

A year on – what does the landscape look like

Exactly a year ago today, Mairi Gougeon MSP, Minister for Rural Affairs and Natural Environment announced to Parliament that the Scottish Government would make sure fox hunting is really banned in Scotland before the next election in May 2021 by bringing forward a Bill to strengthen the current law.

Twelve months on from that announcement, there is still no evidence that the proposed Bill is forthcoming yet sadly there is consistent evidence that the cruelty of hunting is commonplace in the Scottish countryside, with the League Against Cruel Sports Scotland still filming foxes fleeing from packs of hounds.

Just before Christmas the League's fieldworkers filmed an exhausted fox running right past them. It showed all the signs of a fox being hunted. And sure enough a few minutes later they filmed a pack of hounds run down the exact line that the fox had just taken. In the background the bright red jacket of a huntsman with the Jed Forest Hunt was also filmed.

In the seventeen years since the law which supposedly bans fox hunting was introduced there has only been one successful prosecution against a mounted hunt - the Jed Forest. The prosecution was the result of the League's team filming them releasing a fox from underground to waiting hounds.

And the Jed Forest are not on their own. Between now and April ten Scottish mounted hunts will be out at least three times a week.

The League has reported the latest incident to the police but we don't hold out much hope for a conviction as the so called ban on fox hunting is in tatters. The courts say the legislation has too many problems which has proved to be the case on numerous occasions.

Time is running out for both the foxes and the legislation. The process to really ban hunting involves a three month consultation period, scrutiny and hearings by a Parliament Committee followed by two debates in the Holyrood chamber. That's an awful lot of opportunities for delay and procrastination.

When I last met with the Minister in November I was encouraged that she told us that it was still her intention to legislate before the next election. But the clock is ticking and the window of opportunity is slipping away.

Due to the deft work of Alison Johnstone, MSP for the Scottish Greens, there is a plan B. She has been working on a Member's Bill that would do the job. It has already gone through the consultation process and it is possible for the Government to adopt it and fast track the process. Despite this seeming like common sense, there's no sign of that happening either.

The public are always shocked to see our footage and when recently polled around three quarters said they want to see the law strengthened and an overwhelming 92% agree hunting should be illegal. Getting on for a thousand people marched "For the Foxes" in 2018 and almost 25,000 people have signed our petition "to really ban fox hunting". Stopping fox hunting in Scotland, it seems, is incredibly popular.

Even if the legislation goes at full speed there is still the remainder of this season and another full season of fox hunting before the next election in May 2021. The League will continue to try to bring those breaking the law to court but the real solution will be for the Government to really ban fox hunting - for good.

Robbie Marsland is Director of the League Against Cruel Sports Scotland

Your help is vital in ensuring that Governmental promises of strengthen the law are upheld and that the new legislation meets the desires of the Scottish people who wish to see fox hunting illegal once and for all.

Your signature will communicate to the Government that the time to 'really' ban hunting is now.

Sign the petition