



GRAEME ROBERTSON/GETTY

Even when not killing foxes, hunts cause disturbance to rural wildlife and livestock



OPINION

“Throughout the winter, hunts up and down the country will be sticking two fingers up at the law”

MARK CARWARDINE

FOX HUNTING IS ILLEGAL. I MAY BE stating the obvious, but ‘illegal’ means it’s against the law – like smuggling heroin or stealing a car – and therefore you’re not allowed to do it. So how come last week hunters on horseback accompanied by a pack of baying hounds chased a fox right past my village? Throughout the winter, hunts up and down the country will be sticking two fingers up at the law and purposely setting packs of dogs onto foxes for ‘sport’.

Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Despite all the claims and protestations of the hunts, there is so much evidence – video footage, firsthand observations, secretly recorded conversations and comprehensive scientific reports – that even the police openly acknowledge that fox hunting is still common practice. England’s most senior police officer dealing with illegal hunt activity, chief superintendent Matthew Longman, put it perfectly: “It is fast becoming one of the most farcical eras in criminal justice history,” he says, “because hunts are still offending. We see it regularly.” It’s wildlife crime, plain and simple.

The Hunt Saboteurs Association goes further, describing fox hunts as organised crime gangs (claiming that many wield intimidation and violence towards anyone who gets in their way).

‘Trail hunting’ is the usual excuse (see box). But it’s utter balderdash. Hunts openly employ staff to block fox escape routes (including badger setts – which is also illegal). If the fox does find a hole,

terrier men (who are armed with dogs and spades and accompany most hunts) put their terriers down to flush it out. There are hundreds of photographs and hours of video footage online of hunters grabbing these foxes and literally throwing them to the hounds, while the hunters jeer and laugh as the hapless creatures are ripped to shreds.

Fox hunters masquerade as noble, traditional and worthy. They argue that their barbaric bloodsport should continue because it is a British tradition (but then so was bear baiting). They claim that ‘country folk’ support fox hunting. But it’s simply not true – polls carried out for the League Against Cruel Sports in 2024 tell us that 70 per cent of rural voters want to get rid of this vile activity.

What normal, caring, intelligent, decent person would support such animal cruelty? In truth, it’s only a very, very, very small minority who enjoy watching traumatised foxes being ripped apart by a pack of bloodthirsty hounds. (My idea of normal, caring, intelligent, decent people are the kind who devote their lives to looking after injured and sick foxes, nursing them back to health.)

Even without killing foxes, hunts ride roughshod over the countryside, frequently trespassing on nature reserves and private properties (in some cases, even killing domestic cats). There are growing concerns about public safety, too, with packs of hounds tearing across busy roads, railway lines and farmland.

What needs to be done? The National Trust, the Lake District National Park, Forestry England and Natural Resources Wales have all taken the matter into their

→ AT A GLANCE

- Fox hunting has been illegal in Scotland since 2002 and in England and Wales since 2004. It is still legal in Northern Ireland.
- Overwhelming evidence, collated by the police, journalists, League Against Cruel Sports, Protect the Wild, the Hunt Saboteurs Association and many others, shows that fox hunting never stopped.
- The most common and effective way fox hunts have avoided prosecution is by ‘trail hunting’. This legal loophole allows them to lay a scent trail, typically using fox urine, for their hounds to follow.
- The reality of trail hunting was exposed in 2020, when senior hunt officials were caught on camera admitting that it is a smokescreen for the chasing and killing of foxes.

own hands and banned or suspended trail hunting on their land.

Scotland recently banned trail hunting under the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 (although NatureScot has been issuing dozens of special licences for hunting with packs of dogs and it’s unclear how many of these have been used by hunts.) I believe that England, Wales and Northern Ireland should follow suit as a matter of urgency. We need proper deterrents, too. Currently, the only punishment for these criminals is a small fine (the average in 2023 was £356).

Unfortunately, previous governments have been on the side of the very, very, very small minority – albeit a well-connected minority. But perhaps the new government will do the right thing? 🐾

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