

Wigeon	Mareca penelope
Willow Tit	Poecile montanus
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus
Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola
Wood Warbler	Phylloscopus sibilatrix
Woodcock	Scolopax rusticola
Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes
Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava
Yellow-browed Warbler	Phylloscopus inornatus
Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella
Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis