

Feature

Police, public and poachers



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Pigeon shooters are usually dressed in camo so as not to be seen by their quarry, but this can be misinterpreted by well-meaning passers-by.

Charles Nodder considers recent developments and a way forward for fighting rural crime...

2009 WILL BE REMEMBERED BY SOME AS THE year when police swooped – quite literally – on hapless pigeon shooters. Police helicopters costing £1,000 an hour were used more than once to arrest ordinary countrymen in the act of legitimate pest control. In one case, the chopper was supported on the ground by no less than seven squad cars and an armed response unit. In another, a ‘suspect’ was led from the field in handcuffs. The ‘suspects’ were later released after it had been established that members of the public who had reported ‘masked gunmen’ and ‘terrorists’ were mistaken, but by then the cost to the taxpayer was several thousands of pounds, to say nothing of the emotional cost to those arrested.

For others, many gamekeepers included, 2009 was yet another of

chasing poachers, coursers and ne’er-do-wells from one farm to another, suffering abuse, threats and sometimes violence and with very little meaningful response from their local police. Wives lay awake at night worrying for their partner’s safety. There was the cost and hassle of replacing slashed tyres, broken gates and catching up with animals left wounded by dog men. Many keepers think that the recession has fuelled an interest in poaching and rural crime generally and, in places, no response from the police has been forthcoming.

But for some, 2009 was a year of real hope and success in the context of rural crime. Their local police forces got on to the front foot, responding quickly and in numbers to reports of poaching and calls for help. Feedback was excellent,

with descriptions of suspect vehicles and persons texted to keepers on a daily basis; good communication and teamwork resulted in arrests. Homes were searched, other criminal involvement found, cars, telephones, dogs and other equipment were confiscated as accessories to the crime. Overall the problems lessened, or at least moved away.

What explains these differences? Why are some forces asleep or inept whereas others are right on the money? Partly it is down to the availability or lack of resources. Partly it is down to the crime-fighting priorities set by each police force. But mainly it seems to be down to knowledge.

The success stories – the places where the right arrests get made and pigeon shooters can operate without fear – are

the areas where the police know their countryside, know their rural law, know who the problem individuals are and know that in gamekeepers they have an unrivalled rural network with which they can work to get great results.

The problem forces are those where the ops room thinks that any call about a man with a gun must mean a terrorist; or where officers sent out to deal with poaching get lost on the way. They certainly won't know what to expect if they do eventually arrive and they won't have a clue what a gamekeeper does.

The good news, however, is that these problems can be overcome. Knowledge can be acquired and training provided. In some of the better forces, the enthusiasm and the success of the rural crime work can be traced back to just one officer who really knows his stuff – Lancashire and south Hampshire would be good examples of that. In other forces there is a dedicated rural policing team, either already well briefed or just waiting to learn. The problem and the potential solutions are now recognised nationally.

When an NGO delegation went to see the National Wildlife Crime Unit during the summer, the keepers were told that poaching was a wildlife crime priority, one of six identified at national level and supposed now to be pursued actively by all rural police forces. The NGO also learned that training of officers in support of the wildlife crime priorities was itself getting greater attention and the organisation has since been in touch with the police training unit to offer its help.

“If the police think it would be beneficial we are more than happy to run some regional conferences or small training days to explain to officers what gamekeepers do and the sort of response we need in order to be effective,” said Lindsay Waddell, the NGO Chairman. “It needn't be restricted to poaching. If they would like to know how best to establish whether a reported ‘gun man’ is in fact legitimate, we will be happy to tell them that too.”

One Assistant Chief Constable has already welcomed the NGO's offer and said it would fit well with a more

strategic, intelligence-led approach to fighting rural crime and poaching in particular. Other forces are interested in copying the Scottish example by recruiting more gamekeepers as Special Constables. Hertfordshire, North Yorkshire and Wiltshire are all interested in this approach and NGO members have come forward to volunteer. One hurdle still to be overcome is the expectation of some forces that gamekeeper Specials should police football matches!

It is all about teamwork and communication. Using the gamekeepers' network and harnessing their rural knowledge so that police time and resources – which will always be stretched – are better targeted and effectively used. “There is scope for real improvement,” says Lindsay. “Some forces are there already, so it shows it can be done. If we can help bring the worst up to the standards of the best, this could be a huge success story and a real contribution to improving keepers' lives.”

Police helicopters cost over £1,000 an hour. It's a waste of public money when well-targeted education among the police force could prevent unnecessary misunderstandings when shooters are going about lawful business.

