Wild Animal Welfare
Committee

WAWC Position Paper No. 5: Snare use in England

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1. Introduction

This position paper discusses the animal welfare harms inherent in the legal use of wire neck snares (sometimes referred to as cable restraints) to capture wild mammals such as red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) and brown hare (*Lepus europaeus*) in England.

Snares can also be used to catch other species such as American mink (*Neovison vison*), grey squirrels (*Sciurus carolinensis*) or brown rats (*Rattus norvegicus*), although alternative methods of control are more common. In addition, due to their indiscriminate nature, snares regularly capture non-target species, including domestic animals, deer and protected wildlife. The European badger (*Meles meles*) is a regular non-target capture, although it is not legal to set a snare for this purpose.

Snares are used by gamekeepers and farmers in England to catch animals around the neck and hold them until they can be killed by other means. Less commonly, they have been used to live-trap and tag animals for research purposes.

Usually made of flexible steel cable, snares are inexpensive and readily available to the general public. An unknown number are home-made: there are numerous instructional videos on the internet and the components are readily available.

Opponents of snaring consider the traps to be outdated and primitive, with the potential to inflict unnecessary and unacceptable suffering on both wild and domestic animals, even when modified to meet current voluntary standards. They are thus inconsistent with modern concepts of animal welfare, conservation and protection of the wider environment. Despite the paucity of empirical studies, data from anecdotal reports and

post-mortem examinations demonstrate that the physical effect of snaring and the fear and distress induced by violent restraint represent an unacceptable impact on animal welfare.

Eighty-nine Members of Parliament signed Early Day Motion 705[i], tabled on 27 January 2025, urging the government "to bring in a ban on the sale, possession and use of all snares without delay". In its Animal Welfare Strategy for England, the UK government has renewed prior commitments[ii] to ban the use of snares in England but has not yet given a timetable for the necessary consultation and proposals for legislation.

2. The legal status of snares

The use of all snares is now prohibited in both Wales[iii] (since October 2023) and Scotland[iv] (since November 2024). Both prohibitions preclude the use of snares for research purposes; in Scotland, a specific consultation question on such use elicited support from 71% of individual and organisational respondents, including 75% of the conservation organisations that responded[v].

The ongoing use of snares in England is governed by s.11 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981[vi]. Under the Act, self-locking snares – where the noose does not relax when the trapped animal stops struggling, often leading to injury and strangulation – have been illegal throughout the UK since 1981. Free-running snares remain legal in England.

The use of any trap or snare for the purposes of killing or taking or restraining any wild animal listed at Schedule 6 or 6ZA of the Act is prohibited, except under specific licence[vii]. It is also an offence to set in position a snare "of such a nature and so placed as to be calculated to cause bodily injury" to any wild animal included in the Schedules. The person who sets a snare must inspect it, or cause it to be inspected, at least once every day,

Prior to the full ban in 2024, s.11 was extensively amended with regard to Scotland, including a prohibition on drag snares with non-fixed anchors, requirements for user training and registration, mandatory record keeping, landowner permission to use snares, identification tags on all snares, the use of stops to prevent the snare tightening to a circumference of less than 23 centimetres (fox snares) or 13 centimetres (other species), daily inspections no more than 24 hours apart to check for trapped animals and whether the snare is free-running, and provision for regular reviews of the legislation.

None of these provisions applies under the law in England. While set snares must be inspected "at least once every day", the nature of the inspection is not specified. There is no requirement to include a check on whether the snare is free-running, even though a non-free-running snare would become effectively self-locking. While most snare users operate to a daily timetable, in theory the expression "at least once every day" could allow an animal to be held in a snare for almost 48 hours. Industry guidance[viii] recommends intervals of 12 hours or less, but this is voluntary. There is no requirement for training or being able to demonstrate competence in the setting and monitoring of snares and the humane killing of trapped animals.

The Deer Act 1991[ix] prohibits the use of snares to capture any species of deer.

The Animal Welfare Act 2006[x] makes it an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to an animal under human control, which is interpreted as applying to animals held in snares and the means by which they are killed. How the Act applies to wild animals is the subject of advice from Natural England[xi].

Impacts of snares on animal welfare

A report to DEFRA in 2012, *Determining the extent of use and humaneness of snares in England and Wales*[xii] (DEFRA report) identified indicators of poor animal welfare,

including the predation of trapped hares, physical disturbance of terrain, caused by a fox's desperate attempts to escape, and a harrowing description of a snared rabbit's prolonged death by strangulation in an unstopped snare.

The previous WAWC position paper on the *Live Trapping of Terrestrial Wild Mammals and Wild Birds for Lethal Control in the United Kingdom*[xiii] assessed the likely welfare harms of snares against the internationally recognised Five Domains model for the assessment and management of animal welfare[xiv,xv]. The WAWC assessments below were subsequently adopted by the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission (SAWC) in formal advice to the Scottish Government[xvi].

The Five Domains model provides a framework for organising scientifically derived information to assess the experience of an individual animal in a particular situation or condition. It consists of three physical (or functional or "fitness") Domains (very briefly: nutrition and hydration; physical environment; health, including disease or injury); and a fourth of behavioural interaction with the animal's environment. Scientific information from these four Domains is then assessed and their impact on the fifth Domain, mental experience, inferred. This in turn makes it possible to predict the likely overall welfare state of an individual and consider this in assessing "impact".

The Five Domains are widely recognised by scientists and policy makers around the world and can be applied to assess the welfare of companion, farmed, captive and free-living wild animals. For example, scientists have used them to make detailed assessments of the humaneness of different methods used to kill animals deemed pests[xvii, xviii].

Based on the Five Domains, the welfare harms of snares are likely to include:

- Domain 1 (Nutritional impacts): being restrained in a snare prevents the animal eating and drinking normally. This may lead to dehydration and starvation.
- Domain 2 (Environmental impacts): depending on where the snare is positioned, the trapped animal may be subjected to exposure to the elements.
- Domain 3 (Physical impacts): trapped animals suffer a variety of external and internal injuries[xix]. Struggling to escape the snare may result in exertional or capture myopathy[xx, xxi, xxii, xxiii]. Escape behaviour may also include self-mutilation and, in rabbits, tonic immobility[xxiv]. Oral and dental injuries may arise as a result of trying to chew free from the snare[xxv]. Predation of the trapped animal may occur[xxvi]. Death may result from exhaustion or from asphyxiation as a result of strangulation[xxvii]. The size and conformation of non-target species in the snare can influence the nature of the injuries sustained[xxviii].
- Domain 4 (Behavioural impacts): normal behaviours are restricted or cannot be performed: these may include feeding, moving, lying down, caring for dependent neonates, escaping from predators. Attempts to escape can lead to self-trauma. Sites where animals have been caught in snares may show signs of extreme disturbance to the surrounding ground and vegetation (a "doughnut") where the animal has tried to run, jump or scrabble its way out of the trap, often for several hours or more[xxix]. The behaviour of different non-target species in the snare can be varied and influence the range of injuries sustained.
- Domain 5 (Mental impacts): these can include fear and distress[xxx], anxiety, pain, hunger and thirst, and stress associated with trying to escape from the snare.

The captured animal's welfare begins to be impacted within seconds from the point of restraint, while suffering can be prolonged due to the lengthy intervals between inspections. Some animals die in the snare, but they are expected to remain alive until the snare is inspected, at which point they should be humanely killed, or released unharmed if a non-target species.

A free-running snare may easily become self-locking due to rusting or twisting, causing injury or death by strangulation before the trap is inspected.

The use of stops in snares is intended to reduce the severity of injuries and to allow certain non-target species, such as deer, to escape from the snare. However, variation in the diameter of the necks of target species and the possible capture of non-target animals, with different body conformation, can make the stop ineffective and result in increased injury and death by strangulation. One scientific study on the use of wire neck snares reported that of 21 foxes caught, two died before inspection[xxxi]. In Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) research[xxxii], out of 315 foxes retained in a mixture of traditional and modified snares, 5% were found dead on inspection and 4% with externally apparent injuries; a similar rate was recorded in modified snares in a smaller second trial.

Most information about the deterioration of snares in use is anecdotal. In one study in Ireland, where the snaring of badgers is legal, 62% of stopped restraints where badgers were fund with injuries had some degree of twisting, unravelling or fraying after use, and that damage was associated with an increased risk of injury[xxxiii].

Methods of killing may also result in welfare harm – for example, blunt force trauma may be attempted by those who are neither confident nor competent in such methods. The code of best practice recommends shooting a fox with “an appropriate firearm” but does not specify further.

3. Non-target captures

The proportion of non-target species caught in snares set for foxes has been estimated as ranging from 21% to 69%[xxxiv]. The DEFRA report noted that 60% of survey respondents reported catching a non-target animal in a snare at some time[xxxv]. Recorded non-target species include cats, dogs, sheep and protected wildlife such as badgers, mountain hare, pine marten, hedgehog, various species of birds, otters and deer[xxxvi]. The release of non-target animals from snares is not without welfare concerns as they may have sustained muscle damage (exertional rhabdomyolysis) and/or pressure damage (ischaemic necrosis) of tissue, which may not be obvious for several days and require medical care if found in time for treatment [xxxvii,xxxviii] or premature death, if not.

4. Modifications to traditional snares

Snares have been modified over the last 20 years, as operators have acknowledged the welfare harms of traditional designs and the growing opposition to their use. Albeit widely adopted, these modifications are not mandatory and not all snares conform to the standard, including those that are homemade.

Nowadays, snares generally incorporate a stop to prevent the noose closing beyond a certain circumference, usually 26 centimetres for a fox snare (some are only 23 centimetres[xxxix], although this recommendation has been superseded). The code of best practice on the use of snares for fox control in England[xl] also recommends the use of a non-moveable anchor so that an animals cannot escape with the snare still attached; the inclusion of two swivels to allow the wire to rotate freely and prevent the cable unravelling, kinking or becoming over-wound; and a breakaway point intended to allow stronger non-target animals to escape. None of these is a legal requirement.

The main new feature is the breakaway clip which manufacturers claim is intended to allow badgers, hares and deer to release themselves, while holding foxes[xli].

Research into snare design by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) since 2006[xlii] has underpinned these modifications. Code-compliant snares are now referred to as humane cable restraints (HCR) or DB snares[xliii]. HCR were promoted as novel and humane by industry representatives opposed to the pending bans on snares in Wales n

2023 and Scotland in 2024. The GWCT research[xliv] describes varying levels of mortality and externally apparent injury in foxes, hares and badgers retained in modified snares. It does not discuss other welfare harms arising from capture and restraint in a snare, which include exposure to the elements and to predation, injuries caused by struggling to escape or trying to chew free, capture myopathy (a condition caused by stress and exertion and with a high morbidity and mortality rate), fear and distress, anxiety, hunger and thirst, breathlessness and stress associated with trying to escape. Many of these have been raised as concerns by veterinary experts[xlv].

HCR have been described as meeting the requirements of the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards (AIHTS)[xlvi] for restraining traps. The AIHTS was used as a reference for animal welfare standards in the DEFRA report.[xlvii] WAWC considers the AIHTS to be non-applicable to snares as used in England, for three reasons.

Firstly, foxes – the most commonly trapped species in England – are not one of the species covered by the AIHTS and thus the research underpinning its standards may not be applicable.

Secondly, the AIHTS standards for restraining traps are low and have been widely criticised by wildlife biologists, conservationists and animal welfare organisations. They contain no reference to indicators of psychological or mental distress and only limited behavioural indicators of poor welfare. The list of physical indicators to be considered in assessing traps describes only very severe injuries such as fracture, severe internal organ damage, haemorrhage, amputation and death. Significant welfare compromises can occur well before these most severe impacts. The AIHTS does not address animal handling and dispatching which is a fundamental part of the exercise of snaring.

In 2020, a group of wildlife professionals involved in the capture of mammals published a list of criticisms of the AIHTS standards: (1) the list of mammal species included in the AIHTS is incomplete; (2) the AIHTS have relatively low animal welfare performance thresholds of killing trap acceptance and do not reflect state-of-the-art trapping technology; (3) the AIHTS animal welfare indicators and injuries for restraining traps are insufficient; (4) the AIHTS testing procedures are neither thorough nor transparent; (5) the AIHTS protocols for the use of certified traps are inadequate; (6) the AIHTS procedures for the handling and dispatching of animals are non-existent; (7) the AIHTS criteria to assess trap capture efficiency and species selectivity are inappropriate[xlviii].

Thirdly, the experience for a sentient animal of being trapped in a snare is very little changed by being caught in an HCR. Most of the harms identified earlier in this section and in section 3 will still apply, because these are inherent to the experience of being captured and restrained in a wire noose.

5. Alternatives to snaring

Alternatives to using snares for fox control include good management techniques to prevent access to farmed animals, including removing fallen animals promptly to avoid attracting foxes, baited live cage traps (followed by shooting), or accurate free shooting (known as lamping if carried out at night) by competent operatives. Guard animals such as llamas, alpacas, and dogs are also used in Europe, South Africa and the US to protect farmed animals from predation, and this is increasingly being recognised as a viable method in the UK[xlix].

For rabbits, government-suggested alternatives to snaring include non-lethal methods such as fencing, while alternative lethal methods include gassing, trapping, ferreting, and shooting, although all of these can have potential welfare harms.

When considering alternative methods of wildlife control, whether lethal or non-lethal, WAWC believes that all interventions affecting sentient wild animals should be subject to an ethical assessment. This need not be unduly complex but should reflect the capacity

of wild animals to suffer as a result of human actions and the consequent ethical responsibility to take this into account and mitigate it as far as possible.

The international consensus principles for ethical wildlife control[l] were developed by a panel of 20 experts convened in 2015 at the University of British Columbia to explore international perspectives on and experiences with human–wildlife conflicts and develop principles for ethical wildlife control. The resultant academic paper, published in 2017, foresaw the ethical principles approach being incorporated into international or domestic regulations and decision-making by public authorities or by private operators such as land managers, animal control businesses and others.

The ethical principles mean that the acceptability of a wildlife control action is based on a comprehensive analysis of the necessity for control, benefits, feasibility, costs to people and animals, alternatives, and effects on animal welfare in terms of the humaneness of the physical methods employed. While the ethical principles are not intended to prohibit or prevent wildlife control, including lethal control, their application allows for significant reduction and mitigation of harmful effects on individual animals and populations, as well as promoting the public acceptability of justifiable interventions. They provide a robust framework for developing management standards at either local or national level, assessing government policies and formulating individual management plans.

While WAWC promotes the ethical principles, we reiterate that these should only be applied when considering *alternatives* to the use of snares: snaring itself would fail the ethical tests on several grounds, including the duty to minimise animal welfare harms.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The law on the use of snares in England has lagged behind that of Scotland for almost a decade and a half and is now seriously out of step with both Scotland and Wales since those administrations banned all snares outright. England is one of very few European countries that permit the use of neck snares for mammals: many have no tradition or using them or have banned them in order to comply fully with EU conservation legislation prohibiting the use of indiscriminate traps where they may capture certain protected species[li].

The UK government's Animal Welfare Strategy commitment to a ban on snares is necessary and welcome. WAWC considers that any further delay only prolongs welfare harms to sentient wild animals and cannot be justified. WAWC recommends an early consultation and the introduction of legislation as soon as possible to prohibit the manufacture, sale and use of snares in England.

The Animal Welfare Strategy also proposes a review of spring traps and corvid traps in England, to which WAWC hopes to contribute. These traps and alternative methods of wildlife management, where this is justified, should be assessed against the international consensus principles for ethical wildlife control.

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The Wild Animal Welfare Committee (WAWC) is an independent expert committee, set up in 2014 to provide independent advice and evidence about the welfare of free-living wild animals in the UK, aiming to reduce harm to animals and prevent suffering caused by human activity.

ENDNOTES

[i] https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/63065/snares

[ii]Animal Welfare Strategy for England. DEFRA, December 2025. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/animal-welfare-strategy-for-england/animal-welfare-strategy-for-england#wild-animals-1

[iii] Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023, s.46 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asc/2023/4/section/46

[iv] Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Act 2024, s.6 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2024/4/section/6

[v] Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill - use of snares and powers of Scottish SPCA inspectors: consultation analysis https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-management-muirburn-scotland-bill-use-snares-powers-scottish-spca-inspectors-analysis-responses-consultation-exercise/

[vi] Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, s.11 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/section/11#commentary-key-62736d5520535ecceb3acefd72b379d9E+Wv00026

[vii] Schedule 6ZA, inserted by the Humane Trapping Standards Regulations 2019, Part 2, lists badger *(Meles meles),* beaver *(Castor fiber*), otter *(Lutra lutra),* pine marten *(Martes martes)* and stoat *(Mustela erminea)*. A general licence has been issued specifying approved spring traps for stoat.

[viii] Code of best practice on the use of snares for fox control in England https://www.gwct.org.uk/media/680075/Snaring-Best-Practice-Booklet.pdf Developed in 2016 by National Gamekeepers Organisation, Tenant Farmers' Association, Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Moorland Association, Country Land and Business Association, British Association for Shooting and Conservation, Countryside Alliance, National Farmers Union, and endorsed by DEFRA

[ix] Deer Act 1991, s.4 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1991/54/section/4

[x] Animal Welfare Act 2006, s.2 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/45/section/2

[xi] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f11bd67d3bf7f5badfe3d88/wml-gu02-animal-welfare-act-wildlife-managment.pdf

[xii] Determining the extent of use and humaneness of snares in England and Wales Report submitted to DEFRA https://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2012-0577/Document.pdf

[xiii] https://www.wawcommittee.org/s/WAWC-Position-Paper-2-Live-Trapping-Terrestrial-Mammals-and-Birds-260922.pdf

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[xlvi]International treaty between the European Community, Canada and the Russian Federation aimed at permitting the international fur trade to continue as long as capture methods meet the standards set within the Agreement. It covers the use of traps for wildlife management purposes including pest control, obtaining fur, skin or meat, and the capture of mammals for conservation. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/1998/142/oj/eng The only extant species in Great Britain to which the AIHTS applies is the stoat.

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