

It's time for change. Time to ban hunting with dogs for good

Fox hunting was banned 20 years ago in England and Wales by the Hunting Act 2004. But it never stopped. Foxes and other animals including deer and hares are still routinely hunted with dogs and rural communities are blighted by the chaos and antisocial behaviour involved. Illegal hunting is common practice, hunts are flouting the ban and the law is too weak to be enforced.

It's time for change. We're calling for the hunting ban to be strengthened to stop hunting with dogs for good.

"Public confidence in town and country cannot be eroded any further, it is untenable. The Hunting Act is not working effectively and illegal hunting is still common practice. I know it, you know it, the public and the hunts know it."

Ch Supt Matt Longman, National Police Chiefs' Council lead on fox hunting crime, June 2023.¹

Why hunting is still happening

Illegal hunting of foxes and other animals is prolific because hunts are exploiting weaknesses in the ban which prevent enforcement. 'Trail' hunting is being used as a smokescreen for old fashioned illegal hunting and many exemptions in the ban are being abused with impunity. Unlike other animal welfare and wildlife laws, serious and repeat offenders who are successfully prosecuted cannot even be jailed.



The scale of illegal hunting

Our data supports the view of police that illegal hunting is prolific. The League Against Cruel Sports collated 622 eyewitness reports of hunts being involved in suspected illegal fox hunting in England and Wales during the latest hunting season. That's more than 17 reports a week from August 2023 to the end of March 2024, and included 482 cases of hunts being seen chasing a fox. There were an additional 1,015 reports of havoc wrought by hunts, such as hounds killed on roads and traffic dangerously disrupted, trespassing across railway lines, chasing pets through people's gardens, trespass through farmland and worrying livestock, and witnesses to their behaviour being threatened and intimidated. The incidents occurred across 46 counties and involved 107 hunts.

*'The League collated **622 eyewitness reports** of hunts being involved in **suspected illegal fox hunting** in England and Wales during the latest hunting season.'*

¹<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jun/29/foxhunting-law-in-england-unworkable-says-police-chief>



The loopholes in the law

Trail hunting replicates traditional hunting almost exactly, other than claiming to follow an artificially laid, animal-based scent instead of real foxes. Created after hunting with dogs was banned, it is often indistinguishable in practice from traditional hunting, including sending dogs to search through fox habitats. This results in animals being frequently chased and killed. Hunts are also often followed by 'terrier men' whose role is to find and flush out foxes which have escaped underground. Trail hunting is designed so that when foxes are chased and killed, it can be disguised as an accident.

The Hunting Act also contains exemptions to allow hunting under certain circumstances. Hunts have superficially modified their behaviour to use these exemptions as an excuse if they are caught hunting. This includes claiming to be conducting scientific research, flushing foxes out to birds of prey or rescuing wild animals from suffering, activities which were never envisaged to be used by organised hunts in this way.

Police leaders call for change

The National Police Chiefs' Council lead on fox hunting crime Chief Superintendent Matt Longman has made a number of high-profile interventions calling for change.

In June 2023, Chief Superintendent Longman said, "I can only agree with the view that trail hunting has been used as a smokescreen for continuing illegal hunting". He added that "the simplest reason for the lack of prosecution is that the law needs revisiting"².

Speaking in March 2024 he said it is "fast becoming possibly one of the most farcical eras in criminal justice history because hunts are still offending, we are seeing it regularly"³. He added we need "to close some of these loopholes that are continually being exploited and putting police in a very difficult position as we try to rebuild trust and confidence with our communities".

² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jun/29/foxhunting-law-in-england-unworkable-says-police-chief>

³ <https://www.channel4.com/news/possibly-one-of-the-most-farcical-eras-in-criminal-justice-history-says-chief-superintendent-on-fox-hunting-crime>

A growing consensus for action

Ignoring the call for change is increasingly untenable. Two thirds of the public believe that animals are still being chased by hunting hounds⁴. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has highlighted the weaknesses of the hunting ban and recommended it be reviewed⁵. The Scottish Parliament has recently strengthened its own hunting laws and banned trail hunting with the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023.

The campaign to strengthen the hunting ban is supported by the Time for Change Coalition Against Hunting, made up of thirty five of the country's most influential animal welfare and environmental organisations⁶.

The public agree

Polling conducted by Find Out Now and Electoral Calculus in 2024 shows:

- **76% of British voters** support strengthening the hunting ban, including **70% of rural residents**.
- **85% of Labour Party** voters, **78% of Liberal Democrat voters**, and **67% of Conservative Party supporters** want the hunting ban to be strengthened.
- **58% of British voters** would be more likely to vote for a candidate who supported strengthening the ban – **just 7% would be less likely**.

We're calling on all parties and candidates to pledge to strengthen the Hunting Act 2004 to:

- **ban trail hunting, a smokescreen for illegal hunting**
- **remove exemptions which enable hunting**
- **introduce custodial sentences for those who break the law**

⁴ Polling by ORB, 2023.

⁵ https://www.unodc.org/documents/Wildlife/UK_Toolkit_Report.pdf

⁶ <https://www.timeforchangecoalition.co.uk/>