

BLOOD ON THE WIRE

Snaring in Scotland: why only a complete ban can halt wildlife suffering





Left:
Manderston House is popular with tourists

Below:
Fenn trap smeared with blood on the Manderston estate



Blood on the wire

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Nestling in the rolling countryside of the Scottish Borders, Manderston House is one of the region's most popular tourist attractions. Home to Lord Palmer, the house serves as a venue for weddings, conferences, garden parties, photo shoots – Channel 4 recently filmed its Edwardian Country House series here – and regularly open its doors to the public for tours of its opulent halls and ornamental gardens.

But Manderston house and country estate has found itself at the centre of controversy over its involvement with pheasant shooting and an apparent targeting of wildlife deemed to pose a threat to valuable game bird stocks. Investigations by the League Against Cruel Sports have revealed how a variety of brutal snares and traps – including devices which breach industry codes of good practice – have been set at the estate in order to catch predators, such as foxes, hares and rabbits, roaming into woodland used for shooting.

Between 2006 and 2008 secret filming carried out at the estate has shown crude wire snares meticulously placed around pheasant release pens and near to a flight pond, along with a number of metal fenn traps. Some of the snares discovered were attached to wooden dragpoles – a practice which breaches the shooting industry's own

best practice guidelines and which is soon to be illegal under new regulatory measures being phased in by the Scottish Government. Investigators also found evidence of badger movement in the vicinity of the flight pond – any setting of snares in the area could thus contravene legislation designed to prevent persecution of this protected species.

Although the League believes that all snares are cruel, indiscriminate and unnecessary, those set on dragpoles are particularly controversial as any animal could become entwined in the snare, drag it off and thus render it impossible for anyone to find the captured animal. In addition, if the snared animal were to drag the pole to the edge of an overhang, it could die miserably as a result of being hanged. Evidence obtained elsewhere in the UK has demonstrated how a variety of mammals – including badgers – have suffered as a result of becoming caught in snares set on dragpoles.

Inside one wooded covert used for shooting near to Manderston House, investigators filmed the grizzly remains of a number of hares, a squirrel and other unidentifiable mammals dumped near to release pens, presumably victims of the snares or fenn traps littered around the area. One nearby trap, set in a wide tunnel-like

covering, and baited with a rabbit carcass, was found to be smeared with blood. Although primarily designed to catch small mammals such as rats and weasels, the manner in which this fenn trap had been set could see a small fox (or hare) poke its head into the opening – potentially resulting in horrific injuries.

After being alerted to the practices allegedly being carried out at the estate, the League established that game shooting at Manderston was in fact leased out to a third party, a Mr Christian Korsten, responsible for the day to day management of the shoot. Despite written assurances from Lord Palmer that Korsten was instructed to ensure that all predator control on the estate was to be undertaken within the law – in particular that snares were not to be set near to the estate’s flight pond for the purposes of badger protection, and that the size of traps used was to be limited, and that they would be checked regularly – on a recent return visit to the estate, investigators were shocked to again find snares placed near to the flight pond.

Whilst there is no suggestion that Lord Palmer himself is aware of the snares continued positioning in the location, the League believes the findings underscore the problematic nature of self-regulation and monitoring of snare use (and of other predator control devices) and that the shooting industry itself cannot be trusted to adequately police its own activities.

Similarly, further north, on land used for shooting near to Cawdor, Inverness, investigations have revealed how wildlife persecution in the region – including repeated snaring, much in breach of official codes of good practice – has continued despite continual denials by the Cawdor estate that they are responsible.

The Cawdor estate is home to Lady Angelika, dowager countess of Cawdor, the widow of the 25th Thane of Cawdor, and his heir, Lord Cawdor. Macbeth, in Shakespeare’s famous play, was appointed by King Duncan as the Thane of Cawdor on his doomed rise to power. The estate includes a 700 year old castle, protected forestry and a luxury lodge that can be hired out by paying guests who in the past are reported to have included the Beckham’s, Eric Clapton and the Duchess of York.

Earlier this year, undercover footage obtained by League investigators revealed the systematic use of snares to trap and kill mountain hares in an area known as Carn nan Tri-Tighearnan. Investigators found sixteen dead mountain hares in various states of decomposition, along with evidence of extensive snaring on open moorland near Inverness. At least 50 snares were documented in the area.

A vulnerable species, under current regulations snares can only be used to trap hares under license. The League understands that neither the Cawdor estate (or anyone else) had the necessary licenses to carry out such



Above:
Cawdor Estate, which has been accused of Wildlife Persecution
Right:
Mountain Hares dumped on the Cawdor Estate



extensive killing of hares – earlier this year it emerged that thousands of mountain hares may have been killed illegally on Scottish estates between 2006 and 2007 after figures were released showing that as many as five thousand were snared in the period despite licences only being issued for the snaring of around 190 animals

Even with a license however snares must be checked every 24 hours, with any animal trapped being either released or humanely dispatched. Footage obtained by the League establishes that this was not occurring however, with rotting carcasses clearly still attached to many of the snares. Those hares caught would have suffered a slow, lingering death trapped in the wire noose with no way of escaping.

Following the allegations, the Cawdor estate refuted suggestions that they were responsible for any illegality or wrongdoing: “We are fully aware of, and take seriously, our obligations in terms of wildlife legislation. Any suggestion to the contrary is inaccurate...” This was not the first time that the estate had been at the centre of controversy over its predator control methods however, including the previous targeting of mountain hares and use of snares contravening guidelines.

In May 2005, secret filming by League investigators showed how the carcasses of mountain hares were being used as bait to entice further predators into specially laid pits surrounded by snares. At one location eight snares were filmed in the immediate vicinity of one pile of rotting carcasses which contained at least eight hares, magpies, crows and foxes, along with bones including the skull of a

sheep. It is reasonable to assume these animals had been killed elsewhere on the estate and were being used as part of an effort to target further wildlife.

Not far away, in a small wooded covert next to a stream, a second dead pile was discovered, surrounded by snares set in holes in a wire enclosure. Ten mountain hare carcasses, a fox, a duck and other unidentifiable carcasses were filmed. Elsewhere in the immediate area investigators found another six snares set in wooded coverts and on a wooden bridge over a ditch.

Nearby, two multi-traps were discovered (large wooden and wire traps designed to catch birds such as jays, magpies and crows, which are considered ‘pests’ on shooting estates). The birds are lured down ladders into the wire frame by live decoy birds placed inside the trap. Once inside, the birds are unable to escape, held hostage to whatever fate awaits them.

Like snares, multi-traps are indiscriminate, so birds of prey and other protected species could also be caught in them. Both multi-traps contained two crows. The carcass of a



Above:
This hare perished after being caught in a snare
Right:
Snares set on bridges such as this will soon be illegal



Above:
Gin traps found on
the Cawdor Estate

Right:
Poisoned buzzard found
on the Cawdor Estate



lamb was discovered dumped on the ground inside one trap, along with other animal matter (presumably as bait or food for birds).

In 2004, an even more widespread programme of wildlife persecution was uncovered, including the use of five illegal gin traps – heavy steel devices with razor sharp teeth which were outlawed over 30 years ago – set in a circle around rabbit carcasses left out as bait. Gin traps do not kill their victims outright, but hold them in place until they are found, causing great suffering and distress. Animals have previously been reported to chew off their own trapped limbs in a desperate bid to struggle out of gin traps.

Investigators obtained footage of extensive snaring at the estate with dozens of wire snares filmed near gamebird pens, including snares attached to wooden dragpoles. In addition, investigators found a dead buzzard next to partridge release pens and the grouse moor. An analysis by the Scottish Agricultural Science Agency revealed that the buzzard had been poisoned with carbofuran.

When the League advised police about the illegal gin traps, the estate's factor claimed the traps had been planted there. (Weeks later a cat returned home with a gin trap attached to its leg that is believed to have come from the estate.) This was a familiar excuse from the Cawdor estate. When a golden eagle illegally poisoned with the pesticide carbofuran was found on the estate in 2001, the same

estate employee claimed someone must have transported it to the estate in a backpack and dumped it.

The League believes the findings of both the Manderston and Cawdor investigations are illustrative of widespread bad practices on Scottish shooting estates and starkly illustrate why industry self regulation, official codes of practice and legislation that falls short of a complete ban are insufficient to prevent cruelty and stamp out misuse of snares. In both cases – neither isolated examples – dubious predator control programmes have been found to be taking place but when challenged those responsible for the estates have either denied the allegations or made assurances that things will improve, only for much to remain unchanged.

Earlier this year the Scottish Government rejected calls for a complete ban on the use of the devices and effectively ignored the overwhelming public support for a ban, instead favouring the views of the shooting lobby and announcing a raft of measures to tighten up current regulations on the use of snares. In making this unpopular decision the Government chose not to listen to the 75 per cent¹ of Scottish people who think the use of snares should be made illegal, the 70 per cent² of respondents to a Scottish Executive consultation on the issue who called for a ban and the 7,182 representations received by the Minister for Environment calling for a ban in the run up to his announcement.



Above:
Landowners involved in predator control are often keen to keep prying eyes away
Left:
An investigator films dumped mountain hares

It is claimed the package of measures will minimise animal suffering yet enable gamekeepers and others to carry out effective pest control. Since this decision was taken a survey of Scottish vets found that 75 per cent thought the use of snares should be illegal while 69 per cent did not believe that regulations could provide an acceptable level of protection for animals.³

There is no published timescale on when these measures will be implemented but more than six months after the announcement the following proposals are yet to be introduced:

- The compulsory fitting of crimped safety stops to prevent the noose closing too far and inflicting damage, which on its own has the potential to bring about a huge improvement in the welfare of animals restrained by snares
- The compulsory fitting of ID tags on snares which will allow identification of their owner by the authorities, but will not allow identification by casual passers-by
- The action of a snare must be checked before it is set
- Any snare which is not staked in place must be fixed with an anchor that cannot be dragged away
- The setting of snares on posts, over water courses, on planks or fences will be prohibited as this can cause unnecessary suffering to the target

- Areas where snaring is taking place will be clearly marked with signs
- The way in which a new offence of tampering with a lawfully set snare could be created will be considered - this is required both in terms of good governance and because tampering with snares, even for the best of reasons, can sometimes (even unwittingly) make their effects more deadly and cruel
- Legal status for a new land management industry accreditation scheme, which aims to ensure that within a fixed period everyone who sets a snare will require to have received training in best practice and the law - eventually no one without such training will be allowed to set a snare

While the League disagrees with the regulatory approach it does agree that some of the measures may tackle some of the problems with snaring, but will not ultimately improve animal welfare or prevent abuses, largely as they will prove impossible to enforce and thus will enable gamekeepers and other shooting staff to continue to persecute wildlife as they wish. Experiences south of the border, in England, have shown how the shooting industry at large, and key figureheads, are quite happy to espouse good practice and claim to follow guidelines and laws when in fact they engage in widespread abuses.

In 2005 League investigators visiting some of the UK's most prominent shooting estates found clear and frequent

Right:
A badger found snared on
a leading Scottish estate
Below:
Another victim of snaring



breaches of the industry's own code of conduct for snaring including on the estate of the late Earl of Lichfield, former President of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, the organisation responsible for the code; on the estate of Sir Edward Dashwood, Chairman of the Countryside Alliance campaign for shooting, which helps to oversee the industry code, and on the estate of Andrew Christie-Miller, former Chairman of the Game Conservancy Trust, which also helps to oversee the industry code. If these three key figureheads cannot enforce the code on their own estates, then how can anyone else be expected to obey codes of practice or laws?

In Scotland, the Government's decision to bring in legislation short of a ban has several key problems: if any snares are legal, then it is much harder to enforce the law against illegal snares or against illegal use of legal snares, there is also concerns over the number of wildlife crime officers to currently police the already complex regulations of snaring. The new measures are simply a way of regulating cruelty because as long as snares are legal animals will be caught in them and will suffer horrific injuries often resulting in a slow painful death. There is no way to make snares truly target-selective and enforcing regulations regarding frequency of checking is impossible.

In addition to these factors, the League believes the shooting industry's appalling record on the illegal persecution of birds of prey – deemed by many gamekeepers to pose a threat to valuable game bird stocks – illustrates why it cannot be trusted to abide by new rules laid down to regulate snares. Incidents of bird of prey poisoning, trapping and shooting continue to rise, with frequent prosecutions of gamekeepers, despite repeated claims – largely discredited – by industry chiefs that shooting estates are rarely to blame.

Game bird shooting in Scotland is undoubtedly big business, claimed to be worth an estimated £240 million annually to the Scottish economy, and providing the equivalent of 11,000 full time jobs. But the ultimate cost to wildlife from extensive predator control programmes, including snaring, is much bigger.

References

- 1 Scottish Opinion Poll commissioned by LACS carried out by ComRes in February 2007
- 2 Analysis of Scottish Executive Consultation on the future of snaring August 2007
- 3 League / Advocates for Animals Vet Survey June 2008



League Against Cruel Sports Ltd
New Sparling House
Holloway Hill
Godalming
Surrey
GU7 1QZ
United Kingdom

0845 330 8486
www.league.org.uk