

Reducing disturbance to waterfowl during severe winter weather

What is the scheme?

This scheme is designed to help with conservation of waterfowl; ducks, geese, and waders, by reducing disturbance to them during periods of prolonged cold weather. Shooting organisations co-operate closely with voluntary and statutory nature conservation organisations to minimise disturbance to birds during such severe weather. The season for waterfowl shooting inland closes on 1 February and for foreshore shooting it closes on 21 February. However, the relevant Secretary of State(s) has power to impose a temporary close season of waterfowl shooting during 'severe weather' (Wildlife and Countryside Act Section 2). This scheme provides an agreed process as to what qualifies as 'severe weather'. In addition to providing criteria for a statutory suspension of shooting, criteria have been agreed for periods of less prolonged severe weather, where voluntary restraint of shooting will be encouraged where appropriate. Other sources of disturbance in cold weather, should also be reduced, and bird watchers, walkers, dog-walkers, horse-riders and water-based sports, in particular, should avoid disturbing groups of feeding or resting birds.

Why is it needed?

For many species of bird, and especially for waterfowl, mid-winter can be an ecological "bottle-neck" when they have difficulty obtaining enough food, particularly in severe cold weather when the ground becomes frozen. They face reduced prospects for survival during such times. In addition, many waterfowl will have flown to Britain to escape from even colder conditions in continental Europe. Lengthy spells of cold weather result in many birds showing changed behaviour. They become "tame" and reluctant to fly when approached in order to avoid using up their remaining energy reserves. In these circumstances, it is important to reduce any disturbance, such as that caused by waterfowl shooting, because when the birds cease feeding and fly around, they use up their limited energy reserves more quickly. When several periods of severe weather occur within a short time scale, voluntary restraints play a particularly important role because it allows populations to recover from stress.

What does this mean for waterfowl shooters?

- Once severe weather fulfils previously agreed criteria and there appears to be no sign of a change the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) normally calls on waterfowl shooters to exercise voluntary restraint in shooting where appropriate.
- Once stricter criteria are met, a statutory suspension comes into force. This prohibits the shooting of any bird on Schedule 2 Part 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981; in effect it introduces a temporary close season for these birds. This applies throughout the specified country, affecting all inland and coastal waterfowl shooting. This suspension will be widely publicised through the media.
- During both periods of voluntary restraint and statutory suspension of shooting, waterfowl shooters, and all who use the countryside, are encouraged to provide information on the conditions of birds and habitats by completing bird condition forms. This allows us to

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better assess how the weather is affecting birds and identify the most appropriate action to take.

Agreed Criteria

The following guidelines have been agreed between the statutory country conservation agencies, government departments and non-governmental organisations, for example, the RSPB and BASC. In this scheme, due to their geographical proximity, England and Wales are dealt with together as one location, separately from Scotland.

The Met Office records temperature data at network of 25 meteorological stations throughout England, Scotland and Wales on a daily basis (Table 1 and Figure 1). These stations are chosen broadly to reflect the weather conditions around the coast and are often close to major estuaries and centres of foreshore shooting.

Table 1. Primary and Secondary SWO weather stations for Scotland and England/Wales

	Primary Station	Secondary Station	
Scotland (9)			
West (5)	Aultbea	Skye Lusa	
	Tiree	South Uist	
	Islay (Port Ellen)	Machrihanish	
	Prestwick	Auchincruive	
	Dundrennan	West Freugh	
East (4)	Edinburgh	- Edinburgh RBG	
	Wick Airport	Tain Range	
	Aberdeen (Dyce)	Craibstone	
	Lossiemouth	Rosehearty	
England / Wales (16)			
North West	Walney Island	St Bees Head	
	Crosby	Rhyl	
	Valley	Aberdaron	
	Gogerddan	Porthmadog	
South West	Milford Haven	Aberporth	
	St Athan	Mumbles Head	
	Isle of Portland	Swanage	
	Chivenor	Cambourne	
	Culdrose	Plymouth	
	Thorney Island	Bournemouth (Hurn)	
	South East (3)	Herstmonceux	Manston
		Shoeburyness	Manston
Cromer		Holbeach	
North East (3)	Wainfleet	Bridlington	
	Loftus	Scarborough	
	Boulmer	Albermarle	

NB. From time-to-time sites open and close, and the Met Office will undertake reasonable endeavours during the service to retain continuity of service.

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England/Wales

When more than half of these meteorological stations (in Scotland and/or England/Wales) have recorded frozen conditions (determined from minimum air and grass temperatures) for seven consecutive days (but allowing short periods of thaw), the country conservation agencies liaise with BASC who normally advise a period of voluntary restraint of shooting where appropriate whilst severe weather conditions last.

On the 13th day of frozen conditions, if more than half the relevant meteorological stations are still frozen, a case is presented to the relevant Secretary of State(s) requesting a suspension on waterfowl shooting due to the severe weather. Such suspensions can be instituted in Scotland alone, and/or in England/Wales dependent on the extent of the cold weather. Once the Statutory Instrument has been signed, it comes into force at 00h01, two days after the case was presented.

With respect to the agreed process of counting days of severe weather, short periods of thaw (one or two days with less than half stations frozen) have no effect on the counting process, but periods of thaw of three or more days have the effect of resetting the day number to 0. Such short periods of thaw are 'neutral' in terms of counting days towards a suspension - that is they neither count nor terminate the process.

Publicising restraint and suspension

Calls for voluntary restraint of waterfowl shooting will be advertised on the websites of JNCC, BASC, and various conservation organisations. In addition, BASC will email all its wildfowling clubs and shooting syndicates calling for voluntary restraint in waterbird shooting in those parts of the country where necessary (and warning of the possibility of a statutory suspension if conditions persist).

Once a case has been presented to the Secretary of State(s) advising a statutory suspension of waterfowl shooting, the impending suspension is publicised as widely as possible. BASC informs all its wildfowling club secretaries, Joint Councils and game shooting syndicates and institutes a 24-hour telephone information service in all regions of the country. Similarly DEFRA, Welsh Government and Scottish Government, and other conservation organisations as appropriate, and JNCC will publicise the suspension on their websites.

In accordance with Section 26(5) of the Act, the advertisement is placed in the London Gazette, when the Order affects England and Wales.

How long does the suspension last?

A statutory suspension of waterfowl shooting is for an initial period of 14 days.

Information on the condition of waterfowl should continue to be reported through completion of the bird condition form to aid review.

The ban is examined after seven days. If the weather conditions have improved and the forecast is for a continuation of this improvement, then, in consideration with other factors, the lifting of the ban can be recommended. However, if there has been no thaw and the weather is still severe then the ban continues for the full 14 days.

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Any lifting of the ban before the full 14 days will take into consideration the need for a period of recovery for waterbirds after the end of the severe weather itself. In this event, DEFRA, Welsh Government and/or Scottish Government undertake publicity campaigns as extensively as possible to inform the shooting community of the fact.

There can be an extension of the suspension beyond 14 days, through the signing of a second Statutory Instrument, if there is still severe weather and no improvement in weather conditions is forecast. The management of the second period of suspension is undertaken in the same manner as the first.

The role of conservation staff

Country Conservation Agency contacts (see principle organisational contacts below) are responsible for agreeing with BASC if a period of voluntary restraint is required once the 7th day of severe weather is reached. The country conservation agency contacts should also liaise with their respective government, and, in the event of an imminent statutory suspension, have the responsibility to provide them with formal advice to implement the statutory suspension.

A network of representatives from the Country Conservation Agencies, shooting and game keeping associations and various conservation organisations are alerted by the Met Office of periods of severe weather. It is their responsibility to disseminate this information to their regional staff, shooting clubs and syndicates and other users of waterfowl habitat, to encourage them to minimise disturbance to birds and to provide feedback on local conditions by completing the bird condition forms available to download on this website. They should pay particular attention not only to the foreshore and freezing of inland waters and feeding grounds, but also to the condition of birds, bird numbers and movements, appearance of unusual species, significance of wind chill and to snow cover.

An important role of conservation staff is the publicising and encouraging of compliance with any call for voluntary restraint, or statutory suspension. In addition it is very important for them to encourage reduction of other forms of disturbance, for example bird watching, bird ringing, walking, dog-walking, horse-riding and water-based sports. Conservation staff should raise awareness of this where possible, and consider altering access routes in particularly vulnerable areas.

Further information

If you have any further queries regarding these waterfowl shooting suspensions please contact either the relevant Country Agency contact or JNCC (nichola.burnett@jncc.gov.uk). A review of the historical background to the current system of cold weather shooting bans was published in "*Statutory Suspension of Wildfowling in Severe Weather, Review of past winter weather and actions*" JNCC Report No. 75. This gives detailed information on the operation and efficiency of the scheme in previous winters. Available on JNCC website.

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Principal organisational contact points

Name	Organisation	Telephone	e-mail
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Jeff Knott	RSPB	01767 693006	jeff.knott@rspb.org.uk
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