

# Fox snaring in the UK: Your Essential Brief

## Q: What is the central issue?

A: Snares are considered valuable for the control of foxes, but they have been criticised for perceived low target selectivity and poor animal welfare. This has driven further research, which has resulted in changes in snare design, codes of practice (Wales and Scotland) and legislation (Scotland).

## Q: Are there direct alternatives to snares?

A: No. There are no functional replacements yet that match the advantages of a snare. Despite their shortcomings, this is precisely why some important conservation projects use them to help control foxes – including the ten-year study to recover [Langholm Moor](#) (funded by Buccleuch Estates, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, the RSPB and Natural England).



## Q: Are snares used in the UK designed to kill?

A: No. [Snares](#) are a live-capture device used by gamekeepers and farmers (in similar numbers). They are designed to catch and hold a fox<sup>1</sup> without injury until it is dispatched humanely (or released if it is a non-target)<sup>2</sup>. Snares are [regulated](#) through both legislation and [codes of practice](#). Their use is limited by the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981) and subsequent devolved [legislation](#).

## Q: Can a snare really catch an animal alive and uninjured?

A: Yes. We know this because biologists have used snares for decades, as an efficient way to catch foxes and badgers alive in order to fit radio tags to study their ecology (in some cases re-capturing them). Used in this way, injuries are rare. After release, tagged animals show no abnormal behaviour, survive normally and breed normally.

## Q: Is there a humaneness standard for trapping, and how do snares compare?

A: Fox snares, correctly used, meet the humaneness standards for restraining traps defined in the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards ([AIHTS](#))<sup>3</sup>. In contrast, the common mouse trap does not.

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<sup>1</sup> 97% of snare use in the UK is for fox control. To a much smaller extent they are used in rabbit control. It is lawful to use snares to target several other mammal species (e.g. hare, rat, mink) but in fact this is rarely done. Gamekeepers and a similar number of farmers use snares across 6% of landholdings in England and Wales.

<sup>2</sup> Self-locking snares designed to kill were banned in the UK in 1981. In other countries and regions, for example North America, the term “snare” also refers to a device intended to kill. The design and mode of use are different.

<sup>3</sup> AIHTS is an agreement between the EU, USA, Russia and Canada defining humaneness standards for traps that capture mammals commonly traded for their fur. Technically, neither fox snares nor mouse traps are required to meet the AIHTS standard, but in the absence of a universal standard for all traps the AIHTS is often referred to as a yardstick for humaneness.

## Fox control: Is it important?

**Q: Why is fox control important for the conservation of our game and wildlife?**

**A:** Wild ground-nesting birds like black grouse, partridge, lapwing and curlew are particularly vulnerable to predation by foxes, as are brown hares. Several of these are species of conservation concern; others are game species; some are both. In order to protect vulnerable species while they are breeding, gamekeepers aim to control fox numbers, particularly from late winter to early summer. Foxes are also controlled around pheasant and partridge rearing and release pens in late summer and autumn.

**Q: So are foxes solely to blame for the decline of wild bird populations?**

**A:** No. However, where ground-nesting bird populations have already been reduced due to a change in land use, generalist predators can prevent their recovery – even when the habitat has been improved. This is why some conservation projects involve reducing the local fox population.



**Q: Why do farmers control foxes?**

**A:** To prevent the predation of lambs, piglets reared outdoors, and free range and domestic poultry by foxes<sup>4</sup>.

**Q: Have the UK fox population and the number trapped in snares been estimated?**

**A:** Yes. The best estimate<sup>5</sup> of the British fox population is 240,000 adults in the spring (1995), to which a production of 425,000 cubs is added annually. For the population to remain stable, 425,000 foxes

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<sup>4</sup> There are no estimates for the number of foxes trapped in snares by farmers.

<sup>5</sup> Individual foxes in the spring. Harris, S., Morris, P., Wray, S. & Yalden, D.W. (1995). *A Review of British Mammals: Population Estimates and Conservation Status of British Mammals Other than Cetaceans*. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough.

would have to die each year<sup>6</sup>. Some die naturally (including disease), and in the past there would have been less food, as well as their own predators – wolves, lynx, golden eagles and eagle owls – reducing numbers. Today an estimated 100,000 per year are killed by cars. Gamekeepers probably kill 39,000, of which some 25% are estimated to have been trapped in snares<sup>7</sup>.

**Q: Why has the fox population benefited from the way we have changed our land use?**

**A:** In 19th Century Sweden there was a spectacular rise in fox abundance as wolves and lynx were extirpated<sup>8</sup>. However, if we restored these apex predators in the UK, the relationship they would have with foxes would almost certainly not be that which they had before, because the landscape and how we use it has changed. In this country apex predators were long ago removed and we have changed how we use the land, so there is more food<sup>9</sup> available than before. This has allowed some generalist predators, like the fox, to achieve a level of abundance that can be a significant detriment to some of their prey species.

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<sup>6</sup> Lloyd, HG & Jensen, B. (1976) Annual turnover of fox populations in Europe. *Zentralblatt für Veterinärmedizin B*, 23: 75-86.

<sup>7</sup> 9,500 foxes. Be aware that although this number is based on the evidence we have, it is a ballpark figure. The 25% figure is based on daily records by 61 gamekeepers over 12 months. As we pointed out during the Burns enquiry, such figures have huge errors attached to them. Reynolds, JC (2000) *Fox Control in the Countryside*.

<sup>8</sup> The statistics covering the whole of Sweden indicate a large increase in foxes killed as the wolf and lynx were extirpated. Elmhagen, B. & Rushton, S.P. (2007) Trophic control of mesopredators in terrestrial ecosystems: top-down or bottom-up? *Ecology Letters*, 19, 197-206.

<sup>9</sup> This includes human food waste, farm livestock, wild rabbits and gamebirds (rearing and releasing gamebirds has probably improved fox food supply in autumn and winter).

## What are the alternatives to snaring?

**Q: What other methods match the utility of snares?**

**A:** None. Whilst there are other methods of fox control, they may not be effective when the vegetation is tall in the spring and summer.

**Q: What about rifle shooting or other live traps?**

**A:** These are the only lawful alternatives for lethal control (although non-lethal methods like electric fencing also have their place). Whilst technology is allowing these techniques to change, they are still no match for all scenarios. For effective fox control in a variety of situations it is desirable to have a range of methods available, giving options according to cost, time, safety, landscape and seasonal constraints.

**Q: Can foxes be trapped in other ways?**

**A:** Cage traps are suited to use in urban environments, but are generally not very successful in rural settings. They have been formally assessed for rural foxes in Spain, but had a low success rate and were not very selective, taking lots of non-target animals including raptors. There is also a Collarum trap, which, when triggered, throws a heavy snare over the fox's head to restrain it; these do pass humaneness standards but also have low efficiency.

**Q: Why don't these other traps work as well as snares?**

**A:** Foxes are intuitively wary about approaching anything 'new', and this makes it necessary to tempt them with bait, which also raises the risk of non-target captures. By contrast, snares catch the fox completely unawares, do not require the use of bait, and have a higher catch rate when skilfully used.

**Q: Couldn't you flush the foxes out into the open or use scent lures to make shooting possible?**

**A:** Because the foxes are fully aware that something is happening, flushing and attracting tend to select younger, more naïve foxes. To control predation pressure in the spring and summer it is necessary to catch older foxes that have reached breeding age.

**Q: Can we expect other developing techniques to replace snares?**

**A:** There is a lot of technology being brought into fox control. For example, advances in night vision, thermal imaging equipment, and acoustic attractants are making it easier to shoot foxes safely and selectively from high-seats. However, at present no other method matches the utility of snares in spring and summer conditions.

**Q: If foxes trapped in snares are going to be shot, why bother using snares in the first place?**

**A:** Shooting foxes with a rifle can be impractical during the spring and summer, when natural vegetation and arable crops are tall enough to hide a fox. Also, a gun must have someone present to work it, whereas snares work 24 hours a day to catch and hold the fox. A snare must be inspected daily so that if a fox has been caught it can be humanely shot.

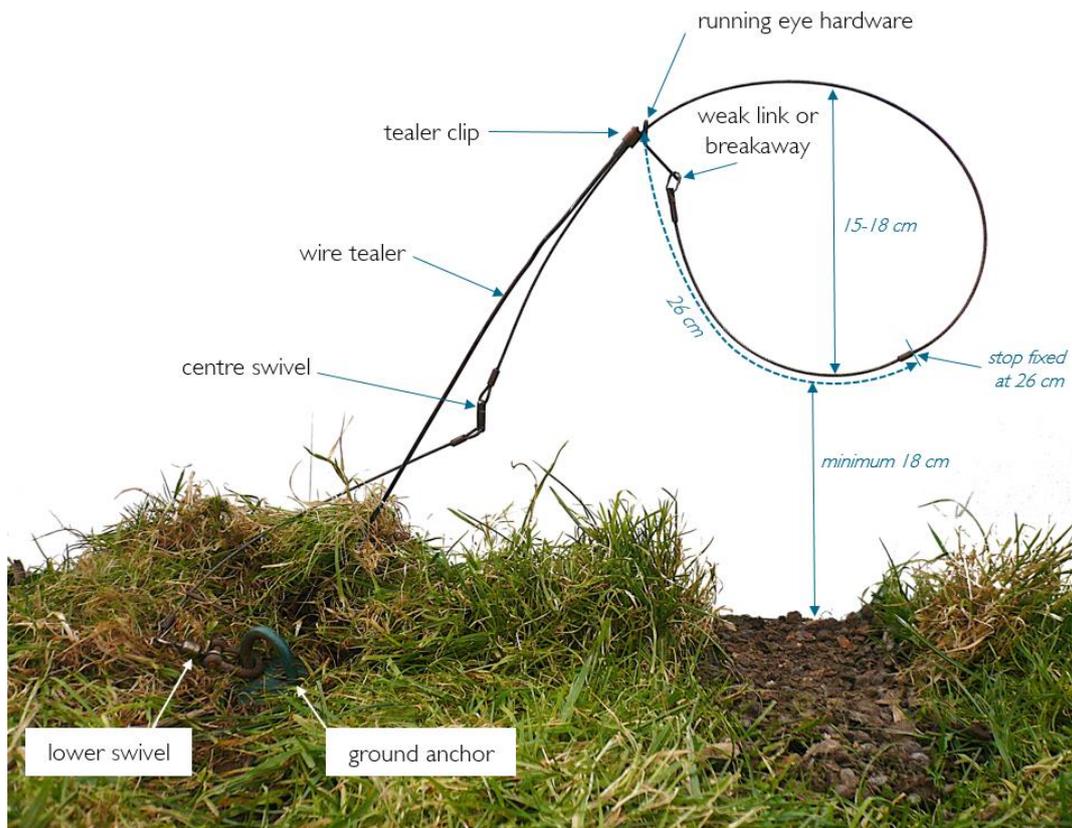
**Q: Why do conservationists need to control foxes in the spring and summer?**

**A:** The fox breeding season coincides, naturally enough, with that of their prey. The food demands of growing cubs are far greater than the maintenance requirements of adults. So to protect prey species that are especially vulnerable to fox predation, like ground-nesting birds, fox control in spring and summer is critical.

## The main components of a well-designed snare

**Q: How does a snare work?**

**A:** A loop of wire is set on a support ('tealer') at the appropriate height in a suitable place – for example in a 'tramline' made by tractors in an arable crop, which foxes may travel along. The head of the fox goes through the snare loop, which draws up to a fixed minimum size, thus restraining but not strangling the fox. The snare is anchored to the ground so the fox is held alive.



**Q: Break-away device – how does that work?**

**A:** This is a device on the cable that opens the loop if an animal stronger than a fox (such as a badger) pulls at the snare.

**Q: Fixed stop – what does that do?**

**A:** This prevents the loop closing beyond the size required to trap (but not kill) a fox. It also allows hares to self-release by pulling their heads out, and prevents the capture of an animal by the leg.

**Q: Running eye – how does that work?**

**A:** It is designed specifically not to lock and therefore allows the snare loop to expand with the movements of the captured animal (e.g. when breathing).

**Q: Wire tealer – what does that do?**

**A:** This is a temporary support that holds the snare loop at fox head height. Once an animal has been trapped, the snare releases from the support.

**Q: Why are there two swivels?**

**A:** These are to prevent separation of the cable by twisting, which can lead to subsequent breakage. Breakage can allow the animal to escape with the snare noose around its body, which can cause very poor welfare. The best position for the swivel (to relieve stresses in the cable) is considered to be near the ground anchor, but a second swivel is positioned further up in case the first one is buried under excavated soil or entangled with an obstacle.

## Fox snares: Hardware vs practice

**Q: Is the risk of injury dependent on the design of the snare, or on the way it is used?**

**A:** Both are critical. Snares that conform to the code of practice are designed to restrain rather than kill, and in most instances will release non-target animals that encounter them. Foxes and any non-targets that are held in such snares will generally be uninjured and fit for release, provided also that the snare has been used as prescribed in the code of practice.

**Q: Why do we also need to focus on operator skills?**

**A:** Few – if any – methods of catching wild animals are independent of operator skills. Fieldcraft is needed to decide when it is appropriate and safe to set a snare. In particular, setting snares where a captured animal could entangle the cable with nearby obstacles hugely increases the risk of it being injured – for foxes, the risk of injury or death is ordinarily <1%, but rises to 16-40% where entanglement occurs. The necessary skills, and awareness of the mistakes to avoid, can be taught.



**Q: How can we ensure high standards of operation?**

**A:** In the last 25 years the GWCT has worked constructively to understand existing fox control practices, to improve snare hardware, and to identify good and bad operating practices. Through publications, the codes of practice, and training courses we promote a responsible and careful attitude to the use of snares. Operating practices are critical to welfare outcomes, so following the code of practice is essential. All stakeholder groups representing the main users of snares are signatory to and promote the code of practice.

## Key controversies

### Q: What are the key controversies surrounding snares?

A: Criticisms of snares focus on (1) the degree of suffering caused to individual animals through injury or death; (2) the accidental capture of pets; and (3) the frequency of accidental captures of non-target wildlife species.

### Q: Does anyone have a reliable measure of the scale of these problems?

A: The 2012 Defra study<sup>10</sup> set out to estimate the scale of these perceived problems. Inevitably, the resulting figures are approximations, with considerable uncertainties attached. But we have reasonable estimates of the scale on which snares are used in England and Wales, and a good understanding of how often and why animals get injured in snares. Some organisations have constructed figures by extrapolating from small samples, which are unlikely to be representative of all the situations in which snares are used, or of current working practices. For instance, the humaneness assessment in the Defra study involved a single operator working in one set of circumstances, while assessment of the extent of use was made across a random sample of landholdings throughout England and Wales. To multiply one by the other to estimate the total number of captures creates a nonsense. Densities of foxes and non-targets vary enormously from place to place and even from time to time. This will be reflected in operator practices and in consequent capture histories.

## (1) Injury and death

### Q: What percentage of snare-caught foxes are found injured or dead?

A: In an extensive field study<sup>11</sup> involving 429 fox captures, we showed that, given good practice, less than 1% of snare-caught foxes were injured or dead as a result of capture. The GWCT estimated in 1995 that gamekeepers used snares to capture something like 9,500 foxes. 1% of this would be 95 foxes. This is unavoidably a very rough estimate, but to put it into perspective, the Mammal Society estimated<sup>12</sup> that 100,000 foxes are killed by cars each year; an additional unknown number are injured by road traffic.

### Q: Do animals released from a snare go on to develop life-threatening conditions?

A: Some people believe<sup>13</sup> that animals held in snares may seem all right at the time of release, but go on to develop a life-threatening necrotic condition. There is no evidence that this commonly occurs. On the contrary, foxes and badgers caught in snares by scientists for radio-tagging have typically not shown abnormal behaviour or higher mortality. In GWCT studies, some individual foxes have been re-captured in snares with no apparent ill effects.

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<sup>10</sup> *Determining the extent of use and humaneness of snares in England and Wales*, Defra, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Short, M.J., Weldon, A.W., Richardson, S.M., & Reynolds, J.C. (2012). Selectivity and injury risk in an improved neck snare for live-capture of foxes. *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, 36: 208-219.

<sup>12</sup> National Road Death Survey, Mammal Society, 2001. Available at: <http://www.mammal.org.uk/sites/default/files/RoadDeaths2001Report.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Stocker, L. (2005) *Practical Wildlife Care, 2nd Edition*. Wiley-Blackwell, 352 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4051-2749-3.

**Q: What have veterinary studies of captured foxes revealed?**

**A:** In a 2012 study by Defra, post-mortem examination of 14 snared foxes by very experienced veterinary pathologists showed that, where the code of practice<sup>14</sup> was followed, injuries were typically absent or of a minor nature. Furthermore, there were no injuries hidden inside the animal that would not be anticipated from external examination.

## (2) Accidental capture of pets

**Q: Are snares a risk to pets?**

**A:** An operator following the code of practice will not be setting snares close to houses or on footpaths or public land, where pets might get caught. In the GWCT study<sup>12</sup> of 34 snare users, only 1 out of 1,296 captures was a domestic pet, a dog that was released unharmed.

**Q: Why does the RSPCA quote figures suggesting pets are commonly caught?**

**A:** They have a different 'window' on the same activity. Our knowledge of responsible snare use comes from intensive monitoring of practitioners over long periods of time and includes all captures. Experience of snares among RSPCA inspectors and vets is heavily skewed to cases that have already gone wrong, where careless or irresponsible snare use has resulted in the capture of pets or injury to wild animals.

**Q: Why is there such a disparity of views?**

**A:** The puzzle, for the last 20 years or so, has been how to marry the grisly cases brought to public attention by anti-snaring campaigners, in which both wild animals and pets caught in a snare have clearly experienced immense suffering, with the much more positive picture of snare use during studies by biologists. After a lot of research and development into snare use and design, we now have a good understanding of why these perspectives are so different.

## (3) Accidental capture of wildlife

**Q: Are snares a risk to other wildlife?**

**A:** It is not possible to eliminate the risk of catching non-target wildlife, but a good deal can be done to minimise it and to avoid injury while the animal is held captive.

**Q: How are snares in the UK designed to minimise these risks?**

**A:** The codes of practice prescribe snare design features and working practices that minimise these risks. This is science-based. For instance, snares now have a stop, which limits the loop closing beyond the size required to trap a fox. On the new GWCT '[break-away](#)' snare, the position of the stop is determined to

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<sup>14</sup> [Codes of practice](#) are published separately in England, Wales and Scotland.

allow hares to self-release by pulling their heads out. In our field experiment<sup>15</sup> 68% of captured hares<sup>16</sup> self-released; a further 24% (i.e. 92% in total) were held but were fit for release on discovery.

**Q: How does the local hare population respond to fox control and snare use?**

**A:** Hare populations respond very positively to fox control provided the habitat is good<sup>17</sup>. This remains true even where snaring forms part of the fox control, despite the accidental captures of hares. (See [GWCT research on hares and predator control](#)).

**Q: Has anyone estimated the percentage of the badger population trapped in snares?**

**A:** Yes. In 1995 we estimated<sup>18</sup> that less than 1% of the badger population<sup>19</sup> was captured in a snare set by a gamekeeper. Many or most of these would have been uninjured and fit for release, and since 1995 we have substantially improved snares and recommended operating practices. In contrast, about 50,000 badgers are estimated to be killed on the roads annually and an unknown number injured in the same way.

**Q: How can snare design and operation minimise the risk of injuring a badger?**

**A:** Badgers are sometimes caught in snares intended for foxes, but again this can be minimised by using well-designed snares and careful operating practices<sup>20</sup>. The new GWCT snare has a 'break-away' device on the cable, which opens the loop if an animal stronger than a fox pulls at the snare. During field trials of this snare, 39% of accidentally captured badgers self-released and were not retained, and 73% of those that were retained were set free by the operator (i.e. 83% in total). The 17% of casualties were mostly caused by entanglement, which could have been avoided given better awareness of this risk among the snare users. Now that we understand the source of this problem, the code of practice and training material have been duly strengthened.

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<sup>15</sup> Performance of the snare was compared against snare types already in use in the UK, through a randomised field trial in 2007-9 involving 34 gamekeepers at separate sites.

<sup>16</sup> Hares are probably the non-target species most commonly caught in fox snares in arable areas. We found in our studies that hare populations respond positively even where snares are used as part of fox control, because foxes are an important predator of hares.

<sup>17</sup> Reynolds, J.C. & Tapper, S.C. (1995) Predation by foxes *Vulpes vulpes* on brown hares *Lepus europaeus* in central southern England, and its potential impact on annual population growth. *Wildlife Biology*, 1: 145-58.

<sup>18</sup> The GWCT estimated in 1995 that 1,300-2,300 badgers were trapped in snares by gamekeepers annually. Many or most of these would have been uninjured and fit for release.

<sup>19</sup> In 1995 there were thought to be about 300,000 to 400,000 badgers in the UK, and about 170,000 cubs are born each year.

<sup>20</sup> Injuries can occur to individual animals, but this is strongly associated with careless placement of the snare where it can become entangled with nearby obstacles.

## Useful links

- Our [fox-snaring guidelines](#) offer extensive information on the design, use and legality of snaring.
- Codes of practice for the various UK administrations can be downloaded from [our website](#).
- For practitioners who are concerned about the licensing and legal recommendations surrounding snaring and other predator control, we run [regular courses](#) and have [advisors available in your region](#).
- We have published a [position statement](#) setting out the background to this issue and our research-led recommendations for policymakers.



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