

Is the fox a pest?

The Burns Inquiry acknowledged that there is a general perception, amongst farmers, landowners and gamekeepers that it is necessary to control the fox population. However, scientific studies have shown that foxes are not the pests that rural folklore suggests.

At the Defra public hearings on hunting with dogs held in September 2002, Professor Stephen Harris (Environmental Sciences, Bristol University) presented peer reviewed scientific evidence and stated: “There is no evidence that foxes need to be controlled” and “no method of fox control has had an impact on the fox population”.

Scientific studies

The results of studies released in September 2002 showed that predation by foxes on lambs and other livestock is low and, in some circumstances, can be reduced by better husbandry or fencing.¹ The results included data from two hill farms in Scotland on which the fate of over 4,000 lambs was recorded over four years. The maximum loss rate that might have been attributable to fox predation was 1.8% and this led the authors to conclude, “...fox predation is a relatively unimportant cause of death among lambs in the UK”. This conclusion was also reached by the Burns Inquiry which stated: “It is clear that only a small proportion of foxes kill lambs; otherwise, lamb losses would be much higher”.²

The Burns Report put the best estimate of losses of lambs to fox predation at under 2% of otherwise viable lambs. Game Conservancy Trust research in mid-Wales suggested that the pre-weaning losses attributed to foxes among 522,422 lambs in mid-Wales amounted to 0.6% for all lambs and 1% for outdoor lambs. Government agricultural advisory material estimates that UK sheep producers lose up to four million lambs every year at an annual cost of the order of £120 million – of which a very small percentage is the result of predation. If farmers wish to control the fox population on their land the removal of dead sheep on which foxes are often known to feed has the potential to restrict fox numbers. In terms of promoting lamb survival, making improvements to ewe nutrition, attention to weakly lambs and the provision of shelter can yield greater benefits than fox culling.³

Gamekeepers maintain that fox predation causes heavy losses of pheasant and grouse. However, a major long-term study of grouse moor in Scotland, published in 2000, found that predation on grouse by foxes and raptors only became really significant if the grouse population on the moor was already in decline.⁴ There are many causes of falling grouse numbers, including habitat management failures, disease and weather.

The Game Conservancy Trust conducted a study (the so-called ‘three regions’ study) looking at the density of foxes in three areas of the country (mid-Wales, the Midlands and west Norfolk). They claimed it proved that hunting with dogs played a role in the management of fox numbers in mid-Wales. However during the September hearings their research was exposed as being unreliable. The data was gathered from information supplied by farmers, gamekeepers and the hunts and Dr Jonathan Reynolds (a wildlife biologist with the Game Conservancy Trust) admitted that “culling records gathered from farmers or gamekeepers or anybody else, are not a very good indication of the number of foxes killed.”

In evidence to the Defra public hearings, Professor Stephen Harris gave details of a ten-year research study for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) which examined the impact of predators on farmland birds.⁵ Predation was not identified as “the main cause of decline” for any of the 11 species

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included in their review, and only appeared as one of several “mechanisms” for the grey partridge. Habitat/management changes were identified as “the main ultimate causes for decline” for all species. Harris advised that this was reflected in the RSPB’s attitude to the need for fox control on their reserves which was expressed to him as “overall fox predation is not a significant problem at our 176 reserves” and predation “usually stops when the control is precise and small scale”. The RSPB shoots foxes where necessary and places “great emphasis on getting their habitat management right at reserves of sufficient size so that they can accommodate a full range of predators and prey”.⁶

One aspect dealt with in a research contract for the Burns Inquiry but, unfortunately, not incorporated into the report, is the fact that fox predation on rabbits may help farmers by reducing the costs of arable crop losses and competition for grazing. Calculations based on the work indicate that such a saving could be in the region of £100 million.⁷

Hunts encouraging foxes

Supporters of hunting claim that fox hunting is a necessary form of pest control. In the nineteenth century however, thousands of foxes were sold through London’s Leadenhall Market to hunt masters who wished to restock their country. These days some hunts build artificial earths – underground chambers designed to encourage foxes to live and breed in the area.

In June 2000, following an investigation by the International Fund for Animal Welfare, the prestigious Duke of Beaufort Hunt admitted to building artificial earths “to attract foxes to the countryside” as hunting is “all about conservation and control”.⁸ In January 2002 it was revealed by the International Fund for Animal Welfare that foxes were feeding on deer carcasses that had been left on the Duke of Beaufort’s estate.⁹ In May 2002, an investigation by the League Against Cruel Sports revealed that even in upland areas such as Cumbria, which are perceived to have a greater need for fox control, sheep carcasses were being dumped on ground adjacent to artificial earths.¹⁰ In June 2003, the International Fund for Animal Welfare released footage showing an employee of the Cottesmore Hunt in Leicestershire putting tiny fox cubs in an artificial earth on land used by the hunt.¹¹ Footage shot of the same artificial earth during the previous hunt season showed a kennelman trying to flush a fox from it during a Cottesmore Hunt. It could be concluded that far from needing to keep down fox numbers hunts are deliberately encouraging foxes on their land to provide a reliable supply of quarry for the hunters to chase.

The Burns Report described the active use of artificial shelters for foxes to encourage them to live in suitable places with a view to hunting them as “inconsistent with the stated objective of controlling numbers through hunting”.¹²

Conclusion

There is little evidence to support the view that the fox is a significant agricultural pest nationally. The Burns Inquiry concluded that while individual foxes may cause some damage, fox predation is not a significant cause of lamb mortality. If farmers need to respond to local sporadic outbreaks of lamb predation by a rogue fox, then it is the individual fox that should be targeted. On farmland, this is most effectively and commonly achieved by lamping – the use of a powerful beam of light to immobilise a fox at night, so that it can be shot with a rifle.

- ¹ Baker, P. J., Harris, S and Webbon, C. C. *Nature*, Volume 419.34. September 5, 2002 and White, P., Evidence to Session 1C. Hunting with Dogs Hearings on the Evidence. September 9, 2002.
- ² Burns Report, par 5.15.
- ³ Stevens, D., Alexander, G and Lynch, J. (1982) Lamb mortality due to inadequate care of twins by merino ewes. *Applied animal ethology*. 8. 243–252. Starr, JR. (1981) Weather and lamb mortality in a commercial lowland sheep flock. *Agricultural meteorology*. 24, 237.
- ⁴ Report of the UK raptor working group. (2000) DETR, JNCC. 39–41.
- ⁵ Evans, A. & Wilson, J. (2001) The implications of ten years of research on lowland farmland birds: an RSPB perspective. *RSPB Conservation Review* 13, 7–17.
- ⁶ Personal communication cited by Professor Harris at the DEFRA Public Hearings, September 2002.
- ⁷ Ryder, R., Foxes are not pests: they are the farmer’s best friend. Submission to the Inquiry on Hunting with Dogs in England and Wales, April 2000.
- ⁸ Jo Aldridge of the Duke of Beaufort Hunt, *Daily Mirror*, February 16, 2000.
- ⁹ International Fund for Animal Welfare press release.
- ¹⁰ The Futility of Upland Hunting, League Against Cruel Sports (2002).
- ¹¹ The footage was shown on Channel 4 News on June 28, 2003.
- ¹² Burns Report, par 9.27.

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