

Can hunts control their hounds?

Categories : [Vets](#), [Wildlife/misc](#)

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“Never have I seen a wild animal attacked by dogs in 40 years of hunting,” declared the baroness to my right. Dog packs were always under control, apparently, and the speaker’s claims hunting packs posed a threat to wildlife were “rubbish”.



Although hunting with dogs was banned by the Hunting Act (2004), some supporters claim packs do not pose a threat to wildlife. Image: © Fotolia/Tanja Hohnwald.

How odd, I told her, because I’d seen police video footage appearing to show exactly that.

As an expert witness in a court case, I had to testify the serious abdominal wounds and broken leg a wild deer had apparently sustained were extremely unlikely to have been caused by bushes, a fence or even barbed wire, as claimed by hunters.

Instead, its injuries were remarkably consistent with a savage attack by dogs, such as those of the hunters’ pack, coincidentally loose in the area just minutes earlier. Nor was the deer merely too “tired” to walk, as a hunter claimed on the video. More likely, it was terrified and in severe pain, as indicated by its rapid breathing and obvious injuries.

Regardless of how one feels about hunting, cases undeniably reveal hunts cannot adequately control hunting hounds, which consequently pose a serious risk to wildlife. At the very least, such hunts should be prohibited from public lands. What if the deer had been a hiker, or a hiker’s child?

To this, the baroness had no answer. The lord to my left did, however. Also a hunter for many

years, he recounted his delight at riding through the glorious English countryside, jumping fences and going wherever he pleased. Such heady pleasures apparently justified the maiming and killing of native mammals, whether targeted deliberately or “incidentally” affected.

This green and pleasant land can, indeed, be a beautiful place. I agreed – particularly on those rare, wonderful days when the sun deigns to shine. Yet, somehow, I had managed to come to this realisation without jumping any fences or killing a single mammal.

Instead of horses, I ride a bike, hike or jog. I got lost for hours on a glorious, sunny mountain in the Lake District above a spectacularly beautiful lake. My experience was diminished not one bit by the absence of any bloodletting or, indeed, a compass.

For those who simply must ride horses with dogs, trail hunting using artificial scents provides the thrill of racing through the countryside, without the need to terrorise a single mammal – assuming, of course, hunts can control their hounds.

Hunting legislation

Such were the musings of the audience at the meeting of the All-Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare (APGAW) at the Palace of Westminster. Under scrutiny was the effectiveness of the Hunting Act (2004), which famously banned hunting with dogs, infuriating red-coated hunters across the English and Welsh countrysides.

The APGAW hunting symposium followed the Government’s attempt to weaken the act, resulting in a defeat for David Cameron¹. Yet, he and his Government maintain an ongoing interest in repealing this act, despite its overwhelming popular support.

Speaking for the Countryside Alliance, James Barrington asserted fox-hunting is perfectly fine, as it is “natural” for foxes to be hunted.

Toni Shepherd of the League Against Cruel Sports noted evolution never prepared foxes to be pursued by mounted riders with horns, packs of dogs and guns, with burrow entrances blocked up by “terrier men”.

Representing the Masters of Foxhounds Association, Jeremy Naylor decried the “emotiveness” of hunting opponents and called passionately for welfarists to redirect their attentions to other, neglected animal welfare issues – before realising he had become quite emotive himself.

And on it went. Although little consensus was reached between hunters and their opponents, much useful information came to light and a fascinating evening was enjoyed by all.