

The case for banning the use and sale of free-running snares in the UK

Introduction:

This Briefing has been prepared in advance of a parliamentary debate on the use of free-running snares in the UK and the campaign to ban the sale and use of such devices. A government petition calling for a ban on the use of free-running snares was signed by more than 100,000 people.¹

At the end of a Parliamentary debate on this issue in 2016, the following motion was agreed without a vote: *'That this House notes the indiscriminate and cruel nature of snares, the failure of previous attempts at voluntary and self-regulation amongst operators, and the continued suffering caused to thousands of animals every year by these traps; and calls on the Government to implement a full ban on the manufacture, sale, possession and use of snares at the earliest opportunity.'*²

Unfortunately, rather than a ban on snares, a non-statutory, industry-owned Code of Practice was introduced.³

According to a report for Defra, 'The estimated number of fox snares set in England in each month of the year ranged from a minimum of 62,823 fox snares set in December to a maximum of 188,283 during March. In Wales the number of fox snares set was also at a minimum in December at 17,231 and at a maximum in March at 51,641.'⁴

Approximately 1.7 million animals are caught in snares every year.⁵

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'.

The case for banning snares

Free-running snares (legal) and self-locking snares (illegal)

A free-running snare is a wire loop restraining device, used to capture animals such as foxes and rabbits, which should stop tightening when an animal stops pulling. There is a 'stop' on free-running snares, which is set at differing diameters, depending on the targeted animal.

Self-locking snares are those which continue to tighten by a ratchet action around the animal as they struggle. These were made illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Snares are supposed to be checked at least once in every 24 hours.

If the snared animal is still alive, they will be killed by the person who set the snare when it is checked – often by being shot. Obviously, it is unlikely that there will be anyone to check that an animal is killed cleanly, directly and without causing extra suffering.

There are numerous animal welfare issues with free-running snares, which include:

- Snares may become frayed and rusty, leading them to behave more like a self-locking snare.
- Animals may not stop pulling when caught, in their state of panic, and can die of asphyxiation.
- Animals can be snared by other parts of their bodies, including abdomen, leg and shoulder, causing horrific injuries and a slow death.
- Non-target animals – such as (legally protected) badgers, as well as cats and dogs – may be caught in snares. In the case of badgers and some dogs, the 'stop' – which may have been set for foxes – is set far too tight for an already panicking animal. Similarly, if the animal is caught by an area that is bigger than the neck, the stop is ineffective and the snare can – and does – cut into the animal, causing injury, pain, distress and even death.
- Lactating animals may be trapped by a snare, leaving offspring to die of starvation.
- Snared animals may be predated (whilst still alive) by other animals.
- Additionally, animals might die of hypothermia, dehydration or starvation.

Scientific studies into snares

Ronald Munro, Professor of Forensic Veterinary Pathology, gave testimony to the Scottish Parliament, which was quoted by Jim Dowd MP during a House of Commons debate on snares:

*"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."*⁶

1) Injuries and suffering (Defra)

In 2005, Defra's Independent Working Group on Snaring produced a paper, entitled *Report of the Independent Working Group on Snares*, which details the types of suffering and injuries snared animals may experience, as listed below:

- the stress of restraint, which could include frustration, anxiety and rage;
- fear of predation or capture whilst held by the snare;
- friction, penetration and self-inflicted skin injuries whilst struggling against or fighting the tether;
- pain associated with dislocations and amputations, especially with unstopped snares;
- ischaemic pain (pain due to lack of blood supply) associated with ligation of body parts;
- compression or injuries in muscles, nerves and joints associated with violent movements against restraint;
- thirst, hunger and exposure when restrained for long periods;
- inflammatory pain and pain from contusions associated with injuries during restraint, and in some cases persisting following escape;
- pain and malaise associated with infections arising from injuries, in escapees;
- neuropathic pain in those escapees that experience nerve injuries; reduced ability of injured escapees to forage, move and hence survive;
- stress of capture and handling before despatch by the snare operator;
- pain and injury associated with killing by the snare operator if unconsciousness is not immediate;

2) Capture Myopathy and Tonic Immobility (University of Cambridge)

A 2010 report by the University of Cambridge, for the campaigning group OneKind, found that some snared animals will experience Capture Myopathy. This occurs when animals overexert themselves (struggling and trying to escape from a trap, for example) so much that physiological imbalances develop and result in severe muscle damage. Capture myopathy may result in sudden death, or clinical signs may develop hours, days, or up to two months later, following capture. Some trapped animals will be driven to try to escape due to fear of attack from a predator or, with female animals, the need to return to offspring.⁷

Other animals who may be caught in a snare will then freeze in a condition known as Tonic Immobility. This is a self-protective stress reaction, which has also been described in humans – they are literally freezing in fear. It has been acknowledged that 'tonic immobility is a fear-motivated defence mechanism employed by some prey animals, such as the rabbit, after other strategies have failed. While it serves to limit injury and provide the possibility of escape, this behaviour is an indicator of extreme fear'.⁸

3) Non-target animals (Defra)

Between 2008 and 2010 Defra commissioned research into snares, and the resulting report was entitled '*Determining The Extent of Use and Humaneness of Snares in England and Wales*'. The report admitted that '*even free-running snares can kill animals under certain circumstances (IWGS 2005)*'. Some of the key points from the report are:

- Non-target animals were caught during field studies conducted by the research team, including badgers, deer, hares, a pheasant and a dog.
- Lactating animals were caught.
- Badgers escaped but with parts of the snare still attached to them.
- Animals were found dead from being predated whilst trapped in the snare.
- It was noted that snares could get caught around the abdomen or neck and shoulder.
- During interviews with snare users, it was noted that among fox snare users, 60% admitted that they had caught non-target animals in fox snares and 29% of rabbit snare users admitted they had caught a cat as a non-target species when using rabbit snares.

Post mortems, conducted on two badgers, found the following:

● **Badger 1:** A young male badger was found dead. He was in good body condition but had been dead for at least 48 hours. X-rays showed an indentation around his neck, which corresponded to visible bruises around his throat. This was consistent with a snare being placed around the throat. There were also recent wounds to the pads on both of his front feet. The vet said these injuries were consistent with him 'having scabbled violently to try to get free prior to death'. He also had bruised gums around his canine teeth consistent with him having tried to bite at a hard thin object (such as a wire) before he died. His windpipe contained some stomach contents and also bloody, frothy mucous. In the vet's opinion this young male badger died as the result of asphyxiation (suffocation) caused by a ligature placed around his neck, probably a snare.

● **Badger 2:** Another young male badger was found dead. Due to the number of maggots on his body, he had been dead for several days. There was a snare wrapped tightly around his neck, just behind his ears. He also had a wound to the back of his head. X-rays showed that, in addition to a snare being very tightly wrapped around his neck, he had been shot in the back of the head causing the rear of the skull to be shattered. The bullet had become fragmented within the cranium. Due to the degree of decomposition, it was not possible to determine if he had been alive at the time he was shot. However, the snare was so tight that he would almost certainly have died of asphyxiation.⁹



4) Comparison of free-running and self-locking snares

The Forestry Commission snaring trials in 1968/9 (Project 315 Y/11) compared free-running and self-locking snares in Scotland and found that *'The trial did not show that either type of snare was significantly more efficient or less cruel at catching foxes than the other'*. Post mortem damage was similar for both types of snare and in addition to the 155 foxes caught, 132 other animals were caught, amongst which were three rare Scottish wildcats, one feral cat, 30 mountain hares, 21 deer, 50 brown hare and three dogs. A small number (four) of badgers were caught, but that was likely due to the Scottish location.

Despite both snares being proved to be cruel and indiscriminate, the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act only banned self-locking snares.

5) Snares and the breakaway snare (Review of the use of Snares in the UK by Professor Steven Harris)

The most recent (2022), thorough and extensive report, by Professor Steven Harris, into the use of snares, reviewed all the available data on snaring and concluded that:

'The use of snares in the UK does not meet acceptable standards of animal welfare or any of the principles for ethical wildlife control established by a committee of international experts. Some methods used to kill wild animals have such extreme effects on their welfare that, regardless of the potential benefits, their use is never justified; snaring is such a method. All the available data show that the only way to stop extremely high levels of non-target capture, illegal use and misuse of snares, address animal welfare concerns, and recognise that wild animals are sentient beings, is to prohibit the manufacture, sale, possession and use of snares in the UK.'

The 69-page report shows that little has changed in over 50 years despite evidence showing injury, death and non-target capture from free-running snares.

The game shooting lobby has recognised the cruelty and indiscriminate nature of snaring, and so has created a breakaway snare designed to free non-target badgers

caught in fox snares. The idea is that the weak link will allow a strong animal such as a badger to escape by using considerable force. The two breakaway snares in use in the UK are the Glen Waters Breakaway Snare and the DB snare – with the latter designed by GWCT.

However, tests conducted in 2021 by the National Anti-Snaring Campaign, which commissioned TTI Testing, showed that the force required to break the weak link when using a pull that replicates the size of a badger's neck was over 70 kilograms, with the weight falling on a wire 2mm wide.

Even this does not equate to the dynamic forces of a struggling animal, and consequently 69% of badgers do not escape and there is no data on the long-term survival of those badgers that do, having had to exert extreme force, usually with the wire wrapped around the soft tissue of their neck.

The report also shows that there has been a 64% decline in rabbit numbers since 1996 and fox numbers have fallen by 44%, largely due to the decline in rabbits which were a staple of the fox diet.¹⁰ Combine this with the move to intensive rearing of livestock and any argument that snaring is needed for the agricultural economy has long vanished.

Alternatives to the use of snares

Some effective methods to deter unwanted species such as fox and rabbit include trap-and-release, electric fencing, wire netting fences, motion sprinklers, ultrasonic devices and the use of radios or reflective discs. More information is available on the NASC and Animal Aid websites.

Conservation organisations that do not use snares

Several conservation organisations that are responsible for vast areas of land do not use snares. These include the RSPB, the Woodland Trust and the Wildlife Trusts. The RSPB maintains 222 nature reserves covering 158,751 hectares¹¹, the Woodland Trust maintains 1,000 sites covering around 29,000 hectares¹², and the Wildlife Trusts maintain over 2,300 nature reserves covering 98,500 hectares.¹³

The Woodland Trust has stated:

"The Woodland Trust does not support the use of snares and we endorse the call for a legal ban on snares."

The Wildlife Trusts statement reads:

"The Wildlife Trusts would never condone the use of snares, we are deeply concerned about the prolonged suffering they can inflict on wildlife. Unfortunately, the use of snares is still, in some instances, legal; and we would support banning them."

Leading conservationist Chris Packham supports a ban on snares, stating that:

"... the fact that these are being used still legally in the UK countryside in the twenty-first century is a complete anachronism. ... We've got to put an end to this suffering because every year 1.7 million animals die in these barbaric devices."¹⁴

Other organisations that oppose the use of snares

In 2021, a joint letter, spearheaded by Animal Aid and signed by more than 20 groups, called on the Prime Minister and the Defra Minister to ‘implement an immediate ban on the manufacture, sale, possession and use of all snares.’

Animal protection, welfare and rescue organisations from across the spectrum that oppose the use of any snares, include: the RSPCA, Cats Protection, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, The Badger Trust, A-LAW (UK Centre for Animal Law), Dogs Trust, Hunt Investigation Team, The League Against Cruel Sports, OneKind, FOUR PAWS UK, Blue Cross, Animal Defenders International, Viva!, Christian Vegetarian Association, Mahavir Trust, National Anti Snaring Campaign, Wild Moors, The Naturewatch Foundation, PETA UK, HSIUK, Off the Leash, Born Free Foundation, as well as cosmetics giant Lush, Professor Andrew Knight and Dr Helen Lambert.

Together these groups represent millions of concerned members of the public.

The RSPCA: “We’re opposed to the manufacture, sale, and use of all snares and any traps which cause suffering. We see lots of wild and domestic animals who have been trapped by snares and it’s heart breaking to think of how much pain and suffering they cause.”

“Snares are cruel and inhumane to cats and other domestic and wild species. @CatsProtection is calling for an outright ban of snares across the UK.”

“Snares are indiscriminate, so cats and dogs can get caught in them.

That’s why @Battersea_supports @AnimalAid’s petition to make free-running snare illegal.”

Other opposition to the use of snares:

- A government petition: ‘Make the use of free-running snares illegal for trapping wildlife’ (<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/600593>) was signed by more than 100,000 members of the public.
- A Parliamentary Early Day Motion (EDM 925), tabled by Caroline Lucas MP, has the support of 43 MPs to date (<https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/59423/ban-on-snares-campaign>)
- Public figures such as Chris Packham, Peter Egan, Deborah Meaden, Dr Amir Khan and Gary Lineker 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.¹⁵
- During a 2016 debate on snares in the House of Commons, Jim Dowd MP stated: ‘According to a Dods poll taken last year, 68% of MPs would support a ban. Veterinary opinion also firmly supports a ban on these cruel and indiscriminate traps. A 2015 poll of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses across the UK found that 87% of respondents believed that snaring is not a humane method of pest control. The figure was even higher – 92% – among those who had experience of treating animals that had been snared.’¹⁶

The use of snares in England and other countries

The EU

Most EU countries have banned snares or restrict their use. Switzerland has also banned snares. Only four EU countries still permit the use of snares: Ireland, France, Spain and the Walloon region of Belgium. Ireland has no restrictions or licensing requirements.

England

In 2021 the government launched the Action Plan for Animal Welfare. As part of that plan, the government committed to ‘launch a call for evidence on the use of snares.’ However, no timetable has been set for the Call for Evidence, or even a launch date.¹⁷

Wales

In 2021 the Welsh government announced that it would be bringing in a ban on snares and glue traps under the 2022 Agriculture Bill. In its policy response to the Agriculture (Wales) Bill’s White Paper, the Welsh Government announced plans to ensure the legislation will ‘amend the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to ban the use of snares and glue traps’ in Wales.¹⁸

Scotland

The Scottish Government’s Wildlife Team is conducting a statutory review at the moment and has been instructed by the Minister that further to the statutory review, a wider review of snaring should be undertaken, to consider whether or not snares should be banned completely.¹⁹

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland 74% of those surveyed think snares should be banned.²⁰

The case against ‘Better Regulation’

The way in which snares are used – that they are set in the countryside, mostly hidden from public view – means that they are virtually impossible to monitor. Importantly, in Scotland, where there are stricter guidelines on the use of snares, there is no evidence to show that it is easier to monitor their use.

Reports of snares to the police

In 2021, Animal Aid sent Freedom of Information requests to all police forces in the country, asking:

1. How many incidents of illegal snaring (illegal snares or legal snares being used illegally) were reported, each year, from 2016 to 2020?
2. And for each of these years, how many of these incidents resulted in an officer attending?
3. How many of these incidents resulted in a caution being issued?
4. How many of these incidents resulted in advice being given?
5. How many of these incidents resulted in a case being filed with the Crown Prosecution Service?
6. How many of these incidents resulted in a prosecution?

Animal Aid received 38 responses or automatic acknowledgements from police forces across the country. Only 13 of those were able to answer some of the questions asked, largely due to a lack of reporting facilities and/or a lack of standardised reporting methods. That is to say that of those that did respond, all had varying ways of recording such information. The maximum number of incidents recorded by police for one year was eight.

Reports of snares to the RSPCA

In three years (2018 to 2020), the RSPCA attended incidents involving 145 foxes, 97 cats, 56 badgers, 31 dogs and 25 deer (of various species) caught in snares; of these species, only foxes can legally be trapped using snares.²¹

Reports of snares to Snarewatch

Scottish animal protection organisation, OneKind, has a reporting tool on its website, Snarewatch, where members of the public can report incidents relating to snares.

The National Anti Snaring Campaign (NASC)

NASC has produced a report detailing the indiscriminate snaring of badgers, cats, dogs, horses, lambs and wildcats between the years of 1993 and 2021. It lists the trapping of 114 badgers, 153 cats and 61 dogs as well as four other animals.

The evidence suggests that improved monitoring and increased regulation do not work, and do nothing to reduce suffering. Better regulation, improved monitoring, training or even new designs of snares would not address the core issue: that trapping animals in snares is inevitably cruel, as well as indiscriminate and archaic. Animals suffer horribly in snares, both physically and mentally, and there can be no justification for such devices being used on any sentient animal.

Animal Aid, along with many other animal protection organisations, is calling for a complete ban on the sale and use of snares. Self-locking snares are already prohibited under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and it is imperative that a ban on free-running snares should now be included in this Act.

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