
Summary

- Snaring is a vital management tool in the countryside, which benefits wildlife conservation and a range of economic activities from shooting and agriculture to forestry and eco-tourism.
- For most land managers there is no functional replacement for snares at crucial times of the year.
- Snaring, used properly, is a humane and effective form of fox control.
- It has been illegal to use self-locking snares throughout the UK for over 20 years and there is already extensive legislation and codes of practice in place relating to the use of free-running snares.
- Defra commissioned research, published in 2012, has identified how snaring can be improved through operating practices and snare design.
- Well-designed snares, operated according to best practices, have been shown to pass the International Agreement on Humane Trapping Standards (AIHTS), minimising injury and capture of non-target species.
- The Countryside Alliance calls for Defra to publish a revised Code of Practice for snaring in England based on the revised Code produced by the Welsh Government which takes account of the most recent research.

Importance of Snaring

The use of snares is an essential part of wildlife management. The aim of wildlife management should be to maintain healthy and balanced populations of wild animals at levels that can be sustained by their local environment and which are acceptable to farmers, landowners and occupiers and the overall balance of other wildlife.

Without snares, foxes and rabbits would be an increased threat to vulnerable populations of wildlife, biodiversity and habitat conservation. They would also cause significantly greater damage to a diverse range of economic activities including shooting, agriculture, forestry and eco-tourism, which all rely on a managed countryside.

The UK's fox population has been estimated to be around 250,000 (Webbon et al, 2004) and as long ago as 1995, the UK's breeding rabbit population was estimated to be about 37.5 million (Harris et al, 1995). Land managers have a statutory obligation to control species such as foxes and rabbits which, if uncontrolled, could cause significant damage. The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) highlights that:

“Foxes kill young lambs, piglets reared outdoors, and free range and domestic poultry. Foxes also prey on vulnerable wild ground-nesting birds like black grouse, partridge, lapwing, curlew and stone curlew, and brown hare. Several of these are species of conservation concern, others are game species; some are both...”

There are several methods to control foxes but none of them are effective in all circumstances. One method widely used for foxes is snaring. Snares are particularly effective for foxes in places and at times of the year when rifle shooting is not possible because of dense cover but when fox control may be critical for wild prey.” ([GWCT, Recommendations on Fox Snares](#)).

In spring and summer, shooting often becomes impractical because of the growth of vegetation cover and arable crops. Shooting is also not always appropriate in certain places such as near livestock, in the vicinity of urban areas, or close to public footpaths and other rights of way. To protect prey species that are particularly vulnerable to fox predation, like ground-nesting birds and lambs, fox control is essential during the spring and summer breeding season. Flushing-out foxes from underground with the use of a dog is only permitted to protect gamebirds, and not livestock or other wild birds including rare or endangered species.

The importance of legal snaring has been recognised by successive governments. The following statement was made by Barry Gardiner MP, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defra, on 28 November 2006:

“The Government consider that, where there is a need for wildlife management, the proper use of snares is one of a range of control methods. Used according to best practice, snares can be an effective and practical means of wildlife management and are needed where other forms of pest control are ineffective or impractical. In these circumstances, snares restrain rather than kill and may prove to be more humane than other methods. If snares were to be banned entirely it may encourage the use of more dangerous and illegal alternatives such as poisons” (28 Nov 2006: Column 495W, PQ 104525).

Snares are considered not to have any functional replacement for their effectiveness, but they can trap non-target species, which makes compliance with legislation and use of best practice essential. These issues were addressed in the Defra commissioned research published in 2012 which made recommendations for amending the current Code of Practice on the use of snares.

Humaneness of Snaring

Self-locking snares, which are designed to kill an animal caught in them, have been illegal in the UK for over 20 years. Land managers can legally use free-running snares, which are designed to only hold an animal until it can be humanely despatched, on account of their effectiveness and humaneness. Animals held in these snares are protected from unnecessary suffering under the [Animal Welfare Act 2006](#), and the [Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#) imposes a legal obligation to check a set snare at least every 24 hours.

Snares are a unique method of control as they catch only when the animal is completely unaware of their presence. According to research from the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT):

“Foxes are highly ‘neophobic’ - they have a tendency to avoid anything new. A fox which detects a snare will avoid it. It may not be unduly alarmed, but it is unlikely ever to be caught in that particular snare set... Foxes that have ‘spotted’ a snare can still be caught in another snare which has not been detected. Indeed it’s possible to

catch foxes in snares several times over, as we have found when catching foxes for radio-tagging...

The action of a snare is not as alien to a fox as one might imagine: being snagged by brambles is probably an everyday experience. The fox just backs off, then carries on. We have watched a fox do exactly this when a snare drew up round its nose. It was clearly not alarmed, and was properly caught the next day after the snare was re-set a metre further along the run" ([GWCT, Fox Snares, 2012](#)).

This evidence also formed part of the Defra commissioned research which reported in 2012. It identified how snaring can be improved through operating practices and snare design and this should now be used as the basis for a revised Code of Practice in England.

Many land managers in England have already adopted [unofficial guidance](#) for the use of snares, based on the recommendations in the 2012 Final Report, which go further than the existing Code of Practice in England. It is important that Defra publish a revised Code to ensure that government advice on adherence to the legislation and best practice is based on the latest evidence in this area.

Existing Legislation

There is already extensive legislation relating to the use of snares designed to balance genuine welfare concerns with the need for wildlife management.

It has been illegal to use self-locking snares in all parts of the UK since the introduction of the [Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#) and the [Wildlife Order \(Northern Ireland\) 1985](#). Land managers are permitted to use free-running snares on account of their effectiveness and humaneness, providing that the relevant legislation is followed.

In England and Wales the following legislation applies to the use of snares:

- The [Animal Welfare Act 2006](#) contains protection for animals subject to human control to help prevent un-necessary suffering and would apply to any animal held in a snare.
- The [Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#) prohibits the use of any trap or snare calculated to cause bodily injury to any wild animal and places an obligation on those who use snares to check them daily, allowing any non-target species to be released unharmed. Defra's 2012 research found that 84% of snare users were already making every effort to avoid the capture of non-target species, and with increasing awareness amongst snare users, that is a figure that one can realistically expect to have improved since the research was carried out.
- The [Deer Act 1991](#) prohibits the use of snares to capture any species of deer.

The Defra [Code of Practice on the use of snares in fox and rabbit control \(2005\)](#) is widely promulgated by sporting associations and by those institutions, such as land-based training colleges, which are involved in the education and training of land managers.

In addition to domestic legislation, the European Union is a signatory party to the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards (AIHTS) between the EU, Canada and Russia. The Agreement is designed to establish international standards of humane trapping, improve communication and cooperation between the parties for the implementation and development of those standards.

A complete ban on the use of snares, requiring new legislation, is unnecessary and would not be in the interests of land managers or wildlife as it “*may encourage the use of more dangerous and illegal alternatives such as poisons*” (28 Nov 2006: Column 495W, PQ 104525).

Codes of Practice

In 2005 Defra published the existing [Code of Practice on the use of snares in fox and rabbit control \(2005\)](#) which was based on the Report from the Independent Working Group on Snares (IWGS). The Code makes those using snares aware of their responsibilities under law and provides advice on good practice.

In 2008 Defra commissioned the Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA) and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) to undertake a study into [Determining the Extent of Use and Humaneness of Snares in England and Wales](#) which was published in March 2012. The Final Report made recommendations for amendments to the Code to help improve target specificity and improve animal welfare standards. The Coalition Government did not implement the recommendations of the 2012 Final Report, despite calls from a wide range of stakeholders, including the Countryside Alliance, to include them in a revised Code of Practice. The current Government’s position is that Defra is “considering options and will make an announcement in due course” (07 Jan 2016: PQ 20742).

In September 2015, the Welsh Government published a new [Code of Best Practice on the Use of Snares in Fox Control](#) based on the recommendations provided in the 2012 Final Report, which the Countryside Alliance welcomed. The new Code will help improve animal welfare standards in Wales and reduce the inadvertent capture of non-target species and domestic animals, whilst allowing snaring to continue as an essential method for controlling foxes to protect livestock and wildlife. In announcing the Code, Rebecca Evans AM (Labour), the Deputy Minister for Farming and Food at Welsh Assembly, said:

“I hope this action will help improve snare operator practice by providing clear and practicable advice and how to comply with the law. This will in turn ensure improved standards in animal welfare and reduce the impact on non-target species” (Welsh Government, Animal Welfare at the Heart of new Snares Code, 25 Sept 2015).

The problems foxes can cause to farmers, gamekeepers and conservationists and the means available to control them do not differ between England and Wales. We hope that Defra will publish a revised Code for England as soon as possible using the example of the Code produced in Wales. This would allow a speedy solution in England, avoid duplication and simplify the promotion of best practice in many regions.

Countryside Alliance calls for:

- Measures to promote the revised code of practice in Wales to ensure compliance.
- Defra to publish a revised code of practice for the use of snares in England based on the example of the Welsh Government.
- Continued research into the use and effectiveness of snaring so that policy in this area can continue to be based on evidence and principle.