

Information for shooting businesses wishing to release gamebirds on Special Protected Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) in 2024

Defra is aware that the shooting sector is starting to plan their business for the 2024 shooting season. The information below has been provided to offer clarity to shooting businesses whilst the avian influenza (AI) outbreak continues, subject to the views of new Ministers.

Stakeholders should feel assured that the Government supports the value of gamebird shooting for all the benefits it brings to individuals, the environment and the rural economy whilst also understanding the need to protect designated sites. Please consider how best to align planning for the 2024 shooting season with the 2024 licensing process and timelines for shoots releasing gamebirds on, or within 500m, of Special Protected Areas for birds.

1. Gamebird releases on SACs and/or within 500m of their boundary (aka the buffer zone) will continue to be covered by the GL43 licence in 2024. You must not release common pheasants or red-legged partridges on SACs or within their buffer zone under GL43 if the site is also designated as or within the buffer zone of a SPA without a licence.
2. The potential transmission of avian influenza continues to pose a risk to SPA populations of wild birds. As such, release of gamebirds on SPAs and/or within the buffer zone of a SPA will require a separate licence outside of GL43 for releases in 2024.
3. Magic Maps is a publicly accessible mapping tool that can be used to view protected areas, their boundaries, and 500m buffer zones. Go to Magic Maps (<https://magic.defra.gov.uk>) and select the following options from the left-hand menu: Designations > Land-based designations > Statutory > Special Protection Areas (England). To view the 500m buffer zone you should also select 'SSSI Impact Risk Zones' from 'Statutory' options list. Impact risk zones will show as a series of purple lines around protected areas at 0m, 50m, 200m, and 500m from the site boundary.
4. **No shoot, whether a licence was granted or refused in the 2023 season, should assume that they will have the same outcome in the 2024 season.** We recommend that shoots in SPAs or their buffers pause ordering their birds and adapt their business planning until a firm policy decision is made.
5. Any shoots that wish to release gamebirds on/in the buffer of European sites (SACs and SPAs) in 2024 will be subject to the maximum thresholds allowed under GL43. This applies a maximum threshold of 700 birds/ha in the site and 1000 birds/ha in the buffer zone. **Shoots should consider this when placing their orders to game farms if they choose to do so before a finalised policy decision is announced.**
6. Applicants should, wherever possible, move their release pens outside of the SPA and its buffer. Defra understands that this option is not viable for all shoots.
7. Defra will continue to be the licensing authority in 2024 and are reviewing the 2023 process with the aim of creating a more efficient approach for next year.
8. Defra will confirm the licensing approach for 2024 before the end of February 2024. We will aim to advance this timeline wherever possible. We need to carefully respond to the emerging evidence, changing risks of AI, and statutory advice from NE regarding our obligations under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 in advance of issuing any licences. This could affect timescales.
9. Defra is exploring the suitability of SPA-specific general licences and, where not suitable, individual licences. The type of licence approach taken will be based on the risk that the gamebird releases pose to the site and its features, and to what degree this risk can be effectively managed.
10. Defra have commenced engagement with a range of key stakeholders, including representatives from the shooting sector and environmental Non-Government Organisations (eNGOs) with an interest in gamebird release.