

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: 'LIMIT THE SHOOTING SEASON OF WOODCOCK'

Petitions Committee Debate, Westminster Hall

Monday 27 February 2023

Key points

- **The global population of woodcock, 10-26 million individuals, is stable. The UK hosts 1.4 million winter migrants (Musgrove et al. RSPB, BTO) with peak arrival during November and departure in late March. The winter migrant population is increasing.**
- **Woodcock were rare or absent as breeding birds until the mid-19th century, when extensive planting of first lowland coverts and then, in the 20th century, conifer plantations led to an increase in numbers. There is currently a resident British population of 55,000 male woodcock in spring, equating to about 180,000 individuals in autumn. The UK breeding population is estimated to have declined by 29% in 10 years. The reasons for this decline include the maturing of conifer plantations and changes to management practices such as coppicing, which means there is a reduced, less diverse shrub layer, and loss of open space for woodcock to breed in.**
- **For obvious reasons woodcock have traditionally been shot after the main body of migrants arrive and there is now voluntary restraint in place for woodcock not to be shot before 1 December. There is no evidence that any significant harvest of birds is being taken before that date and no evidence that shooting is the cause for the decline in our resident population. Given that shooting does not take place to any significant degree before 1 December and the current harvest of migrant woodcock is clearly sustainable there is no need for regulatory change. Any action should be focussed on improving habitat for breeding woodcock.**
- **Extensive research has been carried out by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) into this area. Ongoing research includes their 'Habitat for breeding woodcock'.**
- **In England and Wales, the open season for woodcock (during which it is lawful for them to be shot) is from 1 October to 31 January.**

Woodcock population

Approximately 1.4 million woodcock migrate to Britain and Ireland each winter, mainly from Scandinavia, Finland, the Baltic States and Russia, where results from a joint Franco-Russian survey indicate that breeding populations appear stable. A large percentage of the British population are overwintering birds that migrate to northern and eastern Europe to breed during the Summer.

There is a resident British population of 55,000 male woodcock in spring, equating to about 180,000 individuals in autumn. We assume an equal number of females, 60% annual survival and an average of 1.8 chicks fledged per pair. ([GWCT Breeding Woodcock Survey 2013](#))

The decline of UK population

For resident British woodcock, range contraction was detected between 1970 and 1990, and further range contraction and population decline has become evident since then. It is estimated that the native population in the UK has declined by 29% in the last 10 years. The population and range contraction is considerable, and as a result woodcock have been on the red list of Birds of Conservation Concern in the UK since 2015.

The preferred breeding habitat of woodcock is deciduous or mixed woodland, but conifer plantations are used up to the thicket stage, as are large patches of bracken in upland areas. Wide rides and small clearings (1-3 hectares) in large woodlands provide easy access and flight paths, and an understorey of brambles, hazel, holly or bracken is important, to provide cover from avian predators.

Woodcock were rare or absent as breeding birds until about 1850, but by 1930 they were breeding in practically every mainland British county. The initial increase was probably due to the extensive planting of woods managed for pheasant shooting. The increase continued with the planting of large conifer forests in the 1950s and 1960s across Scotland, Wales and East Anglia.

GWCT research highlights that the main reason for their decline is a change in their habitat. There are numerous reasons for this change. The maturity of the aforementioned planted woodland is seen as being the largest contributor; rising deer numbers are also of concern, due to their excessive browsing of vegetation, young shrubs and sapling trees. This is increasing the fragmentation of woodlands, as well as changing the UK woodland structure.

The GWCT is currently conducting a pioneering tagging project to understand woodcock migration better ([Woodcock Watch](#)).

Shooting

Shooting contributes £2.4billion to the UK economy per annum and people who shoot contribute 3.9 million workdays on conservation every year – the equivalent of 16,000 full-time conservation jobs ([PACEC: The Value of Shooting 2014](#)). Some of these funds and conservation days are put towards the management of land for woodcock. Without the financial incentive, shoot owners/managers would not contribute to the management of their habitat, fuelling fears that the native population would drop further.

There is already a voluntary restraint on the shooting of woodcock until the 1 December. Given both the native and migrant populations and the fact that shooting does not take place before 1 December, there is no need for regulatory change, as the harvest of woodcock is sustainable and does not endanger the sustainability of either the native or migrant populations.

There is therefore no evidence that shooting has a detrimental impact on the woodcock population or that changes to the existing season are necessary.

The Countryside Alliance calls for:

- Continued support for a voluntary restraint for Woodcock not to be shot before 1 December.
- No regulatory change.
- Further research into woodcock populations and solutions to habitat loss to support and increase the native breeding population.

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