

Feature

A future for spring traps

We reported last year that the Government had approved seven new types of spring trap for use in England. Members of the NGO's Predation Control Working Group have been trying some of them out and their comments are reported below.

DEFRA HAS INFORMED THE NGO AND OTHER key 'stakeholders' that it will be shortly be looking at the future of trap use and approvals. The NGO will be part of this review but what lies behind it?

One important driver is undoubtedly the International Trapping Agreement, to which the European Union signed up a few years ago. Although mainly aimed at fur trapping countries, the agreement set minimum standards for trap designs and approvals. Mostly these related to fur-bearing species not present in the UK but one, the stoat, is present here and in any case the agreement set the trend towards higher standards in trap design and performance.

The EU is still deciding how to implement the agreement in member states and indeed the hold-up is partly because one set of lawyers believes that the EU has no authority to enforce it, because it relates to wild animal welfare, not to kept animals. Either way the UK Government is beginning to look again at the traps we have here and whether they might measure up to the international standards.

Another issue is the question of inspection times. Frankly the law in the UK on these is a mess. You are required to look at a snare once a day by law but twice if you are following the Government snaring code (and if you don't follow it you might be in trouble in the event of an incident).

A Larsen trap or a crow cage has to be looked at once a day at intervals of no more than 24 hours, in other words earlier and earlier each day. On spring traps, however, the law is silent unless they are set for rabbits or for hares, in which case 'once a day' is the rule. However, under animal welfare legislation you may well be guilty of an offence if you don't check a spring trap every day because you cannot be sure that all captures will be clean kills.

Enter the DOC traps, three of which were approved for use in England last year. DOC stands for Department of Conservation in New Zealand, where the traps were developed for controlling

The box is an integral part of the DOC trap – it only allows animals of a certain size to enter and guides them directly over the plate for a clean kill.

MIKE SHORT/GSWCT



small ground predators of the emblematic kiwi and other wild birds. They are powerful spring traps of varying sizes sold and set within carefully designed wooden boxes that exclude animals larger than the target range and guide them directly over the plate. Early trials in the UK by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) show very high clean kill rates (98% plus), which explains why in New Zealand they are only checked every few weeks (see article page 30).

Can it be argued that high quality traps like this do not need to be checked every day, leaving the keeper free to spend more time checking holding traps like the snare and the crow cage? Then again, if a crow cage is so designed that it does the caught bird no harm, does it really need inspecting at intervals of less than 24 hours or might the interval be extended to, say, 30 hours, allowing more flexibility and removing the need to visit earlier and earlier each day? The NGO thinks the answer to these questions is 'yes' and will be urging Defra to look into these possibilities.

Excluders are another topical issue, since the near prosecution last year of a keeper using a spring trap on a bridge, with a tunnel, but without excluders to narrow the entrance and limit entry by non-target species. To clarify, excluders are not a legal requirement, but if you don't have them you might fall foul of the law by not being able to show that you were out to catch the target animals alone. They also help to centralise the target over the trap plate and are worth having for that reason alone. Some keepers use the traditional pair of sticks, others use nails down from the top of a wooden tunnel. A few use ply or metal plates with holes drilled through, and some use wire mesh in various ways. It's worth experimenting if you don't use something already. The GWCT is carrying out research.

Then there is the matter of new technology. Devices are already appearing on the market that call a gamekeeper's mobile phone whenever one of his traps has gone off. The retailers say these increase efficiency and remove the need to inspect daily. Lawyers say they are not so sure and that the law, where it specifies inspection, requires a visual check. Others say such short cuts take keepers off their daily rounds, or even that they could



A shipment of DOC traps will shortly arrive and the GWCT will be selling them.

reduce the number of keeping jobs. Whatever the truth, the future of such devices needs careful thought.

So what about those new traps that NGO keepers have been trying out? The DOC series, reported on above and on page 30, clearly do the business when it comes to killing (see photos), although the boxes they are supplied in (and which are part of the approved trap) are large and obvious, perhaps risking vandalism. "I would certainly want to camouflage mine, perhaps with paint, but the squirrels certainly go in them and rats too, although we have yet to catch a stoat," said one keeper involved in a pilot trial.

The three newly approved DOCs are for different species depending on size. There are very few in the UK at present but the GWCT is importing a container load which will be used in a wider trial involving many NGO keepers, not least those who volunteered at our recent AGM.

The Solway Mks 4 and 6 are essentially beefed up versions of the familiar Fenn, Springer and Keepa equivalents. The NGO keepers who have been trying these out say they are well made, look, set and work much the same as the other makes. "I have had a high percentage of clean kills," reports Jeff Handy, "certainly much better than the Keepa". We should

add, however, that Jeff is something of a tunnel trapping expert and always gets good results, attributing this to careful fit of trap to tunnel and the use of excluders to centre the target animal over the plate.

Our two keepers who tried the newly approved Nooski first wondered what we were giving them, for it looks more like a sex aid than a trap! It is in fact a rat trap made of plastic and designed to throw a thick elastic band over the rat's neck to throttle it. Whether it works we don't know because neither keeper has managed to catch with it despite trying a range of baits and locations. "It's a fiddly thing and if you get a frosty night the rubber rings lose their elasticity," reports Brian Mitchell.

The Kania 2500 for squirrels, rats, stoats and weasels is a bigger version of the Kania approved some years ago. Like that it has been killing well in trials and is a particularly good squirrel trap when set up a tree.

You are unlikely to be able to get hold of DOC traps for a few months yet, and you probably don't want a Nooski, unless it's for the bedroom, but Solway traps are available from Solway Feeders (01557 500253) and the Kania 2500, which comes from Canada, is now beginning to be sold by UK trap retailers.