



The annual report on activities of mounted hunts since the enactment of the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act October 2023

Conclusions

We have film evidence that shows:

- **One hunt has apparently used more than two dogs to hunt foxes**
- **Three hunts have apparently used two dogs to hunt foxes with no guns present**
- **Three hunts claim to be “drag hunting” or “simulating hunting” and are not members of, or abide by the rules of, the Master of Blood Hounds and Drag Hunts Association (MBDA)**
- **There is a danger that “drag hunting” or “simulated hunting” is being used as a smokescreen for illegal fox hunting**
- **One previous fox hunt is now a member of the MBDA and is a bona fide drag hunt**
- **Six incidents were reported to Police Scotland. One person has been arrested, interviewed and charged with illegal hunting. Another was arrested, interviewed and released pending further investigation.**

Recommendations

- **Police Scotland should continue to actively investigate any future allegations of illegal fox hunting**
- **The Scottish Government should use its executive powers to modify the meaning of “trail hunting” so as to ensure that “drag hunting” or “simulated hunting” are not able to be used as a smokescreen for illegal fox hunting**

Methodology

Field observations were carried out intermittently for a period of six months looking at patterns of behaviour of several groups who describe themselves as “hunts”. The Berwickshire, Jed Forest, Lauderdale, Duke of Buccleuch and Dumfries and Stewartry mounted hunts were visited.

The League’s aim was to observe and, where possible, record the hunt’s activities when they were out in the field with dogs, in most cases, foxhounds. These observations were carried out by experienced field researchers with decades of experience of monitoring and recording fox hunting behavior.

The film work was covertly acquired, usually from a distance or with a drone mounted camera. The reason for this is that experience shows that when the hunts become aware that they may be being watched or filmed, they will change their behavior.

Film evidence is offered in support of these findings.

It is also important to note that these same hunts have a history of being filmed hunting foxes with dogs in previous years.

The foxhounds used by the hunts in question were, up until 3 October 2023, trained and used to find foxes and flush them out of cover or illegally chase them. The Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act came into effect on 3 October 2023 and a number of hunts immediately announced that their foxhounds would be following an artificial scent and that they would be “drag” or “simulated” hunting. In most cases, there was no suggestion that they were using any other dogs than the ones used previous to the new legislation.

Reports

Jed Forest Hunt

Two members of this hunt were found guilty of illegal hunting in 2017. That case led to the Scottish Government recognizing that the Protection of Wild Mammals Scotland (2002) Act required strengthening and the introduction of the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act (2023)

The Jed Forest Hunt publicly claims to be operating within the law and to be using only the permitted two dogs to flush foxes from cover to waiting guns. They do not describe themselves as a “drag hunt” or a “simulated” hunt.



However, the League has film evidence that we believe is contrary to their claims. We are also informed that other independent complaints have been made to the police on multiple occasions about the Jed Forest attempting to hunt foxes with either two or more foxhounds.

The League has witnessed and filmed this hunt attempting to use more than two foxhounds to hunt foxes. From the start of the new legislation and over a six-month period, whenever we visited this hunt, we observed and recorded attempts at what looked like using their pack of dogs to find foxes.

There were other incidents, possibly because the hunt was concerned that they were being observed, when multiple dogs were kept in vehicles and only two dogs were used. Whenever such incidents were observed or filmed, there was no evidence that there were any guns deployed.

Throughout this last hunting season, the League has noted that this hunt had increased their “followers” and supporters/spectators from previous seasons.

“Followers” are those groups of people who traditionally would follow the hunt on the day of an event, either in vehicles or on foot. They would be seen to position themselves around the area that the hunt operates in, in the hope of getting to see the hunt’s activities and specifically to watch as the hounds would pursue foxes across the countryside. Their entertainment comes from watching the activities of the foxhounds outside of cover, in the open and where they can observe the dogs and hunters in pursuit of a fox.

This kind of support has dwindled over the years, but the followers’ attendance can still be observed at most hunts to this day. However, on the Jed Forest hunt this season, we have seen a big increase in “followers”. It is usual for there to be around fifteen vehicles following the hunt and watching their activities, far more than in previous seasons. The reason for this, the League believes, is that this hunt has built a reputation for being the place to see traditional hunting.

The League’s film evidence and statements on three separate incidents alleging illegal hunting by the Jed Forest hunt were passed to Police Scotland.

Film clip list

Clip 1. Falside, 7th Nov 23. Huntsman enters three dogs into cover. The hunt is using more than two dogs.

Clip 2. Falside, 7th Nov 23. Huntsman enters a fourth dog into cover. More than two dogs.

Clip 3, Falside, 7th Nov 23 Huntsman with more than two dogs.

Clip 4. Wooplaw, 14th Nov 23. Huntsman and hunt riders enter a pack of dogs into woodland. More than two dogs.

Clip 5. Wooplaw. 14th Nov 23. Huntsman rides away from woodland with a pack of dogs. More than two dogs.

Clip 6. 3rd March 24. Craik, Huntsman with four dogs and returns two to a hunt vehicle.

Clip 7. 3rd March 24. Craik, Huntsman with four dogs and returns two to a hunt vehicle.

Clip 8. Deere Street, Ulston. 27th Feb 24. Huntsman and other hunters encourage their six dogs to search amongst hedgerows and in open fields. More than two dogs.

Clip 9. 27th Feb 24. Ulston. Huntsman encourages six dogs within a woodland cover. More than two dogs.

Clip 10. Huntsman encourages six dogs to search within a woodland cover. Thermal imaging. More than two dogs.

Clip 11. 27th Feb 24. Ulston. Six dogs leave woodland cover and join huntsman. More than two dogs.

Lauderdale Hunt

Since the 3 October 2023, this hunt claims to be carrying out two activities. On Saturdays, the Lauderdale Hunt claims to be drag hunting. They are not members of the MBDA and so are not required to abide by the rules of that organisation. They use a pack of bloodhounds that are not accredited with the MBDA and appear to be a cross between bloodhounds and fox hounds. The type of bloodhound breed being used appears to be more robust with a similar stature to a foxhound.

On weekdays, the Lauderdale hunt claims to be taking two foxhounds out to control foxes. Although film evidence was difficult to obtain, the League witnessed on at least one occasion, the hunt use more than two dogs and were using them to search within cover. The terrain did not allow filming of this incident although we could hear the calls of more than two dogs within the cover that they were in.

In addition, the League also witnessed and recorded two foxhounds belonging to the Lauderdale hunt being sent into cover to search for foxes and the film clearly shows that there were no guns in position if the dogs were to have pushed a fox out from cover.

In addition to the League's findings, it was also reported to us that a member of the public had also seen this hunt with four foxhounds in Penicuik and that it was clearly a hunting event. The witness asked the hunt what they were doing, as she was walking her dogs and concerned for their safety. She was told that the hunt was after a wounded fox which was shot and injured the previous day.

Film clip list

Clip 1. 13th Feb 24. Threepwood. A dog follows a scent across open ground. No cover, no guns.

Clip 2. 13th Feb 24. Threepwood. Two dogs are searching. No guns are seen in the area.

Clip 3. 13th Feb 24. Threepwood. A dog runs across an open field following a scent and enters woodland cover. No guns seen.

Dumfries and Stewartry Hunt

Although difficult to find operating in the countryside, on the occasions that we did discover this hunt's whereabouts, the League observed this hunt with more than two dogs.

On both occasions, due to the remoteness of the areas the hunt was operating in, the League's presence had become apparent to the hunt.

Despite the fact that a pack of hounds could be heard in the lorry that transports them, only two dogs were used.

When the hunt used two dogs, there was no evidence of guns being positioned to shoot any foxes that were flushed.

Film clip list

Clip 1 Dumfries and Stewartry, Barr, 19th Dec 23. Redcoat using two dogs. No guns can be seen. Not in cover

Clip 2 Dumfries and Stewartry, Barr, 19th Dec 23 Two dogs leave cover and hunter whips them on. Not in cover and no guns can be seen.

Clip 3 Dumfries and Stewartry, Barr, 19th Dec 23. Two hunt riders position themselves outside woodland cover where two dogs are searching. The gunman stands and chats with one of the riders whilst his gun is in a gun case on the front of the quadbike.

Clip 4 Dumfries and Stewartry, Barr, 19th Dec 23. Hunt gather at the end of the hunting day.

Berwickshire Hunt

Since the 3 October 2023 the Berwickshire hunt have described themselves as a "drag hunt", although they are not members of the Masters of Bloodhounds and Draghounds Association

(MBDA) and therefore are not required to abide by their rules. They are also using foxhounds as opposed to bloodhounds during their activities in the field, the same foxhounds that were used to search for foxes prior to the implementation of the new laws.

Since 3 October 2023, this hunt, on more than one occasion, has been observed and filmed taking their pack of foxhounds into fox habitats (gorse etc) that is too dense and impenetrable for a human to lay an artificial scent in.

Film evidence as well as statements have been handed to Police Scotland.

In addition to these incidents, on one of the final hunts of the season in February 2024, it was observed and recorded that this hunt sent their pack of twenty plus foxhounds to search for a scent, including woodland cover, and the hounds could be heard “in cry” or “speaking”, indicating that they had found a scent and were following it. The dogs were allowed to go off on their own, travelling for some distance ahead of the huntsman, across fields, through woodland and other covers. Hunt riders and dogs were seen travelling across farmer’s crops and the pack of dogs split up during the hunt. At one stage the huntsman was filmed on the road with four foxhounds. Multiple dogs could be heard barking and yelping in the distance.

There was no evidence of a scent or drag being laid at any point in the day.

Later, local landowners who had encountered the hunt complained to Police Scotland that foxhounds and horse riders trespassed on their land. The landowners informed the League that the police had already spoken with the Berwickshire hunt on previous occasions to keep away from private land due to persistent trespass, but this has clearly been ignored and trespass has occurred again during what the hunt claim to be a “drag hunt” activity. Although trespass is generally a civil matter, these incidents suggest a more serious offence of unlawful hunting. The following reports were sent to the League by landowners who saw the Berwickshire hunt trespassing on their land during what the hunt claims was drag hunting.

“On Saturday 24th February I heard a lot of noise from dogs barking and horns blowing. I looked out and could see hunt dogs running around in the land opposite my house which is mostly woods.”

“Around 11.30 am I heard a noise and looked out of my kitchen to see maybe 6 hunt dogs running into Press Castle Estate. A minute or so later I saw a man in hunting gear on a horse ride into Press Castle estate. There is a clear sign on the front gate saying the estate is private. The man on horseback was shouting at the dogs very loudly but he did not seem to me to be trying to get them to come back.”

“I knew there was a fox which lives in the grounds of Press Castle, so I was concerned they were hunting it. I tried ringing 101 but was on hold constantly. One of my neighbours who has an apartment in Press Castle rang me to say she was really scared as the dogs were baying and running about the land near the castle. About 20 minutes later the horse rider came out with the pack of dogs. I do not know if they had killed but have not seen the fox since.”

“The hunt not only cause chaos but seem to think they can invade our private property and I feel either they were hunting on Press Castle Estate or their dogs were out of control”

“I recognised the man on horse from previous hunts which constantly invade our area as being from Berwickshire hunt, I have seen him maybe four times hunting in this area.”

Film clip List

Clip 1. Berwickshire. Abbey St Bathens. 3rd Oct 23. Huntsman encourages his pack of dogs to search within dense cover. More than two dogs.

Clip 2. Berwickshire. Abbey St Bathens. 3rd Oct 23. Huntsman encourages his pack of dogs to search within dense cover. More than two dogs.

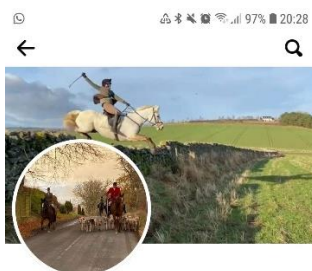
Clip 3. Berwickshire. Greenlaw. A Pack of dogs are encouraged to search in rough cover. More than two dogs.

Clip 4. Hunters are stationary at the side of woodland in which a pack of dogs have been sent into to search. The huntsman blows his horn as the dogs find a scent and can be heard ‘in cry’, yelping and barking, indicating that they are on a scent. More than two dogs.

Clip 5 and following clips. Hounds continue following a scent after leaving woodland cover and go through more cover as the huntsman can be heard encouraging the pack of foxhounds on. More than two dogs.

Duke of Buccleuch Hunt

This hunt continues to use the same foxhounds that they had previously used to search for foxes prior to the implementation of the new laws in October 2023. The Duke of Buccleuch Hunt claims to be “simulating” Hunting and do not call themselves a drag hunt. They are not members of the MBDA and therefore, are not required to abide by the organisation’s rules.



Buccleuch Hunt

5.4K followers · 0 following

The Duke of Buccleuch's Hunt
(simulated) based in the heart of the
Scottish Borders

On a number of occasions, the League observed foxhounds following a scent that had earlier witnessed being laid by a runner or, on one occasion, a person riding a mountain bike.

It is not known what type of scent is being laid or why this hunt doesn't describe itself as a drag hunt.

Trail hunting is banned under the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act (2023). This is a form of simulated fox hunting where a fox-based scent is laid and followed by mounted fox hunts.

At one of these meets the League investigators could smell the very familiar scent of a fox coming from a quadbike that was being used to transport the scent and the runners.

Fife Drag Hunt

The Fife foxhounds were disbanded in 2023 and the Fife Drag Hunt was developed. They replaced their foxhounds with bloodhounds, new hunting staff were employed, and they became members of the Masters of Draghounds and Bloodhounds Association (MBDA) and so therefore, have to strictly abide by the organisation's rules.

According to the MBDA:

"Drag hunting is mostly an equine activity and is carried out across open country. It does not try to simulate fox hunting."

"A scent is laid either using artificial scent, or the scent of a human, along a predetermined route. The runner lays the artificial scent by dragging a cloth dipped in the artificial scent on the ground. This will be done approximately 10 to 30 minutes before the **race** starts. There is no actual hunting of animals or humans. The term 'clean-boot' is another name for the runner, which gives this sport its alternative name."

"A drag hunt is set up in a similar way to a cross country ride. It takes place over a predetermined course, with jumps or obstacles. The dogs often make their way through farms, and because many drag hunts have been going on for many generations, there is a good relationship with the farm owners and the hunt staff. The farm owners provide preset routes so there is no risk of the horses or dogs damaging the crops and farm. If there is any damage on the farm along the route, the hunt staff will make the required repairs."

The League believes that the Fife Drag hunt is operating in accordance with the rules of the MBDA as well as in accordance with the law.