

Feature

Fox snaring

Only best practice will save this important pest control method, believes the NGO's political adviser, Charles Nodder.

THE SNARING OF FOXES AND, TO A LESSER extent, rabbits, has been under continued attack by the antis for years. They allege cruelty, widespread capture of non-target animals and a common failure to check snares within the law. They repeatedly call for all snares to be banned and they point to the fact that their use has long been outlawed in most EU countries.

The shooting and farming world's position is that snares are a necessary tool in wildlife management, particularly important at certain times of year and where alternative control options such as lamping and terriers are not possible. The wildlife management case is that, used properly, snares are humane, selective and highly efficient.

The battle over snaring came to a head in 2005, when the then Labour Government at Westminster was pressed by the antis to ban them outright. It very nearly did so, but at the last minute was persuaded, by the gamekeeping, shooting and farming organisations, to go down a 'code of practice' route instead. An

Contact NGO HQ if you would like to attend a snaring course.



Independent Working Group on Snares was set up, comprising land management and welfare groups, a code was drafted and it was adopted by Government. It is a voluntary code, not law, but at the time all snare users were urged to follow it.

The antis were not happy. They still wanted an outright ban and turned their attention to Scotland, trying to insert a ban into the Wildlife & Natural Environment Act (Scotland) 2011. Again, they narrowly failed, a compromise deal saving snaring north of the Border at the last minute. To keep the snare, however, the shooting organisations in Scotland had to agree that all snare users should be officially trained, on a register, all their snares should have numbered tags and that they should keep full records of all checking and captures. These new legal measures finally took effect throughout Scotland in April this year.

In the meantime, back at Westminster, the pressure on Government for a total snaring ban continued and Defra responded by commissioning research to find out the extent to which its 2005 voluntary snaring *Code* was known about, being followed and working. This research reported to Government six months ago and, like all scientific research, it has been refereed. In other words, the methodology and the science have been independently assessed as being correct.

Frankly, the findings on current snare use are not good. Knowledge of the *Code* was found to be fairly low, adherence to it lower still. Gamekeepers came out better than other snare users in both respects, but some were found wanting. Non-target captures were found to be high and although most of the non-target captures were hares, and thus no law was broken, the case that the snare is very specific and efficient tool overall was not well-supported. The welfare findings were not great either. All this information has been published.

Much better news, however, came from parallel research conducted at the

same time, which showed that where snares are used properly, within the Defra *Code of Practice*, they meet – indeed surpass – the strict welfare requirements of the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards. So the *Code* has been shown scientifically to be an effective way forward for snaring. The problem is that many users are not currently following it.

The Westminster Government has yet to respond to the research and it is being pressed by the antis to do so. The NGO has urged Defra to focus on increasing compliance with the *Code*. One possibility could be to re-issue it under the Animal Welfare Act so that, like the Defra *Code of Good Game Rearing Practice*, it would have a higher legal status. Those not following it would then be at high risk of losing court battles over welfare. The NGO has also urged the Government to take action to prevent the continued widespread sale of snares and snare-parts that are simply not compliant with the *Code of Practice*.

Whether these things will happen, or be enough for the Government to see off the current pressure from the antis, we cannot know, but if they did, and we all worked hard to improve compliance with the *Code*, then ultimately the overall performance of snaring would improve, and the technique would become more defensible. This is what the NGO and the other shooting/country organisations are all working for.

But people should be under no illusions. Snaring is under serious attack. Its defence has been undermined by its having been shown that too many people are not following the voluntary *Code* and are, as a result, getting poor results in terms of welfare and non-targets. Please do all you can to make sure that you and all those you know are following the Defra *Code of Good Practice on the Use of Snares in Fox and Rabbit Control*. It is readily available via the internet. Just type that title into any search engine and you will find it.