

# Tightening the Noose

An investigation into snaring in Northern Ireland

# Why snaring in Northern Ireland must be stopped

An investigation by the League Against Cruel Sports has revealed how snares are being set by gamekeepers and others across Northern Ireland in violation of supposedly strictly-adhered to codes of practice, contradicting industry claims and exposing wildlife and domestic animals to potentially horrific injuries and prolonged suffering.

Following the recent vote by the Environment Committee at Stormont to ban snares as part of the forthcoming Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill<sup>1</sup>, the shooting lobby has mounted an energetic campaign to reverse the decision, claiming the devices are an 'essential' tool for predator control, and maintaining that gamekeepers operate to 'high standards', demonstrate 'best practice' and strictly follow guidelines governing their use.

But new footage obtained by the League in Northern Ireland has exposed bad practices at some of the province's leading shooting estates, undermining the veracity of such claims and

vividly demonstrating why industry codes of practice are entirely inadequate to prevent cruelty and suffering.

Investigations carried out across the UK in recent years have repeatedly demonstrated the shocking impact of snaring on wildlife, livestock and even domestic pets.

In some cases these animals have been captured by mistake - snaring is by nature indiscriminate - but in all too many instances gamekeepers have been found to be deliberately targeting protected species and other creatures, such as the pressure to protect valuable game bird stocks reared for shooting.

Shoddy practices, breaches of industry codes of conduct and frequent violation of wildlife laws have become commonplace, and the League believes the shooting industry cannot be trusted to regulate itself for any longer - new and robust legislation that outlaws snares once for all is the only effective and sensible way to tackle the problem, in Northern Ireland and beyond.



Ballywater House, County Down



Ballywater House, County Down



Snare with no 'stop'

With its historic mansion, luxury accommodation and magnificent gardens, the tranquil Ballywater Park in County Down is one of Northern Ireland's leading country houses - and a popular venue for corporate hospitality, product launches and other high-end events and gatherings.<sup>2</sup>

But away from prying eyes, the estate is secretly conducting a cruel and barbaric predator control programme targeting wildlife deemed to pose a threat to valuable game birds reared for shooting.

On the edge of woodland overlooking the main track through the estate, investigators discovered a number of snares - simple round wire nooses positioned at ground level to capture passing foxes and other mammals - set around gateways into the adjacent field.

One was attached to a fencepost, others were set on branches in the hedge-line.<sup>3</sup> One had no attached 'stop' - metal bits designed to prevent unnecessary suffering and injury from the wire snare tightening as a caught animal struggles - meaning any animal unfortunate enough to become entangled in this snare could suffer serious injuries as the wire bit deeper and deeper into the flesh.

Other snares set at this location were found to have 'stops' attached, but investigators were still able to close the wire snare of one completely, demonstrating how the 'stop' was effectively useless. Again, any animal caught in this device would face the risk of serious injury.

Such devices breach the British Association of Shooting and Conservation (BASC) Code of Practice for fox snaring, which stipulates that only snares with a permanent stop should be deployed.<sup>4</sup>





Ballywater House, County Down



Snare set on animal run

Elsewhere on the estate, investigators discovered further snares set around a duck flighting pond, mostly attached to a wire fence.<sup>5</sup> One was again found to have an ineffective 'stop', and one was set adjacent to a water course, meaning any fox or other animal captured could be left dangling over the drop. The BASC code cautions against setting snares on fences or over watercourses.<sup>6</sup>

Ballywalter Park is home to Lord and Lady Dunleath, with either the Lord or his son, William Mulholland, personally overseeing each game shoot held on the estate.<sup>7</sup> The estate offers paying guns the opportunity to shoot duck, partridge and pheasant, with typical bags ranging from 300 to 450.<sup>8</sup>

According to shooting literature for Ballywalter Park, two gamekeepers are currently employed.<sup>9</sup> A previous magazine article about the estate described how a new gamekeeper - Gordon Woolridge - had arrived from Berkshire and was working hard on the 'breeding programme' and on 'predator control'.<sup>10</sup>

Ballywalter Park's corporate clients include Audi UK, Bass Ireland, the Ford Motor Company, Fujitsu, Kelloggs Ltd, the British Medical Association, Northern Bank, UNICEF, as well as BASC and the Countryside Alliance.<sup>11</sup> The estate also this year hosted the Ballywalter Game and Country Living Fair.<sup>12</sup>



Snare set on boundary of Cleggan Lodge estate

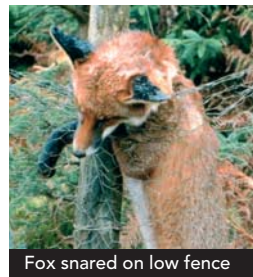
Further north, near Ballymena in County Antrim, investigators discovered a vast number of snares set on fence-lines dividing the prestigious Cleggan Lodge shooting estate and woodland

managed by the Northern Ireland Forest Service - in excess of forty devices were recorded attached to wire fencing overlooking moorland on the Cleggan estate.<sup>13</sup> Some had no permanent 'stop', others were found to be ineffective, again breaching the BASC code and illustrating further bad practice.



Entrance to the estate

Although it is unclear whether these snares were set by Cleggan Lodge gamekeepers or employees of the Forest Service - according to BASC, service staff and leaseholders in Northern Ireland use snares<sup>14</sup> - the potential for cruelty and suffering is the same.



Fox snared on low fence

Snares set on low fences such as these are particularly problematic - footage previously obtained in England has revealed the carcasses of foxes dangling over the wire, indicating the trapped animals have thrashed around to such a degree that they've ended up hanging from the fence line.<sup>15</sup>

Cleggan Lodge estate is owned by Lord Rathcavan and offers pheasant, partridge and woodcock.<sup>16</sup> A day's partridge shooting at Cleggan costs £6500 plus VAT; pheasants are charged at £25 each plus VAT, with a target bag of between 150 and 300; a day's woodcock shooting is available for £600 for up to four guns.<sup>17</sup>

In County Tyrone, at a shooting estate near Killywoolaghan, more snares were filmed by investigators, this time attached to wooden drag poles, or cut and left dangling from a tree.<sup>18</sup> Drag poles are pieces of wood, logs or metal poles that are attached to snares but not anchored to the ground.

The League believes all snaring to be cruel and unnecessary, but snares set on drag poles have the ability to cause even greater suffering: any animal becoming entangled in the device can drag the entire contraption - noose and pole - off, leaving the the gamekeeper unable to locate or dispatch it humanely.

Additionally, drag poles make an animal vulnerable to becoming caught on an embankment or other object, leaving them to die a slow, painful death. It is for reasons such as this that the use of drag poles is not sanctioned by codes of practice - the BASC code clearly states that all snares set must be 'well anchored'.<sup>19</sup>



Taking aim

On land used for shooting at Aghintain, near Fivemiletown, County Tyrone, investigations revealed further evidence of snaring and breaches of the BASC code. More than a dozen



snares were discovered set around the estate, some near to pheasant release pens, on fence lines or on distinct animal runs. The BASC code stipulates snares should not be set in the vicinity of 'well worn paths'.<sup>20</sup>

Although there is no suggestion of illegality on the part of any of the estates identified during this investigation, the League believes the evidence obtained is illustrative of the intensive and unacceptable nature of snaring being undertaken on shooting estates in Northern Ireland, and shows why the voluntary codes of practice currently touted by the shooting lobby are wholly inadequate.

The picture in mainland Britain is much the same - extensive undercover investigations carried out at shooting estates across England, Scotland and Wales in recent years have uncovered a disturbing pattern of cruelty, suffering and unacceptable practices.

Breaches of industry codes of practice in relation to snaring have been described by one investigator as 'endemic' and so commonplace that self regulation can only be regarded as a 'farce'. (In the most detailed survey of its kind, the League visited 68 leading commercial shooting estates in England, Wales and Scotland in 2006 and found that 78% of those using snares were blatantly ignoring official codes of practice).<sup>21</sup>

In 2008, unique footage obtained in Nottinghamshire and on the Isle of Wight graphically revealed the agony of animals captured in snares. In woodland used for shooting near the historic Welbeck Abbey, at Worksop, a shocking level of snaring, including the use of drag poles and snares placed on bridges and by streams, was discovered.

Disturbing images showed two live foxes entangled on snares attached to drag poles - the animals are seen thrashing around in a vain attempt to escape from the wire nooses.<sup>22</sup> As well as the use of drag poles, other breaches of BASC codes of practice were recorded at the estate.<sup>23</sup>

Following a tip off, investigators also visited a shooting estate near St Helens on the Isle of Wight and discovered a

live hare caught in a snare attached to a tree adjacent to pheasant release pens.<sup>24</sup> The animal was lucky enough not to have become caught in one of the other snares found at the estate, particularly those attached to drag poles or, in one case, a piece of metal piping.<sup>25</sup>

Across the water, on the Heath House estate near to Stockbridge in Hampshire, investigators discovered the remains of a fox that had been left to starve to death in one of dozens of snares set in woodland around the estate.<sup>26</sup> Footage obtained at the scene shows the skeleton - intact - hanging in the wire snare, the frayed wire testament to the struggle the animal must have put up before suffering a slow, lingering death.

As well as illustrating the inherently cruel nature of snaring, the incident clearly demonstrates a breach of another supposedly strictly-adhered to part of the BASC code - that snares should be checked at least once every day<sup>27</sup> and any animals captured humanely destroyed and removed. Such a breach is also an offence: under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 it is illegal to 'set in position any snare and fail to inspect it at least once a day'.<sup>28</sup>

Foxes were not the only animals being targeted at Heath House. In one of the worst instances of badger persecution ever uncovered in the UK, investigators revealed how more than half a dozen badgers had been snared and dumped on the estate.<sup>29</sup>

Covered by the Badgers Act 1992, and Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which makes it illegal to set a snare with the intention of taking or killing a badger, the animals are amongst the most heavily protected in the UK. The BASC code of practice also stipulates that if gamekeepers are in any doubt as to whether badgers are active in a particular



Intact skeleton of a snared fox



Badger caught in a snare



Another badger - victim of a snare



Snare on land near Aghintain

region they should not place snares.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, the animals are frequently persecuted by gamekeepers and others.



Decomposed carcasses

At Heath House, some carcasses were found partially buried, others decomposed almost beyond recognition; snares were found littered across the estate, some attached to fence lines, again in breach of the BASC code. It was later found that the badgers had died some weeks

apart, indicating that the snares had been reset after badgers had died at the same location.

Police arranged for post-mortems to be carried out on two of the snared badgers: these showed one had died from strangulation, and another, that had been partially buried, was found to have been shot, but still had the remains of a snare around its neck.<sup>31</sup>

Although gamekeepers at the estate were never prosecuted - they simply denied they had set the snares - the landowner, Donald Hutchinson, admitted to police at the scene that non target animals do occasionally get trapped.<sup>32</sup>

Some badger capture is unintentional, as was the case at the nearby Linkenholt estate, also in Hampshire, where gamekeeper Paul Ashton admitted to investigators that he had freed an animal after it became caught in one of dozens of snares put down at the estate.<sup>33</sup>

Back in Northern Ireland, at Ballynahinch, a Green Party candidate recently reported being involved in rescuing a badger that had been 'horribly injured by a snare'.<sup>34</sup> The Green Party candidate for Strangford, Barbara Haig, said following the incident: 'The badger had managed to pull the snare away from its fixing point but was choking and collapsed into a garden pond. The snare had entirely cut through its skin around its throat and it was starving'.<sup>35</sup>

Domestic pets are also frequently the victims of snaring, with the League uncovering numerous examples across the UK of cats and dogs becoming caught in, injured or killed by the devices. In an unprecedented move, pet owners across Norfolk were last year publicly warned about the dangers posed by snares after a clutch of disturbing incidents in the region.

Ann and Chris Durham, who live near Aylsham in North Norfolk, told how they were left 'devastated' after their pet cat was found dead hanging in a snare attached to barbed wire.<sup>36</sup> The Durhams launched petitions locally to get as many people as possible to add their voices to League campaign to outlaw snares.

In another incident in the area, Dennis Bradley was horrified when his cat Alfie returned home one morning with his front left leg completely severed, hanging on only by a bit of skin. Alfie survived but has had to have his leg amputated following the incident.<sup>37</sup>

Following allegations of local cats 'disappearing' at Thelverton, near Diss, investigators later discovered disturbing evidence of snaring and trapping taking place on nearby land used for game bird shooting.<sup>38</sup>

Snaring forms part of a much wider programme of predator control undertaken by the UK's estimated 2000 shooting estates, one which sees as many as 12,500 wild mammals and birds killed every day, according to extrapolations from research carried out by the Game Conservancy Trust.<sup>39</sup> Those that are not snared are shot, poisoned or otherwise 'culled' by gamekeepers or estate workers.

The League believes this is entirely unacceptable. The evidence contained in this - and other - reports underscores the cruel, barbaric and completely indiscriminate nature of snaring; illustrates the failure of industry codes of practice to prevent bad practice; and compellingly demonstrates why only a legislative ban on the sale and use of snares will ultimately prevent cruelty and suffering - firstly in Northern Ireland, then across the UK.



Alfie the cat - recuperating after the horrific snaring incident



Another innocent victim of the snare



## Appendices

- 1 <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/environment/2007mandate/minutes/2009/100325.htm>
- 2 <http://www.ballywalterpark.com/corporate.html>
- 3 Footage obtained, NI February 2010
- 4 <http://www.basc.org.uk/en/codes-of-practice/fox-snaring.cfm>
- 5 Footage obtained, NI February 2010
- 6 <http://www.basc.org.uk/en/codes-of-practice/fox-snaring.cfm>
- 7 <http://www.ballywalterpark.com/shooting.html>
- 8 <http://www.ballywalterpark.com/shooting.html>
- 9 <http://www.ballywalterpark.com/shooting.html>
- 10 [http://www.countrysportsandcountrylife.com/sections/homes\\_and\\_gardens/ballywalter/page5.htm](http://www.countrysportsandcountrylife.com/sections/homes_and_gardens/ballywalter/page5.htm)
- 11 <http://www.ballywalterpark.com/clients.html>
- 12 <http://www.ballywalterpark.com/game-fair.html>
- 13 Footage obtained, NI February 2010
- 14 [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/environment/2007mandate/wildlife\\_env\\_bill/submissions/BASC\\_Background\\_paper\\_on\\_snaring\(2\).pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/environment/2007mandate/wildlife_env_bill/submissions/BASC_Background_paper_on_snaring(2).pdf)
- 15 Footage obtained, England, 2004 / 2005
- 16 <http://clegganshoot.com/reservations.html>
- 17 <http://clegganshoot.com/reservations.html>
- 18 Footage obtained, NI February 2010
- 19 <http://www.basc.org.uk/en/codes-of-practice/fox-snaring.cfm>
- 20 <http://www.basc.org.uk/en/codes-of-practice/fox-snaring.cfm>
- 21 <http://www.league.org.uk/uploads/media/17/7300.pdf>
- 22 Footage obtained, Nottingham, September 2008
- 23 <http://www.league.org.uk/uploads/media/17/7300.pdf>
- 24 Footage obtained, Isle of Wight, September 2008
- 25 Footage obtained, Isle of Wight, September 2008
- 26 Footage obtained, Hampshire, May 2007
- 27 <http://www.basc.org.uk/en/codes-of-practice/fox-snaring.cfm>
- 28 <http://www.basc.org.uk/en/codes-of-practice/fox-snaring.cfm>
- 29 Footage obtained, Hampshire, May 2007
- 30 <http://www.basc.org.uk/en/codes-of-practice/fox-snaring.cfm>
- 31 Post Mortem carried out May 2007
- 32 Footage obtained, Hampshire, May 2007
- 33 Footage obtained, Hampshire, June 2005
- 34 <http://www.downgreens.com/local-area/ballynahinchspa/green-candidate-saves-badger-and-damns-dup-record-on-snaring%E2%80%8F>
- 35 <http://www.downgreens.com/local-area/ballynahinchspa/green-candidate-saves-badger-and-damns-dup-record-on-snaring%E2%80%8F>
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- 37 [http://www.league.org.uk/news\\_detail.aspx?ID=763](http://www.league.org.uk/news_detail.aspx?ID=763)
- 38 [http://www.league.org.uk/news\\_detail.aspx?ID=763](http://www.league.org.uk/news_detail.aspx?ID=763)
- 39 <http://www.league.org.uk/uploads/media/17/7300.pdf>

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