

Caught in a trap (Wildlife Crime)

WILDLIFE CRIME and the debate on access to the countryside are inextricably linked. During the last fifteen years, over 95% of those people charged in Scotland with offences relating to bird of prey persecution and poisoning have been associated with game shooting interests. In short, most people who attempt to kill raptors come from grouse, partridge or pheasant management backgrounds. According to the Scottish Secretary Donald Dewar, this is a national disgrace. It has also not gone unnoticed that the majority of this crime has been reported by members of the public whilst out walking. Hence the less than warm welcome given by some estates to calls for greater access to the countryside.

The purpose of this piece is to guide hillwalkers on what is legal and what is not legal in the Scottish uplands. There are several types of persecution likely to be encountered on a day on the hill, and the following outlines should guide you as to the course of action to take.

Pole traps

Outlawed almost a century ago, these indiscriminate traps still make annual appearances around some pheasant rearing areas and on grouse moors. They tend to be constructed by placing a fence post in an open area without any other obvious perching positions for birds to land on. A metal trap is attached to the top of the pole and left set. The unfortunate bird then lands on the post and the trap snaps shut breaking or severing both legs. Sometimes the traps are hidden under trees around pheasant rearing pens. A variation on this design is to put bait (such as rabbit) on the ground or on a branch and to hide a trap very close by. These traps are very dangerous and should not be touched; the force from the trap could easily break several fingers.

Poisoned baits

Aimed primarily at carrion feeders (which potentially includes just about every bird of prey), poisoned baits are probably the commonest form of persecution on the Scottish uplands today. Several baits can be used, eg rabbit, mountain hare, grouse, pigeon, eggs, grain, and even bread. The corpses used as baits may be cut open or intact. The poison, usually in a dry granular or powdered form, can be administered anywhere from the belly and back to the eyes. A big clue as to whether you are dealing with a poisoned bait is to see what is close by. Beetles, birds, stoats, weasels, foxes, family pets and sheepdogs get poisoned in most years. The poisons used can be deadly to all animals and you should be very careful not to touch anything. The way these poisons are illegally used means that there are no "safety rules" of what to expect and where to find them. Incredibly dangerous substances, many of which can be absorbed directly through unbroken human skin, are used in the Scottish uplands. It is perhaps surprising that there have been only two human fatalities associated with the illegal use of poisons in the countryside.



Crow traps

Crow traps are legitimate, legal, and effective methods used in "vermin control". Three main types of crow trap are in use: the funnel, the ladder and the Larsen. If correctly used they should not be interfered with, and live bait birds (crows and magpies) should not be released. That said, many crow traps are illegally set, and these pose a significant threat to a wide range of species. All "active" crow traps must contain water, food and shelter, and should be visited daily. All non-target species (ie not crows) should be released immediately by the crow trap operator. It is common to find a trap with the door shut and funnel open and with no food, water or shelter inside. This is illegal. It is also illegal to leave dead birds (crows and "non-target" species) overnight in the trap, as any should be removed at each daily trap inspection. If you find either a live or dead "non-target" species, chances are that the trap is not being checked daily and is being used illegally.

Shooting

Some "pest" species can be killed under licence, but most bird species, including all raptors, are fully protected. If you suspect that someone has shot a protected species, do not approach them. They have a gun and you do not.

Scottish law requires corroboration in terms of evidence. If you do find something that you suspect is illegal, try to get a second witness and photographic/video footage of the event. Note the time and a six figure grid reference of the site. For legal and safety reasons, do not touch or interfere with the (alleged) crime scene. Please phone the **RSPB Investigations Department** on **0131-311-6515**. They will inform the appropriate Police Wildlife Liaison Officer for the area, who will deal with the case.

Deliberate persecution is still common and is the primary reason why you do not see many golden eagles, hen harriers and peregrines in large parts of the Scottish uplands. Help crack down on crime in rural areas by immediately reporting any suspicious incidents. *Dave Pallas*