

Conservation News

Grassroots action removes five bird species from Poland's game list

Poland has adopted a landmark legal reform strengthening bird protection. On 22 September 2025, the Ministry of Climate and Environment issued a regulation amending the list of game species, removing five birds (*Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland*, 2025, item 1286). The law will enter into force on 2 January 2026. The affected species are the common pochard *Aythya ferina*, tufted duck *Aythya fuligula*, Eurasian coot *Fulica atra*, Eurasian woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* and hazel grouse *Tetrastes bonasia*, previously listed under the 2005 regulation on game animals (*Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland*, 2005, item 2454). As of 2026, all will have full legal protection.

This reform responds to mounting evidence that selective hunting of waterbirds in species-rich wetlands is

infeasible. At Lake Miedwie, a Natura 2000 site in western Poland, analysis of hunting bags from three consecutive seasons revealed that 43% of the bird species shot were legally protected. In addition, the globally Vulnerable common pochard, which was still a game species at that time, was also frequently hunted. This study demonstrated systematic misidentification and concluded that waterbird hunting in Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas leads to indiscriminate killing and disturbance of entire bird assemblages (Marchowski et al., 2025, *Avian Research*, 16, 100276).

Documentation gathered by ornithologists also showed that hunting impacts extend beyond direct mortality. Gunshots followed by human or dog activity to retrieve shot birds cause panic flights, disrupt daily cycles, break up family groups and induce behavioural changes. These



Five bird species removed from Poland's game list and granted full legal protection as of January 2026: (a) hazel grouse *Tetrastes bonasia* (photo: Jarosław Solarczyk), (b) Eurasian woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* (photo: Łukasz Fijałkowski), (c) common pochard *Aythya ferina*, (d) Eurasian coot *Fulica atra*, and (e) tufted duck *Aythya fuligula* (photos: Piotr Chara).


effects are particularly severe in wetlands where huntable and protected species gather in large numbers.

Hunting in Poland often occurs within or adjacent to legally protected areas, including Natura 2000 sites and buffer zones of national parks and reserves. In such refuges, birds, including quarry species, are explicitly objects of conservation. Yet they were flushed, wounded or killed there, exposing a stark contradiction between conservation intent and legal practice.

Grassroots initiatives led by ornithologists, NGOs and investigative journalists were crucial in bringing this issue to public attention. Media coverage of foreign hunting tourism at Lake Miedwie in 2024 triggered widespread backlash, prompting the suspension of hunts that winter. Building on this momentum, advocacy groups demanded structural legal change to align national hunting law with EU conservation commitments.

The 2025 reform reduces direct hunting pressure and simplifies enforcement, but still some quarry species

remain, including geese and two duck species that mix with flocks of protected species, perpetuating the problem of identification. The decision illustrates how bottom-up advocacy and scientific evidence can shape national policy. Despite ongoing challenges, such as illegal hunting, toxic lead ammunition and weak enforcement in Natura 2000 sites, the removal of five species from the game list constitutes clear progress for bird conservation in Central and Eastern Europe.

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