

MARK CARWARDINE

Our columnist has never shied away from the big issues.
This month: trail hunting and illegal fox hunting

Isn't fox hunting illegal in the UK?

Yes. After decades of campaigning, fox hunting (as well as hunting other mammals with dogs) was banned in Scotland in 2002, and in England and Wales in 2004. It is still legal in Northern Ireland, but a private member's bill that would ban the hunting of wild mammals with dogs is currently being debated in Stormont (it passed the first stage with 113 votes for and 49 against).

Why was it banned?

It was deemed to be cruel – legislators stated that “causing suffering to animals for sport is unethical”. Foxes are chased for long periods and the independent Burns report (2000) concluded that “this experience seriously compromises the welfare of the fox”. If a fox hides in a hole, terriers are put down to trap it or flush it out; there are hundreds of photographs and hours of video footage online of hunters digging these foxes out and literally throwing them to the hounds. And autopsies reveal that hunted foxes are not killed quickly but are ripped apart by the hounds – causing unimaginable suffering.

Were the bans the end of the matter?

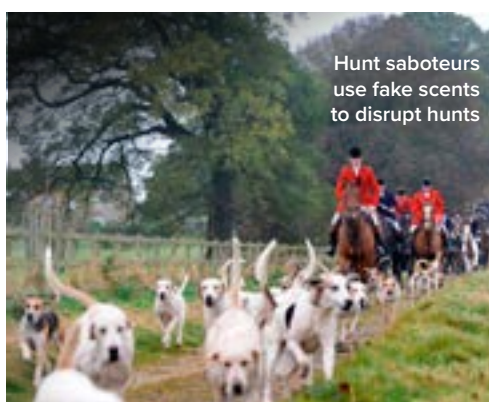
No. Many see the legislation as a masterly fudge, thanks to umpteen exemptions that make it almost impossible to enforce.

So fox hunting never stopped?

No. Overwhelming evidence collated by the police, journalists and animal welfare groups categorically shows that fox hunting never stopped. The most recent figures published by the League Against Cruel Sports, for the winter season ending in April 2025, recorded 397 incidents of foxes being chased by hunts among 1,591 reports of suspected illegal hunting and ‘hunt havoc’.

What is hunt havoc?

Hunts ride roughshod over the countryside, frequently trespassing on farmland, nature reserves and private properties. They chase



other wildlife, illegally block badger setts to remove escape routes, harass livestock and even kill domestic pets. And there are growing concerns about public safety, too, with packs of hounds running amok on busy roads and railway lines.

How do they get away with it?

The most common and effective way fox hunts avoid prosecution is by ‘trail hunting’. This legal loophole allows them to lay a scent trail for their hounds to follow. According to the Masters of Fox Hounds Association, “Trail hunting is designed to replicate how hunting looked and felt before the ban, without chasing live quarry”. But the reality was exposed in 2020, during a leaked webinar, when senior hunt officials admitted that it is used to disguise fox hunting. The most senior police officer in England responsible for fox-hunting crime, described it as a “smokescreen for illegal fox hunting”.

Who supports fox hunting?

Fox hunters claim that rural communities support fox hunting. But that's simply not true. For decades, opinion polls by Ipsos, YouGov and others show that about 80 per cent of people in Britain want fox hunting to remain illegal – and there is no statistical difference in opinion between urban and rural communities on this issue.

Isn't hunting necessary for fox control?

No. The overall impact of foxes on poultry and livestock does cost farmers an estimated £10-12 million annually – but, conversely, foxes provide an important service by controlling rabbits (which cost farmers more than £120 million a year). Either way, culling rarely works. When foxes are killed others simply move into the vacated territory – even Defra advises better protection of poultry and livestock rather than killing foxes. That aside, fox hunting is the least efficient and one of the most inhumane ways of culling, and – tellingly – hunts have been caught breeding foxes to ensure an adequate supply.

What next?

Scotland recently banned trail hunting but, again, there are umpteen exceptions in the 2023 act. Meanwhile, the National Trust, 10 of the 13 national park authorities in England and Wales, United Utilities, the Ministry of Defence, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and other significant landowners have all banned or suspended trail hunting on their land. NRW went so far as to say that it has “lost confidence” in the Masters of Foxhounds Association to ensure activities were carried out legally.

Why is it in the news?

Labour pledged to ban trail hunting in its 2024 manifesto. It recently announced a consultation early in 2026 to seek views on how to actually do it. 

Mark is a zoologist, conservationist, bestselling author, broadcaster, tour leader and widely published wildlife photographer

