

Hints for using Larsen traps

The success of Larsen traps

Larsen traps were designed by a Danish gamekeeper in the 1950s. In Denmark it has been suggested that this trap alone was responsible for a significant reduction in the national magpie population from 1965.

Larsen traps will catch all corvid pest species (ie. crows, magpies, jackdaws, jays, rooks) at all times of the year, but their particular value is in catching crows and magpies when they set up their breeding territories. On the original design, the trap mechanism involves a spring door to each catching compartment which, when set, is held open by a split perch. To enter the trap, birds the size of a magpie or crow inevitably drop onto the perch. The perch gives way, and the bird's momentum takes it past the bottom of the door, which flips up – et voila! Because Larsen traps are small, they can easily be moved around. Traps can be moved to deal with specific pairs of crows or magpies, and a few traps can therefore cover quite a large area.

Larsens are live-catch traps. Why catch alive? Because of the risk of catching birds other than corvids. Virtually all such non-target birds are protected by law, and the licences allowing Larsen trapping stipulate that they must be released alive and

unharmd. In today's countryside, the future of shooting depends on gamekeeping having a responsible image which treasures other aspects of the countryside and is sensitive to the feelings of the wider public. Having said this, we have experienced very few captures of non-target species in Larsen traps - another point in their favour. In a survey of over 10,000 birds captured, only 1% were of non-target species. Finches and tits often visit them, but are too small to trigger the mechanism, and can anyway escape. Of course many legally protected bird species, as well as gamebirds, suffer from corvid predation on their eggs or young, and the Larsen trap is potentially an effective tool in the conservation of these birds too. There is no "natural balance" between corvids and the birds they prey on, because they also feed to a great extent on other foods provided, directly or indirectly, by man. Recent Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust research shows that corvid control can contribute to the conservation of some, but not all, songbird species.

A second reason to catch corvids alive is that each may in turn be used as a call-bird to attract further captures. In this way,

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust

For over 75 years our scientists have been researching why species like the grey partridge, water vole, corn bunting and black grouse have declined. We are continually developing practical measures to reverse these declines.

Our aim is simple - a thriving countryside rich in game and other wildlife.

We are an independent charity reliant on voluntary donations and the support of people who care about the survival of our natural heritage.

Why you should read this leaflet

This leaflet distils our experience of successful use of Larsen traps since 1989. It also has detailed information on the legal requirements in relation to Larsen trap use and best practice for the welfare of decoy birds.

given that you operate several traps, the whole effort quickly grows to an effective scale within a single breeding season.

When to trap and why

We suggest that trapping effort is restricted to spring and early summer. This is the period of maximum game vulnerability and the time when Larsen traps are most effective. In most areas, the overall population of crows and magpies is far greater than the number of breeding pairs. This is apparently because only a limited number of territories with a suitable nest tree site can be fitted into a given landscape.

Non-breeding birds usually feed in flocks, roaming over areas much larger than the usual territory, and using different foods from those of territorial birds. As a result they are probably less of a threat to game. Flock birds should be thought of as a reservoir of frustrated would-be breeders. If a territory becomes vacant, it will normally be claimed by fresh birds from this reservoir. However, until newcomers are established

they are unlikely to find game nests.

If you trap outside the period March to July, you will have to diminish the reservoir population over a very large area to cause any benefit to your wild gamebird population. When catching flock-living corvids you may actually educate other members of the flock and make them trap-shy. This might jeopardise your efforts in spring when it really counts.



Why call-birds work

A call-bird is a previously caught magpie or crow, which is kept alive in the special decoy compartment of the trap. Uncaught territory holders think a single call-bird is an intruder, and will try to drive it away. They are very aggressive, and if the trap is left in peace, few are so shy that they will not get caught. In a scientifically-conducted experiment by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust in 1989, traps with call-birds were 15 times more efficient at catching crows, and 10 times more efficient for magpies.

Taking care of your call-birds

Look after your call-birds. They will work best for you when in good health, because then they move about more in the trap and catch the attention of territory holders. They also call vocally, but won't do if they are miserable.

Visit each call-bird at least once a day to renew food and water (once every 24 hours in England to comply with the current licence). If they are seen by territory holders to be actively feeding, they will arouse special jealousy. (Apart from this, you are bound by animal welfare laws, and are furthermore responsible for the good image of the shooting fraternity.) These birds drink a lot of water - earthenware hamster bowls make good non-tipping receptacles. A better choice is to use a bottle with a hole in its side, wired or tied to the side wall of the trap.

This helps to prevent the water becoming dirty, and reduces evaporation loss in hot weather. Various kinds of food are suitable, but we have found "sausages" of brawn-type dog food, fed with bread, to be very convenient. Another choice is complete diet dog food (soaked). If you feed your call-bird with carrion, make sure it is cut up, or at least cut open, as magpies can have great difficulty in getting into an intact carcass.

Remember to clean out left-overs and clean the cages properly. Rotten food is not a suitable diet.

Make sure the call-bird has a proper perch - magpies and crows need them particularly for roosting at night, and there should be adequate shelter from hot sun, rain or wind.

The licence allowing use of Larsens specifies that you must provide food, water, shelter and a perch.

For keeping decoys that are not in use, you should use a suitable aviary. This must be large enough to allow the birds to stretch their wings freely, it should have shelter and several perches. A 3m x 1.5m A-frame pen of the type often used for gamebirds has been found to work well.

Do not wing-clip your birds

A well publicised court case addressed the issue of whether a wing-clipped decoy (ie. feather clipped) was "maimed"

and therefore illegal to use under the Provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Although the case concluded that wing clipping was not a maim, we are against this practice.

It does not enhance the welfare of the decoy and does nothing to improve the effectiveness of the trap. It also means that if someone liberates your decoy there is a high risk that it will suffer a slow death by starvation. The liberator is unlikely to realise that the decoy is wing clipped until it is out of the trap.

Which species to use as a call-bird

In the wild, crows are dominant to magpies and drive them from their territories. For this reason, crows can be caught to magpie decoys, but the reverse is rarely true. On no account should species other than corvids be used as decoys.

The licence allowing Larsens specifies that they may only be used with crows, magpies, jays, rooks or jackdaws, as decoys.

After a while call-birds get quite tame and phlegmatic. Recently caught territory-holders make the best call-birds, as they are more restless and aggressive, so simply move new captures to act as call-birds in a different territory, and keep a turn-over of call-birds.

Where to put the trap

If you are familiar with your land, you will know the specific trees that always seem to attract crow or magpie nests. If you are just getting to know the area, look out for nest-building activity from the beginning of March. Before bud-burst, magpie nests are very obvious in the trees. Crows, and to a lesser extent magpies, often sit high in the trees near the centre of their territory, literally acting sentinel. You should aim to place a trap in plain view of sentinels, and within 100 yards of the nest site. If you haven't time to watch out for nests

or sentinels, concentrate on small copses and spinneys, thick hedges and woodland edges - but have you really got time to check the traps every day?

Avoid placing traps too close to rookeries, unless you want a full-time job despatching or releasing rooks! We suggest that crows and magpies are your main target to improve wild gamebird production.

Place the trap on the ground, especially for crows, which like to approach on the ground. However, when trapping magpies among bushes, or in a dense hedge, raising

the trap above brambles gives it a better chance of being seen. Do not be afraid to experiment with setting traps in cover. A good call-bird will often reply to the calls of the territory holder even though the trap is out of sight. Indeed, this ploy can account for trap-shy individuals.

If you have not caught anything within two days, it is best to move the trap and use it elsewhere. If you know that there are birds which will not go in, rest the site for a few days and then bring back the trap with a new decoy.

How to catch both birds of a pair

It is not strictly necessary to catch both birds of a pair. They defend their territory together; and to remove one will prevent the remaining bird defending the area against a speculating pair of intruders; in this way its breeding effort is disrupted. Furthermore, the male bird feeds the female while she is incubating the eggs - if he does not turn up, the hen bird must leave the nest. If you keep up your use of Larsen traps throughout spring and early summer, the establishment of territories will be continually disrupted and, while present, fresh birds will be pre-occupied with territorial defence and nest building. Their demand for food is never swollen by the need to feed young, and they have little time to watch the movements of incubating gamebirds. In a well run trapping programme you will have caught each original pair before the young hatch, and then gone on to remove new ones before they are fully established.

Crows and magpies learn very quickly, and a bird that witnesses its partner being removed from a trap by a human and killed may subsequently be very shy of traps. If you catch a bird in one compartment of a Larsen trap, leave it disputing its case through the wire with the call-bird. Its partner will very often join in and get caught in the other compartment. This is one advantage of the three-compartment Larsen trap. However, if you have not caught the other bird by nightfall, you probably never will, so take out the first capture. It is inhumane to leave one of these birds overnight without a perch and with no food and water for the next morning. Siting traps where you can view them with binoculars allows you to check without scaring potential captures. Do remember, however, that you are legally required to go to the trap and check food and water each day.

Catching the difficult ones

Perhaps as a result of a previous fright, some magpies and crows can be very shy of a Larsen trap. Crows, in particular, will often dance around a trap but refuse to jump on. Moving the trap deeper into the territory is the most likely route to success. Otherwise it can pay to lift the trap up onto a bale or some other solid object. Raising the decoy in this way sometimes infuriates the territory holder into jumping on. Do not just use legs though - if the territory holder can see the decoy through the floor of the trap it may attack from below and never land on the top.

Another popular choice is to use a side-entry Larsen. There are various versions available from different manufacturers, many of which work well. However, please be careful to choose a trap of adequate size.

We specifically warn against reducing any of the dimensions of compartments of the Larsen trap design as offered by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust. They are the minimum needed for the welfare of captive birds.

How to handle call-birds

Both crows and magpies can give a fairly painful nip, but neither are really capable of breaking the skin of an adult human. However, it is wise to use a gardening glove when handling them for health reasons. Concentrate on handling the bird securely, but gently. As you put your hand into the trap, a magpie will flutter round the roof, whereas a crow will try to cram itself into a bottom corner. Pin the bird gently against the floor, roof or side of the trap, sliding your first and second fingers round its neck so that they meet at the fingertips. The bird can't bite you now,

and so long as you don't let it wriggle its head between these two fingers, it can't get away from you. Your palm will be over the bird's back, and you can use your thumb and fourth and fifth fingers to pin the wings against the body as you pick it up. Both species grip with their feet: use your free hand to gently prise them open again. When taking call-birds out of the big compartment of a Larsen trap, you will find you have to bring them tail first through the access hole.

Birds can be transported humanely to another trap in a dark rigid box with proper ventilation. Remember it is in your interests to look after the bird. A sack is not good enough, and may well be illegal.

How to dispatch a captured corvid humanely

If you are right-handed, hold the bird as described above in your left hand. With your right hand, grip the legs, tail, and wing tips together. In one movement, draw the bird out of your left hand, so that it doesn't have time to bite you, and strike the back of its head very hard against the edge of the trap/Land Rover/etc. It takes a surprising force to kill one of these birds. Do all you can to make death instant. Breaking its neck after this makes sure that you have not just stunned it.

Where to get your first call-bird

Please do not contact us to ask where you can get a call-bird. Ask your gamekeeper friends, or catch your own. Larsen traps work quite effectively with bait alone. (You may even care to keep a couple of tame birds from year to year to start you off each spring. They are really fascinating creatures, and if you take an interest, you will learn a lot). Please also remember that it is illegal to trade in live magpies and crows.

Operating with bait alone

As mentioned above, Larsen traps do catch crows, magpies and other corvids when used with bait and no call-bird. You will need several to be sure of success and the strategy is rather different from the call-bird approach.

Where to put the trap

Although the trap should be obvious, birds will be more wary of it when there is no call-bird. So it is probably unwise to stand it out in the open. Put it among bushes, or at the base of a hedge or tree.

In contrast to using call-birds, it may take a while for your bait to be spotted (because it doesn't move), or for birds to overcome their natural fear of novel objects. So anticipate quite a long effort, but do check your traps daily. Pre-baiting (with

the trap unset) is completely unnecessary - if a bird goes in, you might as well catch it.

If your trap catches nothing at first, don't blame the trap. It is probable that no corvids have found your bait, (after all, many natural bird nests escape predation). After 10 to 14 days, it may be best to move the trap to try another site.

What bait?

The best bait by far is the egg. However, crows and magpies seem to show a distinct seasonal response to eggs, and will only show keen interest when eggs are naturally available. Outside late March to

late July, they are rather indifferent.

When you use eggs, aim to make the offering look like a depredated nest. Make a 'nest' of dead grass in one (only one) of the catching compartments, and arrange a clutch of five or six eggs in it. Cracked or oversize gamebird eggs from the laying pen are ideal, but hens' eggs (brown or white) seem just as attractive. Break two or three eggs around the trap, and leave the eggshells lying about. Most importantly, on the flat board that shelters a call-bird when present, or on the flat top between the two catching compartments, carefully break an egg so that the contents lie in a

tempting puddle. Renew this egg regularly: it is the glistening fresh egg that catches the corvid eye.

Of other baits, carrion is second best (open rabbits or squirrels - again it is the freshly glistening viscera that attracts, and both crows and magpies have limited powers of opening carcasses). Even white sliced bread may be used: it is eye-catching, fairly natural in farmland, and corvids develop a taste for it. Again, a scatter of bait is more eye-catching, but don't overdo it, or the birds will see no reason to enter the trap

The legal position

The use of Larsen traps is regulated by Open General Licences issued under section 16 of The Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Separate licences are issued by The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (in England); The Scottish Executive Countryside and Heritage Unit, and the National Assembly for Wales Countryside Division. Individual operators do not need to apply for these licences.

These licences restrict the use of Larsen traps to "authorised persons" (effectively landowners or persons with their permission). They also impose a series of licence conditions on the user:

These mainly relate to the welfare of the decoy bird. If you follow the guidance given in these hints you should be well within the law, but the following points should be re-emphasised:

1. **Check your trap every day (at intervals of no more than 24 hours in England).**
2. **Provide adequate food, water, shelter and a perch.**
3. **Only the following five species can be used as decoys: Crow, Magpie, Rook, Jackdaw, Jay**
4. **Remove the decoy if the trap is not in use.**
5. **Make sure that the trap is rendered incapable of holding or catching birds "when in the open and not in use".**

It is also important to remember that the licences are issued for only a year at a time, and that they can be amended. It is up to you to ensure that you are aware of the current licence conditions, and that you stick to them. You can view and download the current licences on the relevant national Government websites.

Please do remember to take note of the welfare points mentioned in this leaflet. Look after your call birds, and keep your traps clean. Strict adherence to our guidelines will not only ensure keepers are working within the law, it will also help the public accept this valuable trapping technique.

When you have finished trapping

A number of incidents of accidental captures of protected species have been reported when traps have been left out. As a result, the licence requirements now state that the decoy bird must be removed from the traps when not in use, and that the trap must be rendered incapable of catching or holding birds. Please remember that if a top entry trap is left with its doors closed, a heavy bird or animal landing on one of them could force the door down and trap itself. For safety sake it is best to turn the trap upside down.

We would recommend that wherever possible, traps that are not in use are taken in for storage. This prevents the risk of accidental captures, avoids the chance

of someone else setting or vandalising the trap, and extends its working life.

Keep in touch

There is still much to be learnt about the efficient control of corvid numbers. If you have experiences at variance with the advice given here, or make any significant improvements to trap, bait, or strategy, please contact the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust's Advisory Service on 01425 651013.

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