

Aim: A ban on all types of cages and traps that are used to lure and trap birds, who are then killed.

This ban would raise public consciousness about the rights of animals to live free from harm, encouraging compassion toward all wildlife. It would reinforce the view that animals have intrinsic value and deserve protection from exploitation and cruelty.

“Corvids (members of the crow family that includes the rooks, ravens, magpies, jackdaws, choughs and crows) are the most highly intelligent of birds, with cognitive capacities on a par with the non-human great apes, and brains, relative to body size, that are just as big. The Larsen trap represses their most vital instincts, their curiosity and playfulness. It lays them open to great stress and fear from potential predators. It is inhumane and should not be allowed. The hidden nature of the trap on private land leaves them open to neglect and abuse, the prevention of which is unenforceable.” Prof. Nicola Clayton, Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge, 2023¹

Introduction

The appreciation of corvid intelligence and self-awareness and the richness of their lives is growing all the time.² Yet, these incredible birds are targeted, trapped, persecuted and killed in vast numbers, largely by the shooting industry, because they are deemed to be a threat to the short-term survival of pheasants and partridges (who are also killed, for entertainment, once the shooting season starts later in the year).

Types of traps used

The most common types of traps used to capture crows and magpies are Larsen Traps and multi-catch traps (also known as Ladder traps).

Larsen traps have a compartment where a live ‘decoy’ bird is trapped. Confined and distressed, their cries attract other birds who are territorial or inquisitive, and who then unknowingly enter the main part of the cage, becoming trapped themselves. Ladder traps are baited with either a decoy bird or food to lure other unsuspecting birds into the cage – where they will be trapped and unable to escape. When the gamekeeper returns, the birds are killed.



Legislation

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 permits the killing of certain wild birds to “protect crops, livestock, forestry, fisheries or inland waters; conserve other wild birds, flora or fauna; (and) preserve public health and safety”.³ However, the Wildlife and Countryside Act also makes it clear that licences should not be granted “unless it is satisfied that, as regards that purpose, there is no other satisfactory solution”⁴.

The killing of birds, such as corvids, takes place under the terms of a General Licence, issued by Defra (GL33). The terms of the General Licence state that you can only use certain types of traps, that they have to be inspected every 25 hours, that the traps should be inspected to see if any birds or other animals have been trapped, that the decoy bird is in good health and has food and water and that the trap is working properly. Additionally, the licence states that the trap should be placed somewhere that minimises trapping non-target species (e.g. domesticated animals or wild animals who are not the intended target) and that the person who sets the trap must be trained in “humane dispatch”. (“Humane methods include a sharp blow to the back of the head using a suitable stick or dedicated priest or equivalent. As far as is practicable, avoid the public seeing the dispatch.”)



Inherent failures of the licence

A person does not have to apply for a General Licence, nor complete any paperwork – essentially this means that someone can claim to be acting under the terms of General Licence if challenged.

Since there is no paperwork and no physical licence issued, it is impossible to check if any other methods to deter corvids have been trialled.

Whilst the traps should be checked every 25 hours to see if other birds have been trapped or if non-target animals have been trapped, it has been documented that traps are unchecked for far longer periods.

In the case of multi-cage traps, the RSPB has collated a strong body of evidence showing that they are routinely misused and that birds of prey caught in these traps are frequently killed. The misuse includes instances of operators repeatedly failing to inspect traps every 25 hours.⁵

Under the licence, there is no requirement for food and water to be provided for captured birds. In fact, it even states that other animals (which would include captured target birds) must not be able to deprive the decoy bird of food.⁶

Whether hunger, starvation and dehydration of trapped birds leads to death will depend on how frequently traps are checked. However, death by starvation has been reported for both target and non-target species. A 2016 report, commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage, raised the issue of birds starving: “the presence of a variety of dead target and non-target species in some of the traps, a few of which had probably died of starvation, does suggest that offences under the General Licence had been committed, because either traps were not being checked daily or were not rendered incapable of holding or catching birds when not in use.”⁷

One condition of the GL33 licence (Trapping wild birds: standard licence conditions) relates to avoiding the killing of trapped birds in front of one another. Specifically: “As far as is practicable, you must not dispatch birds in view of decoy birds or other trapped

birds.”⁸ This is because watching other birds being killed is known to distress many bird species, including corvids. However, in practice it is highly unlikely that this condition is met. In prefacing this condition with ‘as far as is practicable’ it amounts to nothing more than a weak suggestion. In multi-catch traps where numerous birds are trapped together it is extremely doubtful that this condition would be met.

The licence also stipulates that birds caught in Larsen traps should be “killed humanely.” But there are no checks in place to detail how birds are killed and, in fact, there is evidence of birds being beaten to death.^{9, 10} Further, it has been noted that “Cervical dislocation does not cause concussion and so the bird may not become unconscious immediately.”

Cruelty – both physical and psychological

Corvids are highly intelligent and aware birds. Magpies are known to recognise themselves in a mirror, demonstrating a high standard of self-awareness.¹¹ It has been shown that both the decoy bird and the trapped birds suffer stress from their confinement and from the presence of people.

Corvids show unique responses to dead individuals of their own species. They have been observed “vocalising, gathering around the dead birds, making occasional tactile contact, and showing wariness in areas associated with death”. This behaviour is thought to “appear more like responses to danger than of anything like grief for the dead birds”, although “the response to the death of familiar individuals is unknown”¹²

Animal Aid investigations have documented ‘decoy’ birds being left without food and/or water¹³ and/or shelter; left unattended for longer than the 25 hours stipulated; and even traps being used in a manner which makes them illegal (see Addendum).

Ultimately, for wild birds to be trapped for many hours in a cage, only to be met with a terrifying death, is unacceptably cruel.





Target birds

The 'target' birds who are lured into the trap and then cannot escape will suffer stress, distress and pain as they are caught and then killed.

- One study found¹⁴ "Trapped crows might therefore become additionally stressed when a trapper familiar to the decoy bird approaches, as the decoy bird may scold the trapper from a distance, potentially adding to the intensity or duration of suffering by trapped birds."
- And birds may be injured, e.g. on wings or the head, if they try to escape when humans approach the trap.
- Birds will be handled prior to cervical dislocation and will suffer fear and distress as a result. Crows may be additionally stressed during handling because of scolding by a decoy bird that recognises the trapper as threatening.

Other notable points from the same study are:

- "Crows are intelligent birds, potentially prone to stress. There will be welfare impacts on the decoy bird which will depend on the length of time for which it is used before being replaced."
- "During the breeding season, there may be additional impacts for parent birds held in the trap, as well as impacts for dependent offspring. If trapping is conducted during breeding, dependent offspring should be found and despatched humanely." "This assessment assumes that the SOP is followed but if traps are checked less often than specified, or trapped birds not despatched quickly after discovery, then impacts could be increased."¹⁵

Non-target birds

A field study commissioned by Scottish National Heritage found "Over 16,000 trap days were recorded, during which over 4,500 target birds (6 species), 119 non-target birds (11 species), and 9 non-target mammals (8 species) were caught. Carrion crows and magpies were the most common target species caught, pheasants were the commonest non-target bird caught and domestic cats the commonest mammal caught." NB 31 of the 'non-target' group were raptors, mainly buzzards, but also some tawny owls.¹⁶

Alternatives to trapping and killing corvids

In comparison, this study found that crow scarers were found to have a greater impact in keeping birds away "if birds learn quickly to avoid the protected site, this effect will be short-term only (a few days) and of minimal impact." And "Birds will be startled by gas guns but will recover quickly as described above. While scarers induce some degree of stress, stress levels are acceptable because they do not exceed those that a bird would experience in a variety of natural situations and the bird is free to take appropriate avoidance action."¹⁷

Public support for a ban on traps

Polling conducted by Animal Aid via OnePoll (July 2026) showed that: 93% agreed it is important that wild birds are able to live freely in their natural environment; 79% were concerned about wild birds being caught in traps; 70% would support a ban on the use of cages for the trapping and killing of wild birds by the shooting industry (only 13% opposed a ban)¹⁸

Conclusion

The use of traps to capture and kill highly intelligent birds to enable the smooth running of the shooting industry's mass production and killing of pheasants and partridges, is not only cruel but wholly unnecessary.

Weak legislation surrounding the use of a general licence, requiring no formal application process or evidence of humane deterrents, is further compounded by the lack of government inspection, and means that the killing of wild birds is wholly unregulated and in breach of animal welfare legislation.

The psychological impact of trapping the birds, who are then killed in front of each other, often by being bludgeoned to death, means that these devices are as cruel and unacceptable as snare traps.

Given compelling scientific evidence, and in line with public opinion opposing cruel and outdated wildlife-killing practices, the government should move to ban the use of all bird traps, including Larsen traps. Continuing to allow the trapping and killing of birds with advanced intelligence and self-awareness is incompatible with the principles of evidence-based animal protection.

ADDENDUM

Animal Aid's Investigations into Corvid Traps

Animal Aid has documented the suffering of birds who are used as 'decoys' as well as the birds who are trapped after being lured into the cage. We have reported our findings, and breaches of legislation, over the years, to the relevant authorities. Action by the authorities – if any is taken – usually amounts to little more than a verbal warning, which demonstrates a general lack of concern towards these intelligent, sentient birds and further makes the case for a ban. If authorities are unwilling or unable to police the use of bird traps, then the logical conclusion is to ban them. Below is a summary of bird trap investigations detailing the suffering of the birds and the breaches of legislation.

Heart of England Game Farm, 2017 Larsen Traps

- On 12 June 2017, Animal Aid investigators discovered a crow in a Larsen trap without water.
- In July 2017, an Animal Aid investigator discovered a Larsen trap illegally baited with a live red-legged partridge. A Larsen trap baited with a partridge is illegal and is commonly referred to as a 'hawk trap' because it is used to attract and catch raptors (usually sparrowhawks or owls) who will then be killed. Following a joint raid by the police and the RSPB, accompanied by Animal Aid investigators, the evidence was passed to the CPS. We were informed, more than a year later, by the CPS that the case had run out of time and that the perpetrator would not face prosecution.

Chargot Estate, Somerset, 2018, Ladder Trap

Animal Aid's investigators visited the site of a bird cage (ladder) trap on the Chargot Estate on 30 May 2018. A long-run (continuous record) camera was left filming the trap for 44.5 hours, and was collected on 1 June. The cage trap was baited with corn (or feed) and a dead rabbit.



Illegally set Larsen Trap, using a partridge as a decoy, Heart of England Game Farm 2017

- One rook was left in the trap for the whole duration of the recording without water (and no dish or receptacle for water) or perch.
- One of the rooks in the cage trap had blood on his beak, indicating that he had become injured whilst trying to escape the trap.
- The trap was visited four times during the recording by the gamekeeper, including one visit of around six minutes to make repairs to the trap. None of the birds in the trap were tended to or given water during those visits.
- Animal Aid's investigator released the birds on collecting the camera because their welfare had been severely compromised in breach of the Animal Welfare Act and would have been suffering significantly. They had not had any water or shelter for the period that the camera had been left running. Our investigator resecured the door on leaving.
- A female pheasant became trapped in the cage trap. The bird was a non-target bird and should have been released immediately when the trap was inspected.
- Photos from the investigation can be viewed at: <https://www.animalaid.org.uk/news/gamekeeper-cautioned-animal-welfare-offences-prestigious-chargot-estate-shoot/>

Bonson Wood Game Farm, Somerset, 2018, Larsen Traps

Animal Aid investigators set a long-running camera filming two Larsen traps at Bonson Wood Game Farm in Somerset on 28 and 29 June 2018, covering a period of 47 hours and 12 minutes. The recorded temperature for the two days in the area reached 28C.

- One trap had a single decoy bird in a compartment. The other trap had three birds crammed together in the decoy compartment.
- Animal Aid's film shows that the trap is not physically inspected for almost 35 hours.
- During this time, one of the decoy birds had kicked over a small and totally unsuitable water dish in his cage. Our film showed that he had been without water for a period of more than 24 hours.

- The three birds crammed into a single decoy compartment had suffered feather loss injuries and were prone to getting their wings caught on the perch of the cage as they tried to avoid one another.
- We also observed the distressed birds flying at the sides of the cages in order to try to escape.
- A speeded-up film showing the birds' confinement for the 47 hours can be viewed here: <https://www.animalaid.org.uk/undercover-footage-reveals-suffering-of-wild-birds-in-cruel-trap/>

The Norfolk Estate, West Sussex, 2021, Larsen Trap

Animal Aid's investigator visited the site of a Larsen trap, sited on the Norfolk Estate on 3 April and 7 April 2021.

- On 3 April, the investigators discovered that the decoy bird compartment contained a crow, with a damaged right wing. When the investigator returned to the site on 7 April, the trap had been moved, but the injured bird was still being used as a decoy.

- On 7 April, the investigators recorded that the food bowl was empty and that the water bowl had frozen over.

- Photos from this investigation can be seen at: <https://www.animalaid.org.uk/cruelty-in-the-countryside/>

Bryn Coch Game Farm, Newtown, April 2025, Larsen Traps

- On 24 April 2025, Animal Aid Investigators visited a game farm In Newtown. Two circular Larsen traps were found. One had a crow in the call bird chamber.
- The second cage had two magpies in the decoy bird chamber.
- The decoy birds had food (dead pheasants and eggs), dirty water and a small sheet of metal on top of the trap as shelter.

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