

A guide to successful good practice for controlling corvids

Although territorial pairs of crows and magpies are usually the most serious nest predators, flock-living corvids can also do serious damage. In many cases the sheer weight of numbers means that they come across nests, even if by accident, at far too great a rate. This applies especially if you have large numbers of juvenile crows living nearby, perhaps obtaining their main living on a rubbish tip or outdoor pig unit.

Similar problems apply with moorland situations. Here, if there are no trees, crows will breed on the edges of the moor, defending their territories here, but foraging out onto the moor for grouse nests and other foods. Similar problems can occur with rooks and jackdaws. Wherever possible it pays to get permission from neighbours to trap the boundaries in these situations.

Remember that crow cages must only be operated under a General Licence (issued annually by NatureScot by authorised persons who understand

and comply with its conditions (see legal section at rear of leaflet for more details of the licences). An authorised person means the owner or occupier, or any person authorised by the owner or occupier, of the land on which trapping is taking place.

All trap operators must be registered in advance with NatureScot in order to use traps under GLs. The licences only cover situations where Nature Scot are satisfied that there is no other satisfactory solution in respect of the species to which they relate and the circumstances in which the licensed action may be taken.

In most cases Larsen traps are of limited use on open moorland. Even if corvids are naïve enough to go in and join the decoy when attracted only by the need for company, the rate of catch at one or two birds at a time is too slow to be really effective. On the other hand, the urge to join a feeding flock is great. So a larger cage, with several decoys already in it, is likely to work. This applies especially in

Multi-catch cage use in Scotland

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the late winter period, when many keepers like to make a start on their crow control.

The exact design of these multi-catch cages is much less critical than with Larsens, and General Licences do not specify what size a multi-catch cage should be. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 states that if any person keeps or confines any bird in a cage which is not sufficient in height, length or breadth to permit the bird(s) to stretch its wings freely, he shall be guilty of an offence and be liable to prosecution.

Roof funnels

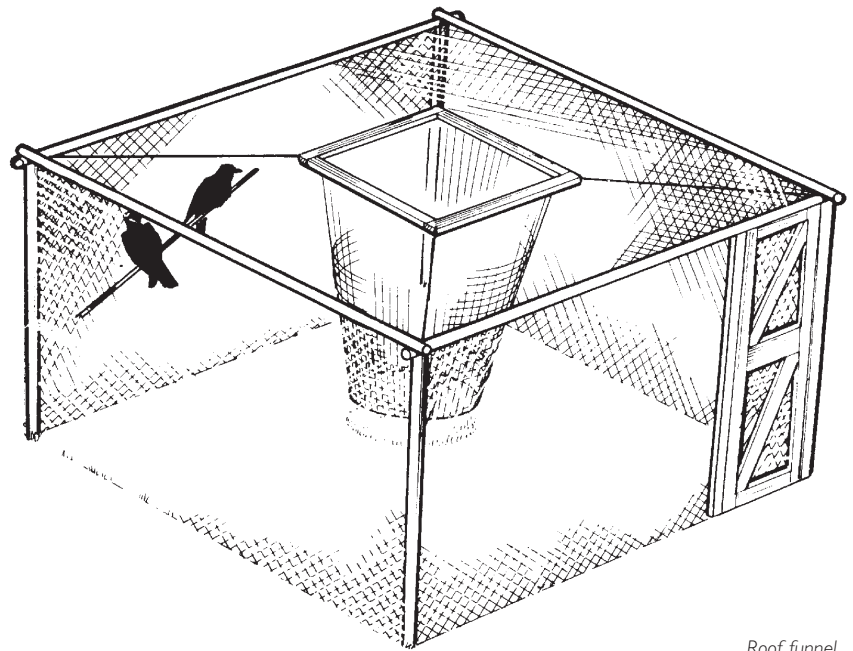
This type of trap is particularly popular on the hill for carrion and hooded crow control. It can be made in sections, or permanently sited in places that are known to prove successful from year to year. The trap itself is usually about 3m square and 1.8m high, with a door in one side for access. It has a single roof-funnel entrance which is 120cm square at the top, and framed with wood. This tapers to a round hole at the bottom, 60cm in diameter, and only about 22cm from the ground (see right). The idea is that the crow folds its wings to drop unrestricted down the funnel, but that if it spreads its wings to fly out again it does not have room even if standing exactly in the centre of the circle. Hence the height and diameter of the bottom of the funnel are more critical than the size at the top.

Building such traps around a dead sapling or placing a perch which rises above the trap and leads a bird part way down the funnel are popular schemes which seem to help. Remember that if using rabbit or other carrion as food for decoys, a multi-catch cage trap may attract and catch non-target species such as buzzards; many trap operators therefore prefer to provide soaked dog food (clean and readily available) for their decoy birds. Birds other than those permitted for capture under licence must be released unharmed immediately on being found. The use of fallen farm stock as bait or food, such as dead lambs, is illegal under EU and UK Animal By-Products Regulations. When cage traps are active, they must be inspected by the authorised person at least once every day at intervals of no more than 24 hours. Such an inspection must be sufficient to determine whether there are

Designs and dimensions of traps are numerous. The size of the trap is relatively unimportant when compared to its siting, the latter being crucial to catching success. We recommend you do not site a cage near to a main roost or near to a used public access route. Not only might users of the route see and possibly disrupt your legal activity, but non-captive crows may become shy of the location when disturbed by people. Select a quiet location site on a known flight line eg. along a lochside, sea

shore, beside a burn in a glen or even in open moorland where crows have good all-round vision.

Three basic types of multi-catch cages have come to the fore: The roof funnel, the ground funnel and the ladder letterbox. In all cases they should be covered with 35mm wire mesh, since smaller sizes trap songbirds and anything larger could allow jackdaws or magpies to escape.



Roof funnel

any live or dead birds or other animals in the trap. Any dead or sickly decoy birds must be immediately removed from the trap. Do not therefore rely on a binocular check. It is a legal condition under General Licences that when not in use, multi-catch crow cages must be immobilised and rendered incapable of use. Access doors of multi-catch cage traps must be removed from the site or securely padlocked open so that no bird can be confined.

The presence of a couple of live decoys (see legal section at rear of leaflet for legitimate decoy species) can enhance catches significantly and their care must comply to all relevant animal welfare legislation at all times, including the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland)

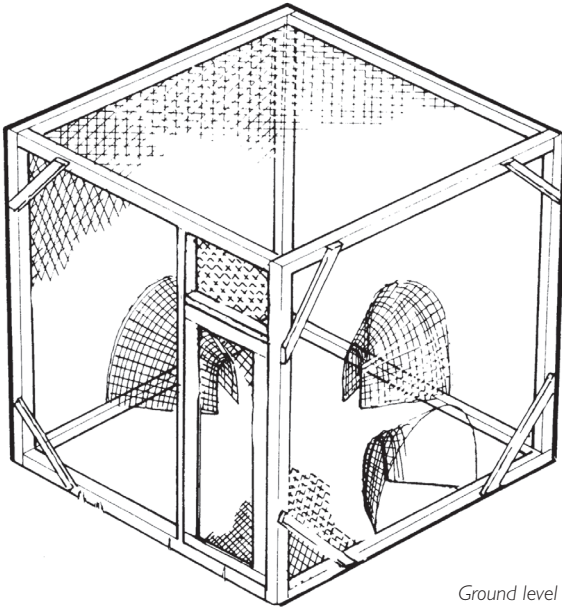
Act 2006. Decoy birds must be provided with adequate food, water and shelter and a suitable perch that does not cause discomfort to the birds' feet. GWCT recommends the use of a pet nipple drinker for an effective water supply. This method helps to prevent the water becoming dirty and reduces evaporation loss in hot weather. Decoy birds must also have adequate protection from the prevailing or anticipated wind and rain.

Appropriate shelter also helps during periods of hot sun through the provision of shade. Shelter should be provided off the ground where birds are more likely to make use of it. In the uplands it is usually essential to stock-fence cages to prevent damage.

Ground level funnels

This type of trap is usually made in sectional form for easy use and movement on low-ground. The standard, but not critical, size is a 1.8m cube. A ground level funnel similar to that on a pheasant catcher is put in three sides with a door in the

fourth. The funnels should be about 50cm wide by 50cm high on the outside, tapering to 10cm wide by 12cm high at the inner end, with a length of about 60cm. Some keepers dislike this type of trap since it occasionally catches the odd gamebird.



Ground level funnel

The trap can be run in one of two ways. Either by introducing food, water, perches, shelter and several decoys as soon as it is set, or by pre-baiting. In the latter method no decoy is used and the trap is simply set up in an area where there are flock living corvids, with the roof off and the door removed from the site or taken off the trap and secured by a locked padlock. Bait is then scattered both around and within the trap for several days until the corvids are coming with confidence. White sliced bread is often as good a bait as any. It is palatable and visible, and if the wrappers are left in the trap the area resembles a picnic site. Once the bait is disappearing regularly, replace the door and fit the roof (a small piece of rearing-pen netting will do) and leave the trap for a full day. Catches in excess of 100 birds, particularly rooks and jackdaws, can be achieved in a single day in one trap.

Sometimes it pays to leave a few birds as decoys for a second day but in most cases it is better to return to pre-baiting for another week. Once catches fall off, it usually pays to move the trap to a new site.

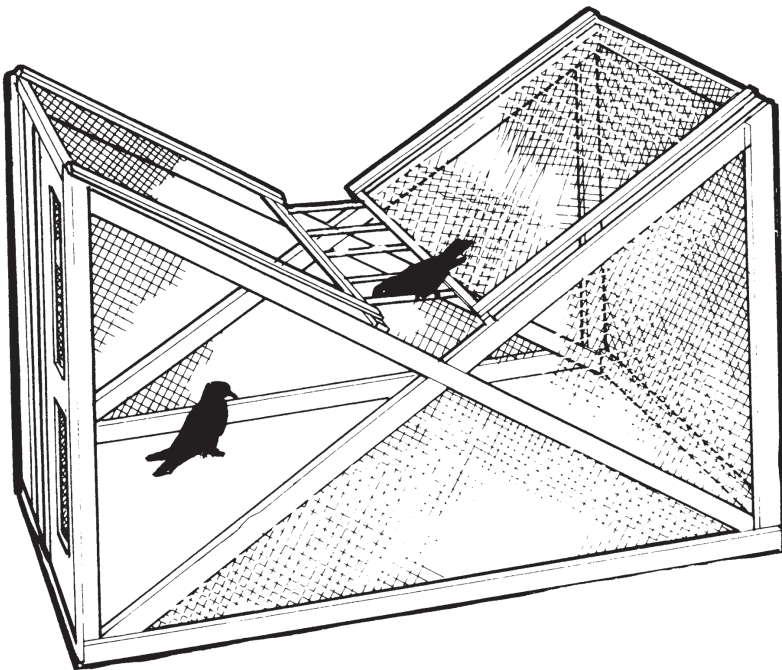
Ladder letterbox traps

This type of cage can be built to the same dimensions as the ground level or roof funnel types. It has no particular advantage,

except that there is no risk of catching gamebirds. Its main disadvantage is when using it to trap jackdaws, which seem to

have an ability to escape through roof entrances, although this design reduces that to a minimum. As will be seen from the diagram (left), the roof slopes from two sides to a central slot which has rungs across it like a ladder. The best size of slot is 14cm wide, with the rungs placed 9cm apart except for the centre which is 14cm square. The 30cm or so at each end should ideally be blocked off with plywood or appropriate mesh to prevent jackdaws from climbing up the sides and escaping.

Some keepers like to suspend 36cm lengths of line wire along both sides of the ladder at 30cm intervals to help prevent captive corvids flying up to the ladder once inside. Another variation of the letterbox design is to do away with the ladder rungs and simply suspend a one metre skirt of chicken wire from both sides of the ladder frame. With the wire skirts 14cm apart, larger corvids are unlikely to escape with their wings outstretched in flight.



Destroying corvid nests

The General Licences permit the destruction of eggs and nests as part of a corvid control programme. Many keepers like to push out old corvid nests when they are poking for grey squirrels in early spring. This is certainly helpful in allowing the keeper to easily spot any new nests being built on his beat. Care must be taken, however, as it is an offence to damage the nests of birds of prey or any other bird not listed under the General Licence which you are operating under. Sitting corvids often stay on the nest when approached, and it is sometimes possible to shoot them.



The legal situation in Scotland (2020)

The use of multi-catch cages to control corvids is regulated by General Licences issued under section 16 of The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Separate licences are issued annually by NatureScot. All trap operators must be registered in advance with NatureScot in order to use traps under GLs. You are not required to have them in their possession.

These licences restrict the use of multi-catch cage traps to 'authorised persons' (effectively landowners, occupiers or persons with their permission) who understand and comply with their conditions ie. General Licence No. 01 is for the conservation of wild birds and GL 02 is for the prevention of serious damage to livestock, foodstuffs for livestock, crops, vegetables or fruit

These licences can only be relied upon in circumstances where the authorised person has satisfied himself that appropriate non-lethal methods of control such as scaring or bird proofing are either ineffective or impracticable. No person convicted of wildlife crime on or after 1 January 2015 may use these licences unless admonished or fully discharged by a court order. The licences also impose a series of licence conditions on the user; these mainly relate to the welfare of decoy birds. If you follow the guidance given in this guide you should be well within the law, but the following points should be emphasised:

1. Every multi-catch cage trap used under General Licence must only display a single tag or sign that shows the NatureScot Trap Registration Number which allows the individual operator to be identified. All trap operators must be registered in advance with NatureScot in order to use traps under this licence. To obtain a registration number visit - <https://licensing.nature.scot/trapregistration>.

2. Only operate multi-catch cage traps under the terms and conditions of each licence for the purposes specified.
3. Check your traps at least once every day at intervals of no more than 24 hours, except in the case where unexpected severe weather prohibits. A "buddy system" may be used where the registered operator may temporarily authorise another person to check their trap. An inspection must be sufficient to determine whether there are any live or dead birds in the trap; any dead or sickly decoy birds must be immediately removed from the trap.
4. Decoy birds must be provided with adequate food, water and shelter and a suitable perch that does not cause discomfort to the birds' feet. Shelter should be provided off the ground where birds are more likely to make use of it. Decoy birds should also have protection from the prevailing wind and rain. These provisions must be made available at all times to be compliant with all relevant animal welfare legislation, including the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006.
5. Only the following corvid species may be confined as decoys in multi-catch cages: carrion and hooded crow, jackdaw, rook and magpie. Jays may not be used as a decoy. **Never use species other than permitted corvids as decoys.** Remember also that Larsen trap legislation on permitted decoys is different (see GWCT fact sheet on Larsen trap use). Remember that raven and chough are protected species and must not be used as decoys.
6. Each General Licence relevant to corvid control, GLs 01 & 02, name the birds

- which may be taken or killed by certain listed methods. Birds other than these listed species must be released unharmed immediately on being found in a cage trap.
7. When any cage trap is not in use it must be immobilised and rendered incapable of use. Access doors must be removed from the site or securely padlocked open so that no bird can be confined.
8. Any trap used under General Licence must not be designed or used in such a way to likely cause injury or unnecessary suffering to any bird trapped.
9. Multi-catch cage traps should not be used within 500m of a designated site listed under the General Licence where you cannot meet the site's "Standing Conditions". These standing conditions are available at - <https://www.nature.scot/designated-sites-standing-conditions>.

It is important to remember that General Licences are issued for only a year at a time, and that they can be amended. It is up to the operator to be aware of the current licence conditions, and adhere to them. The current General Licences can be viewed and downloaded from the NatureScot website. Be aware that the 2020 General Licences contain the following warning: 'NatureScot reserves the right to exclude the use of General Licences by certain persons and/ or on certain areas of land where there is evidence to suggest that a wild bird or birds has/have either been killed, injured or taken or where there has been an attempt to do so other than in accordance with a licence, or where General Licences are being misused'.

Non-target release

Remember that if using rabbit or other carrion as food for decoys, a multi-catch cage trap may attract and catch non-target species such as buzzards. Birds other than those permitted for capture under General Licences must be released unharmed immediately on being found. In this instance, if a couple of corvid decoys are also present in the trap at the time a buzzard finds its way in, you are best to first catch (by hand or small landing net) and confine the corvids before opening the door to let the buzzard out. However, if the trap contains numerous fresh-caught crows along with a buzzard, it is advisable to first carefully catch the buzzard and release it before attending to humane crow dispatch. There are essentially two recognised methods for ensuring the safe release of

accidentally caught raptors. The first is to simply open the trap door wide and then walk round to the opposite end of the trap and gently shoo the raptor towards and out of the open door. However, the design of the door may be a 'half-door' through which the operator has to step over a fixed lower panel to enter the cage. In this case, as the raptor will not be able to walk out itself, you will need to enter the trap wearing garden-style gloves and carrying a towel. The raptor is likely to head into a ground level corner as you approach it. Drop the towel over the bird and, once the sudden darkness has calmed it, put a gloved hand on its back and place careful downward pressure at the same time as grasping its legs with your other hand. Now lift the bird up and carry it out of the trap for release.

If you choose not to grasp the birds legs use the towel to allow raptors talons to clutch the material as this will prevent the bird from grasping tight and potentially damaging its own feet. As a raptor will sometimes lie on its back with its claws pointing upwards, simply follow the same procedure of placing a towel over the bird and grasping its claws. If you have to enter a trap containing a lot of corvids as well, just head straight for the raptor as it will likely be the calmest bird in the cage. Rather than sulking in a corner, it might be readily caught (adopting the same procedure) while climbing the cage wire.

Wing clipping

Under section 5 of The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, it is illegal to use a decoy which is tethered, or which is blind, maimed or injured. A well publicised court case addressed the issue of whether a wing-clipped decoy (ie. feather clipped) was 'maimed' and therefore illegal. Although the case concluded that wing clipping was not maiming, we are against this practice. It does not enhance the welfare of the decoy and does nothing to improve the effectiveness of the trap. It also means that if someone liberates your decoy(s) there is a high risk that it will suffer a slow death by starvation.

Humane dispatch

When dispatching birds in a multi-catch cage, the General Licences demand that all reasonable precautions are taken to ensure that any killing of birds must be carried out humanely as soon as reasonably practicable after discovery. Humanely is defined in each licence as taking all reasonable precautions to ensure that any killing of birds is carried out by a single, swift action. To ensure effective dispatch, we recommend that each individual bird is first caught by hand or with a small net as might be used for landing fish.

Corvids and especially crows have a strong head and can peck and break your skin. We therefore recommend that you wear gardening or similar protective gloves.

Catch each individual bird by hand (or using a small hand net if you prefer). Having taken a firm hold across the bird's body, rap its head hard against the nearest frame of the trap. This should kill it with a single blow, but always dislocate the neck straight away just in case the bird is only stunned. Please always take away the carcasses and dispose of them properly. Alternatively use a humane bird dispatching tool.

Please remember to take note of the welfare points. Look after your decoy birds, and keep your traps clean. When not in use, remove any old food to minimise the risk of animals being drawn to the cage and being injured.

Strict adherence to these guidelines and licence conditions will not only ensure 'keepers are working within the law, it should also help the public accept multi-catch cages as a valuable and humane trapping technique.

More information

The GWCT's Advisory Service and Grouse Technical Services can provide further advice on predation control, and on all aspects of game management.

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