

BASC – Snaring in Northern Ireland

Executive Summary

BASC Northern Ireland on behalf of its members is concerned that the debate about snares is developing without full understanding of how and why they are used, and the new technology being developed. BASC is conscious of the welfare issues around snaring and has prepared a briefing to inform policy makers.

Northern Ireland's professional gamekeepers and good countryside managers operate to high standards, demonstrating best practice and working to industry codes of practice. Snares are an essential tool used both by the Province's farmers as well as wildlife and conservation managers to manage certain predators and pests in the countryside.

Foxes not only kill livestock and game birds, but threaten a range of ground-nesting bird species, some of which are identified within the NI Biodiversity Action Plan, as well as mammals such as Irish hares. A well-designed snare, set correctly, is a highly effective method of restraining foxes and rabbits until they can be humanely dispatched, and where other techniques such as trapping or shooting are neither suitable nor effective.

The shooting community in Northern Ireland makes a significant contribution to conservation, with active management influence over a million hectares. Ten million pounds is spent on habitat improvement and wildlife management each year, which provides the equivalent of 640 full-time conservation jobs. The sporting shooting industry is worth £45 million per annum to the Northern Ireland economy and sustains 2,100 FTE posts.

Snaring plays an important role in shoot management and ultimately in sustainable economic and social development of rural communities. Without snares, foxes and rabbits could inflict significantly greater damage on economic activities as diverse as agriculture, forestry and eco-tourism, all of which rely on a managed countryside.

BASC wants snares to continue to be available as a management tool, to be used properly and humanely, and to ensure that those who use them act in a responsible and a professional manner.

What is snaring?



Figure 1 - Fox held in snare

Snaring is a skilful, selective and humane method of restraining an animal until it can be either released unharmed or humanely despatched, as appropriate. Fox snares are made from wire and are designed not to cause damage to a restrained animal.

In Northern Ireland the snare is used exclusively for the targeted control of foxes, rabbits and occasionally rats, all of which can cause serious economic and environmental damage. The UK's fox population has been estimated to be around 250,000 (Webbon et al, 2004) and that there has been an increase in UK fox densities and numbers over the past 40 years (Reynolds and Tapper, 1993).

As long ago as 1995, the UK's breeding rabbit population was estimated to be about 37.5 million (Harris et al, 1995). These key points are confirmed by the Report on the Independent Working Group on Snares (DEFRA, 2005):

“Snares involve the use of flexible materials to capture and restrain, and in this regard they have similarities to gill nets used for capture of sea fish and mist nets used in the capture of wild birds for ringing”

“In contrast to the situation in other countries (e.g. USA & Canada) snares are widely used in the UK to restrain animals for despatch rather than as killing devices”.

Snaring is often the most effective and efficient method of managing fox and rabbit populations; it is sometimes the only practical method. In a UK survey of over 1,000 gamekeepers, 96% reported the presence of foxes that needed to be controlled and reported that, after night shooting, snaring was the most effective method of control, used by 86% of keepers (BASC, 1995). Snaring accounts for 30% of all foxes controlled by gamekeepers each year (BASC, 1995.) on some land. Operator skills strongly influence capture rate. Foxes use the same routes on a regular basis therefore snares can be sited with a degree of precision (sometimes for a specific, individual animal).

By law, snares have to be checked at least once within every 24 hour period to ensure captured animals are not restrained longer than necessary. Most animals are caught at night and best practice requires snares to be checked first thing in the morning (BASC Code of Practice) at which time non-target species can be released, target species despatched and any damaged snares removed.

Why is snaring so important to NI?

Conservation

Two recent reports, “The Singing Fields”(Tapper, 2007), and the RSPB’s “The predation of wild birds in the UK” (Gibbons et al, 2007) clearly demonstrate the advantages of predator control to a wide variety of ground nesting bird species including merlin, red grouse, golden plover, lapwing and curlew.

The Singing Fields report concludes:

“On grouse moors, red grouse, black grouse, lapwing and curlew, are faring better than elsewhere but are in national decline”. At the report’s launch, Dr Mark Avery - RSPB’s Director of Conservation, said: “We are increasingly recognising that predators are having a greater impact on ground-nesting birds and waders and on more and more of our nature reserves are carrying out predator control.”

The RSPB’s predation review concludes that “...generalist ground predators, such as foxes, can sometimes reduce the population levels of their prey, and that this is a growing worry if we are to conserve populations of threatened ground-nesting birds, for example, lapwings”

Snaring and red grouse

There is a Northern Ireland Species Action plan for each of red grouse and curlew. In a study by the RSPB (Murray Grant) and a subsequent six year study undertaken by EHS/NIEA, RSPB and BASC in north Antrim, foxes were identified as a key predator on curlew. The red grouse species action plan delivery group has also established that the biggest single threat to re-establishing grouse is effective fox control.

The red grouse - a bird reliant on heather moorland - is included on the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland and as a Priority Species under the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy. The red grouse population in Northern Ireland is estimated (Allen *et al.*, 2004) at between 202 and 221 pairs with densities of between one and three pairs per square kilometre and sometimes lower.

Northern Ireland's heath land is host to habitats and wildlife of European importance and through improved management can be an increasingly rich resource. However, loss and fragmentation of upland heath and blanket bog habitat as a result of overgrazing, agricultural improvement and afforestation have reduced the areas in which grouse can occur (Tomlinson, 1997; Cooper *et al.*, 2002). Breeding birds are concentrated into smaller areas and, as a consequence, they become more vulnerable to predators such as foxes. The planting of forests in upland areas, increased stocking levels of sheep and a reduction in game-keeping activity have all contributed to an increase in predator numbers.

As can be seen from the above, snaring can have a key role to play in the conservation of the red grouse and other ground nesting bird species in Northern Ireland. Fox control is also important to protect lambs in hill farming areas, whilst rabbits must be controlled to protect agricultural crops as well as sensitive flora. Rabbits can damage sensitive flora, crops and young trees and undermine grassy banks (including burrowing under railway lines). Snaring is one of the most widely used methods of rabbit control.

Other methods of control available

In parts of Northern Ireland there is no access for vehicles and many areas are covered in forestry plantations, standing crops or thick scrub making it impractical to shoot foxes. Difficulty with access particularly applies when trying to control foxes on large areas of heath land. "*Lamping can generally only be undertaken in terrain that permits free movement of vehicles and it is not practicable for some hilly areas or where there is a lot of cover*" (Reynolds, 2000). Over exposure to lamps severely reduces the effectiveness of this technique. Given their nocturnal habits, fox and rabbit shooting at night may in some situations cause problems relating to working hours and health and safety concerns.

As a further impediment, Forest Service does not allow bullet-firing guns to be used in its estate, so snares are used by its staff and lease holders as part of effective fox control.

Live-capture traps depend on the fox entering a box or cage and triggering a door release mechanism. Innate or learned wariness in the fox makes this an impractical solution in rural areas as they are typically cautious of novel, man-made objects, which severely limits the efficacy of these traps. Only 9% of gamekeepers report having caught foxes using such traps (BASC, 1995). These traps may, however, be effective in urban environments, where foxes are more confident about entering small spaces.

Drop Traps for rabbits must be sited on a rabbit-proof fence line and dug into the ground. They can be an effective method of rabbit control but are expensive to install and maintain. Each trap costs about £100 plus the cost of installation; one trap is needed for every 50 yards of fence. Such fencing, as required for these traps, may restrict the freedom of movement of many species such as badgers, hares, otters and pheasants.

Foot packs consist of a small team of dogs and beaters to flush foxes from cover to waiting guns. They are often used in dense woodland adjoining moorland or farmland and require a great deal of manpower and expense. This method is deployed at the end of the shooting season to avoid disturbance to game birds and before the lambing and ground-nesting bird breeding season starts.

Fox hunts, where traditional packs of hounds flush foxes to waiting guns, can be an effective method of fox control in the areas in which they operate. Such control is only really suitable in lowland situations.

Terriers are used to flush foxes from underground to a waiting gun, a technique used mainly in the spring. This is a very time consuming but effective method for dealing with known dens.

Physical barriers such as wire netting can be valuable in reducing loss of poultry, game birds or livestock held in small areas. Wire netting is widely used in an attempt to exclude rabbits from vulnerable forestry and crops. Electric fencing has partial success in protecting ground-nesting birds on nature reserves but experience has shown it must be backed up by lethal control methods that may not be practical in a moorland situation and it is very expensive.

Fertility control for wild mammals has been the subject of several years' intensive research by Australian and French scientists. Despite enormous expenditure, many practical problems stand in the way of a workable methodology.

So what is the way ahead?

BASC proposes that:

Legislation should ensure that snaring remains legal as a valued tool for farmers, gamekeepers and wildlife managers. The committee for Agriculture and Rural Development in its pre legislative scrutiny of the Animal Welfare Bill published on the 13th October 2009 gave assurances that there are no proposals in the legislation to ban snares and clarified that Under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, the Department of the Environment takes the lead on legislation about snares. BASC supports this view; the right place for legislation relating to snaring is within the Wildlife Order.

BASC believes that the proposals within the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill offer clarification and refinement of the laws on use of snares and these seem to be a sensible revision to improve regulation without disadvantaging responsible gamekeepers and land managers. As a safeguard, further consideration should be given to restricting the offence to being the setting of such devices, rather than possession without reasonable excuse. However, if the Department intends to make the possession of a self-locking snare an offence, then a commitment must be made to ensure widespread education to foster understanding of the changed law so that offences are not committed inadvertently.

Snaring is already subject to industry codes of practice, containing best practice recommendations and legislation, with penalties available for illegal activity/practice. BASC would be happy to lead a joint industry working group to develop a new Code of Practice for Northern Ireland to take into account all legal and best practice provisions.

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