

# BRIEFING: Snares in the UK

**CAMPAIGN AIM** A ban on the sale and use of all snares in the UK, including free-running snares<sup>1</sup>

## Use of snares in the UK

Snares have been used to trap animals since the Stone Age, but certain ones, called free-running snares, are still used in the UK today. A snare is a wire loop, anchored to the ground, which traps an animal when they walk or run into it. It is estimated that around 1.7 million animals<sup>2</sup> are trapped by snares every year.

Snares are often used to trap foxes and rabbits in order to keep their numbers down. However, UK fox and rabbit numbers are in decline, according to the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) annual British Bird Survey, which includes a survey of the number of UK mammals. The 2019 survey showed a 64% decline<sup>3</sup> in the wild rabbit population between 1996 and 2018. BTO stated that this decline has shown no sign of slowing over the past ten years.<sup>4</sup> It also found the fox population to have declined by 44%<sup>5</sup> over the same period.

Snares are also used to trap brown hares – regarded as a pest species due to claims that they damage crops. However, their numbers have declined by 80% in the last 100 years.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this longer-term decline, brown hares are a Priority Species with a Species Action Plan under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework.

Snares are often used on land that is managed for the mass-production and release of some 60 million pheasants and partridges, to be shot for 'sport'.<sup>7</sup> Other land managers, involved in conservation work, such as RSPB and Woodland Trust do not use snares. Animal Aid contends that there can be no justification, therefore, for the shooting industry's claim that snares are an important tool in game bird management.<sup>8</sup>

## Types of snares and regulation

One type of snare, called a self-locking snare, was banned under the **1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act**.<sup>9</sup> That same Act also governs the use of free-running snares, which are still legal, stipulating that *'the noose of the snare is able at all times freely to become wider or tighten (and is not prevented from doing so whether because of rust, damage or other condition or matter other than the stop)'*<sup>10</sup> and that free-running snares must be inspected *'at least once every day at intervals of no more than 24 hours'*<sup>11</sup>

The Act also sets out those animals who may not be killed or taken by snares, including badgers and the Common Otter.<sup>12</sup> Defra's **Code of Good Practice on the use of Snares in Fox and Rabbit Control in England 2005**<sup>13</sup> states that it is *'an offence to cause bodily injury to any animals included in Schedule 6'* and that *'Snares must not be set on or near to a badger sett, or on the runs radiating from a sett.'*<sup>14</sup>

## The Agreement on International Humane Trapping

**Standards (AIHTS)** currently excludes foxes and rabbits from the animals covered by the Agreement, but it does include badgers, one of the 'non-target' animals most commonly caught in snares.<sup>15</sup>

The AIHTS' indicators of poor welfare<sup>16</sup> were, however, applied during the research undertaken for a study produced for Defra entitled **'Determining The Extent of Use and Humaneeness of Snares in England and Wales'**<sup>17</sup> (see below).

## Issues with free-running snares

Although designed to stop tightening when the trapped animal stops pulling, there is good evidence to show that animals do not always just stop still. Instead, many will panic causing the snare to twist or fray. It has been observed that badgers, in particular, circle and dig down in their efforts to escape, creating a shallow hollow in the ground.<sup>18</sup>

## Defra admits that snares could act as either free-running or self-locking, depending on how they have been set.<sup>19</sup>

Another issue with snares is that animals may be caught around parts of their bodies other than the neck (for which the 'stop' has been set, if used correctly). Animals may be caught by the abdomen or legs, which will cause them to panic and twist the snare.

The study into snares produced for Defra contains a particularly upsetting description of a rabbit killed deliberately in a scientific trial. The rabbit was snared at 14.19 in the afternoon but was not pronounced dead until 07.15 the following day. The suffering of the animal, recorded on video for 17 hours, includes: multiple episodes of gasping, fitting, flipping over, collapsing, laboured breathing and getting the snare wrapped round front and back legs in an attempt to escape.<sup>20</sup>

Two badgers were caught during one field trial for the Defra study, and it was observed that *"These results-to-date suggested 95% probability of failing the AIHTS for restraining devices if the trial continued and 20 badgers were caught (as non-targets) with the same rate of indicators of poor welfare occurring."*<sup>21</sup>

Hares are not covered by AIHTS welfare standards but were considered during the study, and it was observed that *"Three of the six hares held had indicators of poor welfare (Table 5.7), suggesting a 97% probability that the snare would fail the AIHTS for restraining devices if the trial continued."*<sup>22</sup>

Snares also catch lactating female foxes (and female animals of other species), which leaves offspring vulnerable to predation or starvation. The Defra study observed that *'All methods of control that target adults and are used during the breeding season are likely to leave dependent young to die from starvation if the primary carer (especially a lactating female) is caught and killed.'*<sup>23</sup>

*"From the veterinary perspective, snares are primitive indiscriminate traps that are recognised as causing widespread suffering to a range of animals. At their least injurious, snares around the neck can result in abrasion and splitting of the skin. However, being caught in a snare is extremely distressing for any creature and vigorous attempts to escape are natural. These efforts cause the snare wire to kink, thereby changing a free-running snare to a self-locking one. Strangulation and choking follow. It is commonplace for snares to lodge around the chest, abdomen or legs rather than the neck. In such instances the stop restraint is ineffective and the wire cuts through skin and muscle and, eventually, bone. Badgers may be eviscerated when the abdominal wall is cut through. Amputation of the lower limb and foot by a snare is well-documented in deer. These unfortunate animals suffer immensely."*<sup>24</sup>

Ranald Munro, retired Prof of forensic veterinary pathology

### Non-target animals

Snares are indiscriminate, and local newspapers are peppered with tragic stories of 'non-target' animals who have been killed or maimed by snares, including cats, dogs and badgers.<sup>25</sup>

There are also many reports of animals who have been caught by snares on campaigning organisation OneKind's website entitled Snarewatch.<sup>26</sup>

The Defra study interviewed people who used snares and found that: *'60% of operators had caught non-targets in fox snares at some time. Badgers were the non-target species most commonly mentioned i.e. by a quarter of these operators.'* Nearly a third (29%) of those setting snares for rabbits have (unintentionally) snared cats.<sup>27</sup>

Badgers are a protected species, should not be snared and are covered by the AIHTS. However, during the Defra field study two badgers were caught by snares, though both escaped due to component failure in the snare.

In another of the study's field trials, *"The numbers of non-target species caught and held were: five badgers, two hares, one pheasant and one dog."*<sup>28</sup>

### Countries that have banned snares

Most European countries have banned snares or restrict their use. Switzerland has also banned snares. In 2021 the Welsh government announced it intended to "amend the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to ban the use of snares and glue traps" in Wales. Only four EU countries permit the use of snares:

Ireland, France, Spain and the Walloon region of Belgium. Ireland has no restrictions or licensing requirements.

### Alternatives to the use of snares

Some of the methods to deter unwanted guests include trap-and-release, electric fencing, wire netting fences, motion sprinklers, ultrasonic devices and the use of radios or reflective discs. However, Animal Aid believes that we must live in harmony with nature and other animals, who are, after all just trying to live and feed themselves and their young.

### Why a ban on all snares is needed

Snares are more strictly regulated in Scotland. However, according to the Scottish campaigning group, OneKind, such regulation does nothing to alleviate the inherent cruelty of snares – in that a regulated snare, is still a snare, causing pain and distress to animals. *'The law in Scotland is stronger than the rest of the UK, yet despite this, it still offers Scotland's animals very little in the way of protection. In the UK, snares must be free-running to reduce the risk of snare wire causing flesh wounds and snares must be checked every 24 hours. In Scotland, there are additional requirements, such as ensuring snares are fitted with a 'stop' to prevent animals from being strangled. Operators must also complete a training course by a rural college or shooting industry body to receive an ID number from Police Scotland, which must be present on all their snares. This requirement can aid enforcement but does nothing to protect animals from the inherent welfare problems of snares.'*<sup>29</sup>

So-called better regulation does nothing to prevent non-target animals from being trapped in snares in Scotland, as evidenced by the group's reporting site Snarewatch.

Despite fox and rabbit numbers being in decline in the UK<sup>30</sup>, pro-bloodsports groups insist that, *'Foxes are present in our countryside at a much higher density than nature intended, as a result of human activities'*<sup>31</sup>. Of course, one of those 'human activities' is the release of millions of game birds to be shot for 'sport', which attracts foxes.

### Support for a ban on snares

Celebrities, such as Chris Packham, Peter Egan and Deborah Meaden, have backed the campaign to ban snares.

A 2021 YouGov poll found that 69% of people support a ban on the use of snares, whilst only 14% oppose such a ban (the remainder were undecided).

According to OneKind, 76% of people in Scotland support a ban on the use of snares.<sup>32</sup>

Animal Aid, along with a great many other animal protection and rescue organisations that have witnessed first hand the injuries done to wild and domestic animals by snares, are calling for a total ban on the use of snares.

### How to help

There are many ways that you can help the campaign to ban snares. For the most up-to-date information on the campaign, please visit: [animalaid.org.uk/bansnares](https://animalaid.org.uk/bansnares)