

Opinion

Automatic trap-checking: friend or foe?

Dick Bartlett of British Moorlands Ltd suggests there is a role for this technology in modern gamekeeping.

MOST OF TODAY'S GAMEKEEPERS HAVE benefited from the information technology (IT) revolution of the last 15 years with an array of devices from walkie-talkie radios to computers and smartphones. In the past, much time was spent in visiting suppliers for information and prices and also in

contacting beaters and others regarding availability for shoot days. Now this information comes electronically to the keeper saving the time and cost of personal travel.

So why do most keepers still spend so much time every day checking the status of traps and snares when such informa-

tion can be sent to them automatically from the trap site?

Automatic trap-checking (ATC) works by fitting a trap with a device that sends a signal daily to the operator at pre-set time(s). This can be a simple yes/no or a coded message or a colour picture. Video clips may be possible soon. Technical details can be found on the British Moorlands website.

The main benefits come from saving the keeper's valuable time, which can be better used to set more traps for more effective predator control and/or spend more time on habitat improvements. There are also welfare benefits as the keeper knows which traps have been activated before he leaves home, so he can attend these first.

New technology can lead to anxiety about loss of jobs. This might affect estates employing several keepers but nationally the number of keeper jobs will rise as predator control becomes more cost effective and affordable again to estates which abandoned grouse moors and wild lowland game in the middle of the last century. Similar anxieties arose when the pheasant industry moved from labour-intensive coops and broody hens to the modern technology of incubators, gas brooders and complete feeds. But the result was a massive expansion of pheasant shooting at all levels of scale as it became more affordable with more employment opportunities for keepers.

Keepers are a proud and independent breed who might not like the idea of the boss having access to the information recorded by the ATC system but, on the other hand, it would show the boss the long hours of work being done.

The capital outlay for ATC might seem high until you check the total employment cost of a keeper (including housing,

Dick Bartlett with one of his automatic trap-checking devices for use on a Larsen trap.



vehicle, ATV, etc) against the number of traps that can be checked per day. Over a six-month trapping season this can cost over £200 per trap. ATC can do the job for about £50 for a whole year. The best way to start using ATC is a small-scale pilot unit set to monitor trap sites that are good for catching vermin but too far from the usual daily round. Snares and corvid traps have legal limits for intervals between checking and some keepers think that they can check others, such as Fenn traps, less frequently. In fact the Animal Welfare Act 2006 requires daily checks on all traps. Even the killing traps can sometimes catch just a foot or leg. The antis are now getting more sophisticated as they move from vandalism of traps to attempting to wreck a keeper's career as they use surveillance to monitor and report any breaches of regulations.

If you ask an official about the legality of ATC they usually say you still have to check in person. They say this out of ignorance of how fail-safe protected ATC works and they don't want to authorise something that might get them into trouble or invite the wrath of the antis for making predator control easier.

However, British Moorlands has used and promoted ATC in the UK for 12 years without any interference from anyone and, this year, ATC has been publicly approved by legislation in EU countries such as Denmark, Sweden and Germany.

Legal approval does not cover catch-activated alarm systems. Fail-safe standards require that the device sends a regular positive signal that the trap is still as it was set by the operator. If there is a catch or any technical fault with the device (eg. battery run-down) that signal cannot be sent and the absence of this regular signal would demand a personal visit to the trap.

We are currently trying to get the word "inspect" replaced by "check" to remove all legal doubt but, even now, failure to inspect is not an offence if there is "good reason or reasonable excuse". This clause is to cover times of bad weather when travel is prevented, but it can also cover the use of ATC as a system much superior to any manual system. Nearly all safety conscious industries today use automated checking as it has been found to be more reliable than human efforts and a tamper-proof electronic record shows the job has

been done. In fact, it is mandatory in, for example, care of medical patients, aircraft and train safety and Defra regulations for monitoring food storage temperatures and environment monitoring in intensive livestock buildings.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE VISIT
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WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON ATC?

As this opinion article implies, the legality of ATC as a means of trap 'inspection' is uncertain. The NGO advises anyone thinking of investing in ATC to tread carefully until the matter is tested in Court.

ATC is not for everyone, although it may work well in many situations. If you have an experience with the technology that you would like to share, or if you disagree with its use, please let us know. We would like to hear our members' views on the subject. Please contact Sophia Gallia, Editor *KtB* (see page 3 for contact details).

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