



BASC Submission to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee Evidence on use of snares

Introduction

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) is the largest shooting organisation in Scotland, and the UK, with approximately 150,000 members in total.

Our mission is to promote and protect sporting shooting and advocate its conservation role throughout Scotland and the UK.

Our members, considerable numbers of whom are gamekeepers, rural workers and farmers, have a wealth of experience, knowledge and skill when using snares in Scotland.

Amidst climate and nature crises, effective predator control must continue to play a crucial role in protecting endangered and threatened species, such as capercaillie, curlew, lapwing and golden plover.

BASC believes that the Scottish Government has not fully analysed nor evidenced the potential catastrophic consequences of a total ban on modern snares (also known as humane cable restraints).

Crucially, there has no impact assessment been carried out on biodiversity, conservation, agricultural damage, or the wider rural economy.

Fundamentally, this proposal removes a key option in the predator control toolkit which will spell disastrous consequences for threatened species. With the introduction of the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023, limiting the use of dogs, shooting will be the only remaining predator control method, which is ineffective in certain terrain.

It is vital that snares are retained under the powers of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Snares are necessary in places and at times of the year when rifle shooting is impossible because of dense cover or the absence of safety backstops yet when fox predation has critical impact and control can mitigate the damage. This is can also be when key species are breeding.

Key points from our response are as follows:

- BASC has serious concerns that a ban on all snares would remove the latest most modern fox snare designs (also known as humane cable restraints).
- Humane cable restraints are used by conservationists and landowners to prevent foxes preying on ground nesting birds such as Curlew, Lapwing, and Golden Plover.
- Removing the lawful use of humane cable restraints to catch and hold foxes, at times of the year and in locations where other methods simply do not work, would have serious and unintended consequences for rare and endangered wildlife and risk hastening the extinction of iconic species such as Lapwing and Curlew in Scotland.

- BASC has engaged with the Scottish Government and other stakeholders regarding the issue of snaring, the adoption of humane cable restraints and best practice.
- BASC supports the continued use of humane cable restraints, making compliance with the Best Practice Code a legal requirement and banning the use of non-code compliant snares.
- The Scottish Government cannot simply introduce a ban of snares; a licencing system for the use of humane cable restraints by authorised people must take precedent over a ban.
- Considering the estimated amount of people who rely on humane cable restraints, such a licencing system does not seem to be too onerous.

Background

Conservation and biodiversity

Some 66% of ground-nesting bird species are in decline in the UK and are more likely to decline than other species¹. The brown hare is a biodiversity priority species. Fox predation (predominantly of leverets in the spring), is a significant determinant of hare populations. Studies carried out by GWCT show that predation control is always accompanied by an increase in hare numbers and this 'explained' 46% of the variation in hare population²

The Eurasian Curlew, according to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), stands out as one of the UK's breeding bird species in severe decline. From 1995 to 2016, it saw a staggering 48% drop in numbers³, with Scotland experiencing an even more alarming decline exceeding 50%.

In the case of the Capercaillie, a recent report commissioned by NatureScot and presented to its Scientific Advisory Committee in February 2022 paints a grim picture. If current trends persist, this bird species faces extinction within two to three decades. The report identifies predator control as one of the most effective immediate measures to boost the Capercaillie population⁴. The report states, 'Reducing predator numbers would lead to a rapid improvement in Capercaillie breeding success.'

Research conducted over eight years at Otterburn by GWCT⁵ has demonstrated how effective predator control can significantly increase local species abundance, surpassing levels observed without predator control, resulting in improved conservation status when appropriate habitat is available. Species like Lapwing, Golden Plover, Curlew, Red Grouse, and Meadow Pipit exhibited threefold higher breeding success when predator control measures were in place, leading to subsequent population growth. In contrast, populations declined in the absence of such control.

¹ Hradsky BA, Kelly LT, Brendan AL, Wintle A., (2019) 'FoxNet: An individual-based model framework to support management of an invasive predator, the red fox'. Journal of Applied Ecology, British Ecological Society.

² GWCT. (2022) 'Gamekeeping and brown hare numbers'. Available at: <https://www.gwct.org.uk/research/species/mammals/brown-hare/gamekeeping-and-brown-hare-numbers/> (Accessed: 14/10/2022)

³ www.bto.org/sites/default/files/bbs-report-2017.pdf

⁴ Commissioned Report - Review of Capercaillie Conservation and Management – Report to the Scientific Advisory Committee (February 2022) www.nature.scot/doc/review-capercaillie-conservation-and-management-report-scientific-advisory-committee

⁵ Fletcher, K.L., Aebischer, N.J., Baines, D., Foster, R., & Hoodless, A.N. (2010). Changes in breeding success and abundance of ground-nesting moorland birds in relation to the experimental deployment of legal predator control. Journal of Applied Ecology, 47: 263-272.

In addition, the Langholm Moor Demonstration Project also showed that fox and corvid control had beneficial effects on waders, hen harriers, and red grouse⁶.

Other studies also suggest positive outcomes from predator control for species like the Black Grouse and Capercaillie⁷. The recent report to NatureScot's Scientific Advisory Committee on Capercaillie Conservation and Management emphasized that reducing predator numbers would swiftly enhance Capercaillie breeding success. However, it acknowledges that shooting foxes in Capercaillie habitats may not always be practical or safe. The use of snares presents an alternative method of predator control, although it must be carried out with great care for Capercaillie conservation. Previous guidance developed by GWCT and RSPB for the Capercaillie Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) Group is being updated to align with the urgent action led by the Cairngorms Caper project, supported by the Cairngorms National Park Authority and NatureScot.

The impact of predators is now widely acknowledged by various organisations at both policy and practical levels. Consequently, predator control is not limited to farmers and gamekeepers but is also applied at numerous designated sites and nature reserves across the country, often receiving public-sector funding.

Managing predators

At time when Scotland is committed to addressing the dual challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, it is not advisable to sacrifice effective tools for managing one of our most proficient predators.

The 2018 review of British mammals' population and conservation status reveals that the Red Fox range is expanding in Scotland. The UK has the second highest density of foxes in Europe⁸.

The review estimates the British population at approximately 357,000 (with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 104,000 to 646,000), marking a 48% increase since the 1995 technical summary. At that time, the Scottish population was estimated at around 23,000 and appeared to have slightly decreased over the subsequent decade.

With expanding woodlands providing cover, it is likely that the fox range will continue to expand. This potential threat is acknowledged in guidance provided by Scottish Forestry and may require Environmental Impact Assessments for new planting proposals.

Humane cable restraints for foxes

Modern humane cable restraints for foxes would exceed requirements for restraining devices under the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards (AIHTS) (they are not tested under the agreement because foxes are not listed as a species within it).

⁶ Ludwig SC, Roos S, Baines D (2019) Responses of breeding waders to restoration of grouse management on a moor in South-West Scotland. *Journal of Ornithology* 160: 789–797

⁷ Summers, R.W., Green, R.E., Proctor, R., Dugan, D., Lambie, D., Moncrieff, R., Moss, R. & Baines, D. (2004). An experimental study of the effects of predation on the breeding productivity of capercaillie and black grouse. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 41: 513-525.

⁸ Mathews F, Kubasiewicz LM, Gurnell J, et al (2018) A review of the population and conservation status of British mammals: technical summary

Humane cable restraints are also used by wildlife biologists carrying out research with the foxes caught being released unharmed and a number being recaptured.

Humane cable restraints for foxes have several design features to improve the welfare of the foxes caught and ensure a substantially reduced risk of 'holding' non-target animals that were initially 'captured'.

Whilst these humane cable restraints look simple, and on first view appear very similar to a 'traditional fox snare', they are distinctly different and their design is the result of significant scientific research.

In addition to being free running (a legal requirement which means they relax rather than continually tighten) these design features include:

- A stop, which is a small wire crimp positioned on the snare wire at a predetermined length (26cm) which prevents the cable from ever closing beyond a certain point so it cannot overtighten and 'strangle' a fox. In addition, an animal such as a hare can back out and deer can remove their feet.
- The wire the humane cable restraint is made of is of a specific strength, which means it will not break before a breakaway eye or weak link, and this is incorporated into the design. Therefore, should an animal stronger than a fox e.g. badger be caught it can self-release without risk of the restraining wire breaking first.
- Two strong swivels allow the snare to rotate freely, preventing it becoming kinked, unravelled, or overwound, thereby risking breakage.
- A fixed anchor is used to hold the humane cable restraint in place. There are different designs and types, but all have the purpose of holding the device in place so that it cannot be moved.

Consequences of banning humane cable restraints

BASC has serious concerns that a ban on all snares would remove the latest most modern snares (also known as HCRs).

Removing the lawful use of a humane and essential method of catching and holding foxes, at times of the year and in locations where other methods simply do not work, would have serious and unintended consequences for rare and endangered wildlife and risk hastening the extinction of iconic species such as Curlew in Scotland.

The Curlew is subject to a single species action plan under the African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA)⁹.

Both action plans recognise that the decline is driven by low breeding success and both list high levels of nest and chick predation being amongst the factors responsible.

⁹ Brown, D.J. (2015) International Single Species Action Plan for the Conservation of the Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* *arquata*, *N. a. orientalis* and *N. a. suschkini*. AEWA Technical Series No. 58. Bonn, Germany. Available at: https://www.unep-aewa.org/sites/default/files/publication/ts58_eurasian_curlew_issap_website_version.pdf. (Accessed 14.10.2022)

Removing any legal method of fox management when vulnerable species are on the brink of extinction is choosing to push them to oblivion faster still.

Humane cable restraints are used by conservationists and landowners to prevent foxes preying on ground nesting birds such as Curlew, Lapwing, Golden Plover and other iconic species such as the European Brown Hare.

A downturn in conservation efforts because of a ban on humane cable restraints would risk seriously damaging the struggling attempts to halt the decline in ground nesting birds.

Conclusion

Modern humane cable restraints, which have undergone improvements like adjustments in safety stop positioning, the inclusion of double swivels, and the addition of breakaway components, have substantially mitigated the welfare risks linked to their use.

One of the key catalysts for these advancements was the enactment of the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act in 2011. This legislation encouraged more thoughtful deployment and positioning of snares, as well as a reduction in the duration of their use.

Additionally, this legal framework has stimulated the innovative application of mobile technology to enhance record-keeping and make better use of the data collected during inspections.

Considering the considerable concern surrounding the conservation status of iconic Scottish bird species, such as the capercaillie and curlew, it is essential to retain all currently permitted predator control methods for the time being to support their recovery.

The data on incidents and prosecutions indicates a consistent decline since the implementation of the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act in 2011.

Completely eliminating snaring, without first obtaining a more comprehensive understanding and conducting an objective evaluation of potential concerns related to the broader public benefit associated with species conservation, would be premature and could have catastrophic consequences for threatened bird species.