

Defra code of practice on the use of snares in fox and rabbit control

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Defra Code of Practice on the Use of Snares in Fox and Rabbit Control

This is not a statutory code but is rather a document which lays down best practice. It also details the legislative provisions in this area.

This Code of Practice on the use of snares is based on the Code of Good Practice developed in 2005 by the Independent Working Group on Snares (IWGS). Details about the IWGS, the background to its work, and the review of snaring it undertook in the development of this document are available in the Report of the Independent Working Group on Snares (2005) (see section on Further Information).

The use of snares

Snares are used most commonly in fox and rabbit control but are also set for a variety of other purposes including, for example, to capture rabbits for food and foxes in research programmes. In addition to fox and rabbit other target species that can legally be snared include rats, grey squirrels and mink.

Snaring is subject to legal restrictions and when properly practised is an effective and relatively humane form of control. Snaring can, however, cause welfare problems when used incorrectly by creating distress and injury both to the animals for which the snare is set and through the accidental capture of non-target species. It is the responsibility of all involved in pest and predator control to ensure their methods are legal, humane, and carried out with sensitivity and respect for other countryside users.

The use of snares for fox or rabbit control is only one method available to land managers to minimise damage to game, wildlife, livestock or crops. Predation by foxes can be reduced, in some cases, by fox-proofing methods, and fox numbers reduced by shooting and cage trapping. However killing of cage-trapped foxes can be difficult using firearms. Likewise, rabbit damage may be reduced, in some cases, by rabbit-proof fencing and tree guards, and rabbit

numbers reduced by gassing, shooting, killing traps, live-capture traps and ferreting.

Before using snares or other capture/control methods, an assessment should be made to determine whether the need (eg regarding damage or the threat of damage) is sufficient to warrant action being taken, taking into account the possible welfare impact on target animals and any risks to non-target species. Where capture/control is deemed to be necessary then an assessment should also be made of the most appropriate method to use, again taking into account the welfare impact on target animals and any risks to non-target species, and steps should be taken to minimise these risks.

If snares are to be used to capture foxes or rabbits or other species for control or other reasons then this should be done using 'best practice'. Adherence to this Code of Practice will ensure that snares are used to high standards and within the law. Advice is provided at several levels:

- Advice that **must** be followed – **unless otherwise stated the term 'must' only applies to compliance with this Code of Practice and does not refer to a legal obligation. Where there is a legal obligation this will be clearly stated**
- Advice that **should** be followed in order to achieve Best Practice, any deviation from which would need strong justification.
- Advice which **may** be of practical help to you.

Sources for further information on control methods are provided at the end of this leaflet.

Legal obligations for snare users in England and Wales

Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 it is an offence to set in position any trap or snare calculated (intended) to cause bodily injury to any wild

animal included in Schedule 6 of that Act which comes into contact with it, or to use a trap or snare for the purpose of killing such a wild animal; relevant species listed in Schedule 6 include badger, polecat, otter, red squirrel, hedgehog and pine marten. Snaring of protected species is not permitted unless the person has been authorised by a specific licence under section 16 of the Act.

The Deer Act 1991 makes it an offence to set in position any trap or snare calculated to cause bodily injury to any deer coming in contact with it, or to use any trap or snare for the purpose of killing or taking any deer.

Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 the use of a 'self-locking' snare is unlawful; only free-running snares can lawfully be set. The term self-locking is not defined in the Act and there has been no successful prosecution within a court high enough to clarify the law by legal precedent.

A free-running snare is a wire loop that relaxes when the animal stops pulling, whilst a self-locking snare is a wire loop that continues to tighten by a ratchet action as the animal struggles. However, as there is no clear legal definition of either term, whether a snare is self-locking essentially becomes a question of fact. There are snares that could act as either free-running or self-locking depending upon how they are set and a free-running snare may in practice act as a self-locking snare if, for example, it becomes rusty or is twisted and kinked by the movements of the trapped animal.

Snaring foxes

In order to comply with this Code of Practice, snares must be set only at sites likely to be used by foxes. This will maximise the chances of capture and minimise the risk to non-target species. Snares must not be set where there is evidence of regular usage by non-target species. Close physical inspection of the site and field-craft will help determine whether non-targets are also using the site (see below).

As well as the actual sighting of a fox, signs that indicate their presence include:

- Fox tracks (footprints)
- Long reddish brown hairs caught on bramble, twigs or wire
- Strong musty smell on prominent objects such as stones, protruding twigs etc., the smell is most noticeable in warm conditions and especially in late winter/early spring
- Droppings ('scats'), with a musty odour and usually in prominent places but never in pits, latrines or dung scrapes
- Food remains, portions of food may be lightly buried and carry a strong smell of fox urine, remains of birds include quills of larger feathers characteristically sheared off as though cut with a knife.

Snares must only be used as a restraining rather than a killing device. Snares should be set in open sites such as field edges, tramlines, along runs, trails or tracks, such as vehicle tracks, where foxes are likely to travel through. They must not be set in sites cluttered by obstacles such as saplings, hedges, walls, fences or gates, which increase the risk of injury as a result of the snares becoming entangled.

Preparing snares for use

Maximising the efficacy of snares will mean fewer snares will need to be set and this will also help to minimise the risk to non-target species. To this end, efforts should be made to reduce the chances of their detection by target species.

Some have recommended the following procedures to minimise chances of snare detection:

That the manufacturer's lubricant, the scent of the lubricant and the shine of new snares are removed by placing new snares in a large pan with boiling water and a small amount of automatic (low froth) washing powder for one

hour, removing any residue on the surface. After one hour the snares should be boiled for another hour in a pan of boiling water with chips of oak bark, oak leaves and tea (bags or leaves) and be left to stand in the cooling water for 24 hours. This will stain the snares and disguise them making them less detectable to foxes and rabbits.

That to re-wax snares, paraffin wax, which has very little odour, should be used after the boiling process. Mineral oil or aerosol lubricant should not be used. Snares handled regularly for resetting should be re-boiled regularly to remove the scent of humans. Once snares are prepared for use they should be handled as little as possible and kept away from sources of strong scents.

New snares should be re-boiled and re-located to another site after their first week or so of use. If there is evidence of a near miss, such as the snare being knocked or drawn up and fur left behind, then the snare should be replaced with a fresh, scent free one a few metres along the trail.

The greater the number of snares in operation the greater the chances of capturing foxes but this should be weighed against the greater time necessary to inspect, maintain and set the snares, and the increased risk of non-target captures. For this reason the use of snares is usually concentrated in periods when alternative methods are not viable (e.g. when vegetation cover prevents shooting) and when the benefits of fox removal are greatest, such as at nesting time and when poults are released.

How to set snares to capture foxes

1. Free running snares must be used, and these must have a 'permanent stop' fixed approximately 9" (23cm) from the eye of the snare.
2. The bottom of the loop should be at least 7-7.5" (15/18cm) above level ground and up to 12" (30cm) in open ground. On banks the height of the loop can be increased up to 9" (22 cm). In other situations the height may be modified to reduce non-target captures.

3. Snares should incorporate a strong swivel near the anchor point and also at a position closer to the noose. The wire must not be less than 460lbs (208 kilos) breaking strain. To avoid animals escaping while still entangled in the snare, with potentially serious welfare consequences, the fastenings should be designed so that the weakest point is at the eye.
4. Snares should be supported by a suitable 'tealer' or set-stick pushed firmly into the ground. Tealers made from stiff wire are easy to conceal, set and make.
5. Snares must be firmly anchored so that they can on no account become free (because of the great risk to welfare that this would cause). Drags should not be used.
6. You must ensure that snares are free running at the time they are set and remain so during their use. Snares that are frayed or damaged must be disposed of safely.
7. Avoid leaving scent on the snare and the area around the snare by rubbing your hands with soil and wearing clean rubber boots. Set the snare whilst standing or crouching rather than kneeling down.
8. Try not to disturb the run and try not to broaden it.
9. You must adapt your procedures for setting snares in the light of experience, particularly to minimise the risks to non-target species (see below).

Snaring rabbits

In order to comply with this Code of Practice, snares must be set at the time and place that maximises the chances of catching a rabbit and minimises

risks to non-target species. Snares must not be set where there is evidence of regular usage by non-target species. Close physical inspection of the site and field-craft will help determine whether non-targets are also using the site (see below).

As well as the actual sighting of rabbits, signs that indicate their presence include:

- Burrows
- Rabbit sized holes in fencing
- Clearly defined rabbit sized runs
- Latrines of rabbit droppings

Rabbit snares should be set on well-used rabbit runs, in short vegetation, close to the harbourage from which rabbits gain access to crops. They must not be set in sites cluttered by obstacles such as saplings, hedges, walls, fences or gates, which increase the risk of injury. Sites that pose the risk of fatal entanglement should be avoided.

How to set snares to capture rabbits

1. Rabbit snares should be constructed with 3 or 4 -stranded brass wire (doubled so that whilst there are 3-4 strands around the eye, there are 6-8 in the noose) with a loop of 4" (10 cm) diameter for the head of the rabbit. The snare must have a fixed stop about 5" (14 cm) from the 'eye' of the snare.
2. You must ensure that snares are free running at the time they are set and remain so during their use. Snares that are frayed or damaged must be safely disposed of.
3. The loop should be positioned 3" (9cm) above the ground using a short notched stick, the 'tealer'.

4. The free end of the wire must be securely tethered by a strong, rot-proof cord attached to a peg that is driven firmly into the ground. It must not be possible for the snare to become free because of the serious welfare consequences that could ensue.
5. Avoid leaving scent on the snare and the area around the snare by rubbing your hands with soil and wearing clean rubber boots. Set the snare whilst standing or crouching rather than kneeling down.
6. Try not to disturb the run and try not to broaden it.
7. You must adapt your procedures for setting snares in the light of experience, particularly to minimise the risks to non-target species (see below).

How to avoid capture of non-target animals

When setting snares every effort must be made to avoid the capture of non-target and protected species. As stated above, snaring of protected species is not permitted unless under the authority of a specific licence. Knowledge of the tracks, trails and signs of both target and non-target species is essential. If there is evidence of other species regularly using a site then snares must not be set. Pay particular attention to the following:

Badgers:

Signs that indicate the regular and frequent use of paths by badgers include:

- Well worn paths
- Badger tracks (footprints)
- Coarse grey hairs with black tips, caught on bramble, twigs or wire

Snares must not be set on or near to a badger sett, or on the runs radiating from a sett. These can be identified by:

- Signs of excavation linked by well-defined paths

- Signs of bedding near the sett entrance
- The presence of dung pits.

Domestic pets:

Snares must not be set on or near public footpaths, rights of way, near housing and areas regularly used for exercising domestic animals to avoid capturing pets.

Deer:

Signs of the presence of deer include:

- Deer slots (tracks).
- Droppings.
- Signs of browsing or frayed saplings.

Snares should not be set in holes through or under fence lines, in gaps through hedges or under gateways, particularly where roe or muntjac are present.

Snares should not be set along-side fence lines, particularly when they pass through woodland, where deer may travel alongside them. Snares should not be attached to fences, as this increases the risk of entanglement and injury.

Livestock:

Snares must not be set where livestock are grazing.

Snares should not be set along side fence lines because cattle and other livestock often lean over or push through to graze the grass on the opposite side.

You should agree with farmers and landowners when and where snares are to be set to avoid contact with livestock and horses.

Otters:

Signs of otter activity include:

- Otter tracks (footprints).

- A regular feeding place such as a rock in midstream, which may be recognised by assorted food remains such as fish bones.
- Latrines of droppings (spraints).

Snares should not be set on tracks along the side of watercourses of any size. Snares should not be set on or under footbridges, fallen trees or logs spanning watercourses. Where snares are used for mink control particular care should be taken and, if necessary, other methods used.

Hares:

Where hares are present particular attention should be given to site selection and, if necessary, other methods of fox or rabbit control used.

Inspection of snares

It is desirable that animals are dealt with as soon as possible after they are caught. During the winter, in order to comply with Best Practice, snares must be inspected as soon after sunrise as is practicable, and should again be inspected near dusk. In summer snares must be inspected before 9 am, and a further inspection should be conducted in the evening.

Humane killing of foxes

Snared foxes must be killed quickly and humanely by a shot at close range from a rifle, shotgun or pistol. A .22 rim fire rifle or a shotgun is suitable. Air weapons must not be used, as they are not sufficiently powerful. The shot should be aimed to the head because this maximises the chance of immediate and irreversible loss of consciousness. Due care must be taken to avoid the risk of ricochet. However if the animal is constantly moving it may be necessary to aim for the heart and immediately follow this up with a shot to the head. Insensibility and death should be confirmed by absence of corneal reflex (failure to blink when the surface of the eye is touched), and absence of

breathing. The body must be disposed of responsibly, e.g. by deep burying (more than a metre).

Humane killing of rabbits

Once removed from the snare, a rabbit may be humanely killed by holding it firmly and giving a strong blow to the head with a heavy stick. This must always be followed by a second blow and death confirmed by the absence of breathing and/or the eye-blink reflex. Breaking the neck is also a suitable method but is an acquired skill. After the neck has been broken, ensure that dislocation is complete by feeling the spinal cord between the dislocated vertebrae; pinching the spinal cord will ensure that any reflex kicking subsides quickly.

Release of non-targets from snares

If, despite following the advice given previously, a non-target animal is caught, the most appropriate course of action needs to be considered. Unless the animal is badly injured and has to be killed on humane grounds, it must be released immediately. It should be remembered that if humane despatch is deemed to be appropriate then the snare user may be called upon to justify their actions in a court of law.

Releasing non-target animals from snares can be difficult but the following course of action should be followed. The animal's struggles should be limited by shortening the wire so that it can then be cut at the noose in order to ensure that no part of the snare remains on the animal. The wire must never be cut anywhere else in the hope that the noose will fall off later.

Non-target animals (e.g. dog, cat) caught by the neck and likely to bite can be released with the help of a garden fork. This can be achieved in the following way. Take the fork and walk to the snare's anchor point. Put the fork tines over the wire and run them out along the wire close to the animal's head.

Then push the fork into the ground (without using a foot to avoid the risk of being bitten). This pins the animal by the neck. A blunt hook can be slipped under the wire enabling it to be raised from the neck and then to be cut with wire cutters.

Great care must be taken to avoid injuring the animal and to avoid being bitten. Badgers, dogs or cats caught around the body, rather than the neck, are far more difficult to control. Offering such animals a stick to bite may keep them occupied long enough to cut the noose. If the captured animal has been seriously injured it must be humanely despatched using a firearm, as described above.

Further development of knowledge and skills

All those using snares should maintain awareness (by reading, attending training courses etc.) of developments in the field, for example of any improvements in snare design and/or methods of use.

Further information

IWGS (2005) Report of the Independent Working Group on Snares.

Available from: Defra Publications, Admail 6000, London Sw1A 2XX, or the Defra website www.defra.gov.uk .

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