

Larsen trap use in Scotland

January 2024

A guide to successful good practice in Scotland

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 can successfully 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 unharmed. 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 non-target species. Finches and tits often visit them, but are too small to trigger the mechanism, and can 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 (GWCT) 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

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust

For over 80 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 and captive birds.

this way, 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. Flock living corvids are usually best controlled through careful deployment of larger multi-catch cages.

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. Should you attempt to catch flock-living corvids with Larsen traps 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.



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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 GWCT 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.

You have a legal obligation under a General Licence (except where unexpected severe weather prohibits) to visit each call bird in a trap at least once every day at intervals of no more than 24 hours to ensure that there is adequate food and water at all times. If they are seen by territory holders to be actively feeding, they will arouse special jealousy. (Apart from this, you are bound by the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, as amended by the Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Act 2020, and are furthermore responsible for the good image of the shooting fraternity.) These birds drink a lot of water – earthenware hamster bowls can make good non-tipping receptacles.

A better choice is to either use a bottle with a hole in its side, wired or tied to the side wall of the trap, or even better, use a

A nipple drinker provides a clean and reliable water supply for the decoy.



nipple drinker bottle as used for pet rabbits. This helps to prevent the water becoming dirty, and reduces evaporation loss in hot weather. Various kinds of food are



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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) or even lamb pellets. 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. If you wish to use meat-based bait in Larsen mate or Larsen pod traps, you must first register with NatureScot <https://licensing.nature.scot/trap-registration>. Please also be aware that carrion can be attractive to non-target species and may look gruesome to members of the general public. We therefore suggest that the use of complete dog food may be the best policy. The use of fallen farmstock as bait or food in traps is illegal under UK Animal By-Products Regulations.

Remember to clean out left-overs and clean the cages properly. Rotten food is not a suitable diet and certainly does not portray a best practice image.

Make sure you comply with the General Licence under which you are

Soaked complete dog food is an ideal diet for call birds.



operating by providing the call-bird with a suitable perch that does not cause discomfort to the bird's feet – magpies and crows need them particularly for roosting at night, and there must be adequate protection from the prevailing or anticipated wind and rain; we recommend both a shelter panel on the side of the Larsen trap as well as a roof panel. Appropriate shelter should also help during periods of hot sun.

In the case of the Larsen trap, only one decoy bird may be used, and it must be kept in a separate compartment; it must be removed from the trap when not in use. For keeping decoys that are not in use, you should use a suitable aviary which must be large enough to allow the birds to stretch their wings freely; it should comply with animal welfare laws by providing adequate food, water, shelter and suitable perches. A 3m x 1.5m A-frame pen of the type often used for gamebirds has been found to work well. Remember that birds being kept in an aviary should be checked at least once a day.

Do not wing-clip your decoy 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 General Licences in Scotland specify that Larsens may only be used with hooded and carrion crows and magpies as decoys. Please see the Legal section on page 5 for further specific detail on jackdaws and rooks.

After a while call-birds get quite tame and phlegmatic. Some people believe that recently caught territory-holders make the best call-birds, as they are more restless and aggressive, but we do not have evidence to support this. In fact we feel that keeping the same caller is easier and less disruptive to the 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. When operating a Larsen 'mate' or Larsen pod trap, it must be firmly pegged or staked down or tethered prior to use so that it cannot be moved should a non-target animal be caught. Traditional Larsen traps do not need to be secured in place.

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 they have young, 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. Do not 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 inspect the trap at least once every day at intervals of no more than 24 hours. Adequate food, water, shelter and a suitable perch must be provided. An inspection must be sufficient to determine whether there are any live or dead birds or other animals in the trap and any dead or sickly decoy birds must be immediately

removed from the trap. **Do not therefore rely on a binocular check.**

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. Larsen mate traps are also gaining in popularity but we urge operators to either use them adjacent to Larsen traps, or if used individually to catch the first decoy bird, bait them with eggs in the spring. General Licences now permits the use of meat bait in Larsen pod and Larsen mate traps in Scotland subject to conditions outlined in the General Licences (see legal position on p.5). Meat bait can also be used in a traditional Larsen trap. The definition of a Larsen trap in the 2022 licences specifically excludes designs of any trap where one or more capture compartments are mounted directly above the decoy department. This prohibits the placement of a Larsen mate or pod on top of a Larsen trap.

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

How to handle call-birds

As both crows and magpies can give a fairly painful nip 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 the call-bird out of the decoy compartment of a Larsen trap, you will find you have to bring it 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

Any birds to be killed under General Licence must be dispatched humanely. The General Licences clearly describe

humane dispatch as taking all reasonable precautions to ensure that any killing of birds under licence is carried out by a single, swift action as soon as reasonably practicable after discovery. 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. Alternatively carry and use a humane bird dispatching tool.

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 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, wall 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 within the legal period. 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 roof panel that shelters a call-bird, 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. Meat bait is permitted for use in Larsen mates and pods, as well as traditional Larsen traps. However, operators intending to use meat bait in Larsen mate and Larsen pod traps must provide basic details to SNH licensing team before use. Use of these baits is only permitted once the receipt of the appropriate information has been acknowledged by NatureScot. See item 8 in the legal position on p.5. You do not have to register an intention to use meat bait in a traditional Larsen trap.

The legal position in Scotland (From 1 January 2023)

The use of Larsen traps is regulated by General Licences (GLs) issued under section 16 of The Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Separate licences are issued annually by NatureScot <https://licensing.nature.scot/trap-registration>. All trap operators must be registered in advance with NatureScot - <https://licensing.nature.scot/trap-registration> - in order to use traps under GLs. You are not required to carry a licence on your person.

These licences restrict the use of Larsen traps, Larsen mates and Larsen pod traps to 'authorised persons' (effectively landowners, occupiers or persons with their permission) who must understand and comply with their conditions ie. General Licence 01 is for the conservation of wild birds and GL 02 is for the prevention of serious damage to livestock, foodstuffs for livestock, crops, vegetables or fruit. The licences only cover situations where Nature Scot are satisfied that there is no other satisfactory solution in respect of the species to which they relate and the circumstances in which the licensed action may be taken. If you follow the guidance given in this good practice guide you should be well within the law, but the following points should be re-emphasised:

- A Larsen trap, Larsen mate or Larsen pod trap to be used under a general licence must only display a single tag or sign that shows the NatureScot Trap Registration Number which allows the individual operator to be identified. All trap operators must be registered in advance with NatureScot in order to use traps under this licence. To obtain a registration number visit - <https://licensing.nature.scot/trapregistration>
- When a Larsen trap, Larsen mate or

- Larsen pod trap is not in use it must be immobilised and rendered incapable of use. Access doors must be secured in an inoperable position with a padlock or the trap removed from the site. Only operate Larsen traps, Larsen mates or Larsen pod traps under the terms and conditions of each licence for the purpose specified.
- Check trap(s) at least once every day (at intervals of no more than 24 hours) unless not possible because of unexpected severe weather conditions. A buddy system can be operated whereby the registered operator may temporarily authorise another person to check their trap(s).
- Provide adequate food, water, shelter and a suitable perch, that does not cause discomfort to the bird's feet, at all times.
- Only the following three species can be used as Larsen decoys: carrion and hooded crow and magpie. Jackdaws and rooks may only be used as decoys in multi-catch crow cages.
- Only one decoy bird may be used in a Larsen trap and it must be kept in a separate compartment; the decoy must be removed when the trap is not in use.
- Eggs, bread and meat bait are all permitted for use in Larsen mate, pod and traditional Larsen traps. Operators intending to use meat-based baits in Larsen mate or pod traps must first register with NatureScot in advance and will be asked to provide an annual return comprising the number and types of traps used and the area in which they will be used. See General Licences for relevant NatureScot contact details.
- Larsen mate or Larsen pod traps must be firmly pegged or staked down or tethered

prior to use. Traditional Larsen traps do not need to be secured in place.

- A Larsen mate trap must have a minimum distance of 39cm between any two corners when set open. The trap must not shut tightly along the majority of the length of the meeting edges.
- Any trap used under General Licence must not be designed or used in such a way to likely cause injury or unnecessary suffering to any bird trapped.
- Larsen traps, Larsen mates or Larsen pod traps should not be used within 500m of a designated site listed under the General Licence where you cannot meet the site's "Standing Conditions". These standing conditions are available at - <https://www.nature.scot/designated-sites-standing-conditions>.
- Definition of Larsen trap specifically excludes designs of any trap where one or more capture compartments are mounted directly above the decoy department. This prohibits the placement of a Larsen mate or pod on top of a Larsen trap.

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 Scottish Natural Heritage website.

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

Non-target species

GLs specifically detail which birds may be taken or killed under licence by certain methods. Any non-target species must be released unharmed immediately on being found in a Larsen or in any trap used under GL. Please be aware that the 2022 GLs carry the following warning: 'NatureScot reserves the right to exclude the use of GLs by certain persons and/or on certain areas of land where there is evidence to suggest that a wild bird or birds have either been killed, injured or taken or where there has been an attempt to do so other than in accordance with a licence, or where General Licences are being misused.'

Securing the access doors of a Larsen trap, Larsen mate or Larsen pod trap shut

with a padlock is one of two legal options when traps are not in use. However, 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 can suggest any significant improvements to trap, bait, or strategy, please contact the GWCT's Advisory Service on 01738 551511.

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