



18

Mark Carwardine's **AT A GLANCE...**

FOX HUNTING

WHAT DEFINES FOX HUNTING?

It is a field sport in which hunters follow a pack of trained dogs as they pick up the scent of a fox, chase and kill it. They follow on foot, on horseback, in cars and on motorbikes. It has been banned in many countries, but is still popular in Australia, the United States, Canada, Ireland, France, Italy and elsewhere.

WHEN DID IT BEGIN?

A Norfolk farmer's attempt to catch a fox using farm dogs in 1534 marks the beginning, but it didn't become a sport until much later. The accepted father of modern fox hunting was 18-year-old Hugo Meynell, who began to breed hunting dogs for their speed, stamina and keen sense of smell, in Leicestershire in 1753.

ISN'T IT BANNED IN THE UK?

Years of anti-hunt campaigning led to a Government inquiry into hunting with dogs in 1999. Called the Burns Inquiry after Lord Burns, the chair, it failed to make firm recommendations but did note that hunting with dogs "seriously compromises the welfare of the fox". Eventually fox hunting (as well as hare coursing and other forms of chasing wild mammals with dogs) was banned in Scotland under the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act 2002, and in England and Wales under the Hunting Act 2004. It is still permitted in Northern Ireland.

WHY WAS FOX HUNTING BANNED?

It was deemed to be cruel. In particular, hunted foxes are dismembered by the hounds, and if they escape into unblocked holes terriers are sent after them. The ensuing underground battles result in severe injuries.

WAS THE BAN THE END OF THE MATTER?

No. While the act states that, "a person commits an offence if he hunts a wild mammal with a dog", it continues: "unless his hunting is exempt". The last five words (and the exemptions) make it almost impossible to enforce. Indeed, the Masters of Foxhounds Association (MFHA) – the governing body representing 176 active packs in England and Wales and 10 in Scotland – states on its website that "foxhunting has been restricted by the Hunting Act 2004".

SO FOX HUNTING NEVER STOPPED?

Officially, fox hunts abide by but exploit the law to its limits, but animal welfare campaigners complain that many operate illegally by, for example, using trail hunting – where hounds simply follow a fox-based scent – as a smokescreen.

IS HUNTING NEEDED TO CONTROL FOX NUMBERS?

The jury is still out on whether foxes need to be culled (for instance, they provide a service by



The ban on fox hunting in England and Wales came into force in 2005.

controlling rabbits) and there are experts who say culling rarely works. When foxes are killed, others simply move into the vacated territory or more cubs are born to make up the numbers. That aside, fox hunting is, in my opinion, the least efficient and one of the most inhumane ways of culling and – tellingly – many hunts have been caught breeding foxes to ensure an adequate supply.

A RECENT OPINION POLL, CARRIED OUT IN 2016, FOUND THAT 84 PER CENT OF PEOPLE IN ENGLAND AND WALES WANT THE HUNTING BAN TO STAY."

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

Every month he demystifies some of the most important issues affecting the world's wildlife and assesses the organisations that protect it.

● Would you like to comment? Email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk

WHY IS FOX HUNTING BACK IN THE NEWS?

Prime Minister Theresa May said, during the General Election campaign, that she has "always been in favour of fox hunting" and would give MPs a vote on repealing the Hunting Act. This could also affect other forms of hunting with dogs. However, a 2016 opinion poll carried out by Ipsos-MORI, found that 84 per cent of people in England and Wales want a ban to stay.

WHAT NEXT?

Fox hunting was in the Conservative manifesto, but it is unlikely to be raised now. Without a majority there will be more pressing issues for the government and a bill would struggle to get through the House of Commons. Animal welfare groups, meanwhile, would like to see the ban strengthened.

FIND OUT MORE

Read about the Burns Inquiry at <http://bit.ly/1CTbsQI>