

Larsen Trap Use in England

The success of Larsen traps

Larsen traps were designed by a Danish gamekeeper in the 1950s. In Denmark it has been suggested that this trap alone was responsible for a significant reduction in the national magpie population from 1965.

Larsen traps will catch all corvid pest species (i.e. crows, magpies, jackdaws, jays, rooks) at all times of the year, but their particular value is in catching crows and magpies when they set up their breeding territories. The Larsen trap contains a separate compartment for a 'decoy' bird, which is seen as an intruder in any corvid territory in which the trap is placed. Territory-holding birds attempt to drive it away and get caught in the process. In the original design, the trap mechanism involves a spring door to each catching compartment which, when set, is held open by a split perch. To enter the trap, birds the size of a magpie or crow inevitably drop onto the perch. The perch gives way, and the bird's momentum takes it past the bottom of the door, which flips up – et voila! Later variants of the design have introduced other, alternative door mechanisms.

Larsens are live-catch traps. Why catch alive? Because of the risk of catching non-target wildlife other than corvids. Virtually all non-target birds are protected by law, and the licences allowing Larsen trapping stipulate that they must be released alive and unharmed. It is important to remember that in today's countryside,

the future of shooting depends on game management being conducted responsibly and professionally and in a way which delivers wider environmental benefits.

Having said this, we have experienced very few captures of non-target species in Larsen traps – another point in their favour. In a survey of over 10,000 birds captured, only 1% were non-target species. Finches and tits often visit them, but are too small to trigger the mechanism. Of course, many legally protected bird species, as well as gamebirds, suffer from corvid predation on their eggs or young, and the Larsen trap is potentially an effective tool in the conservation of these birds too. There is no 'natural balance' between corvids and the birds they prey on, because they also feed to a great extent on other foods provided, directly or indirectly, by man. Recent Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust research shows that corvid control can contribute to the conservation of some, but not all, songbird species. It has also been proven to benefit wader species such as lapwing and curlew.

A second reason to catch corvids alive is that each may in turn be used as a call-bird to attract further captures. Because Larsen traps are small, they can easily be moved around to address further pairs of crows or magpies, and a few traps can therefore cover quite a large area. In this way, the whole effort quickly grows to an effective scale within a single breeding season.

Version 4.1 (2020)

Written March 1991. Revised April 2012, February 2014 and April 2020.

Why you should read this leaflet

The use of Larsen traps is made lawful by General Licences issued separately in each country of the UK. These will be reviewed by the Government this summer with changes likely to come in to place in August 2020. We believe this document is accurate at the time of publication and efforts will be made to keep it up to date but please refer to your governing authority to keep abreast of further changes. They are as follows - in England: DEFRA and Natural England; Wales: Natural Resources Wales; Scotland: Nature Scot; Northern Ireland: DAERA.

This advisory document aims to explain how Larsen traps work and how to run them to a high standard. It provides detailed information on the current legal requirements for using Larsen traps and what is considered best practice management for the welfare of decoy and captive birds. The document is supported by our experience in the successful use of Larsen traps since 1989 and explains why they are valuable tools in corvid control and wildlife conservation.



The legal position - England

The use of Larsen traps is permitted and regulated by the Open General Licences issued under section 16 of The Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Separate licences are issued in each of the devolved countries respectively by Natural England (NE), Nature Scot (NS), Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and in Northern Ireland, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

Operators do not need to apply for these licences, but they must know and comply with the conditions stipulated in the relevant licence. However, a recent development in England (2019), is the need for operators undertaking control in European designed sites (RAMSAR, SPA, SACs) to have individual licences granted by Natural England.

This applies not only to the site itself but also within 300 metres of the boundary. In SSSIs, an individual licence is not required if the SSSI is not inside or within 300m of a SPA, SAC or RAMSAR site. However, the user of the General Licence must obtain consent, (if it is not already a consented activity on that particular SSSI) from Natural England prior to trapping on a SSSI. The boundaries of protected sites where bird control takes place requires individual licences can be found on the Magic Maps portal online - <https://magic.defra.gov.uk/>

In England the two licences relevant to agriculture, game management and conservation include:

1. WML GL 34 – To kill or take certain species of wild birds to conserve wild birds and to conserve flora and fauna
2. WML GL 36 – To kill or take certain species of wild birds to prevent serious damage

There is also a guidance document setting out how operators are expected to use traps:

3. Standard Licence Conditions for trapping wild birds and using decoys under a Natural England licence (GL33)

The General Licences restrict the use of Larsen traps to 'authorised persons' (effectively landowners or persons with their permission). They also impose a series of licence conditions on the user which mainly relate to the welfare of the decoy bird. The Licensing system continues to grow in complexity but if you follow the guidance given in this leaflet you should be well within the law. The following points should be emphasised:

1. Check your trap every day (at intervals of **not more** than 24 hours). This must be a physical inspection.
2. Provide adequate food, water at all times, appropriate shelter and a suitable perch.
3. Only the following five corvid species may be used as decoys: carrion crow, magpie, rook,

jackdaw and jay.

4. Any non-target captures that are fit for release should be released as soon as they are discovered at the capture location, or as close as is safe to do so.
5. Remove the decoy, food and water if the trap is not in use
6. Make sure that the trap is rendered incapable of holding or catching birds 'when outdoors and not in use'. Ideally, remove the trap and place it in secure storage.

It is important to remember that the licences are normally issued for a year at a time (Jan - Dec), but they can be amended at any time and recently have been revised at shorter intervals because of legal challenges. The current licences will run until the 31st July 2020 at which point there may be some changes. It is up to you to ensure you are aware of the current licence conditions, and that you stick to them. You can view and download the current licences on the NE, NS, NRW and DAERA websites.

Please take note of the welfare points mentioned in this leaflet. Look after your call birds and keep your traps clean. Strict adherence to our guidelines will not only ensure keepers are working within the law, it will also help the public accept this valuable trapping technique.

When to trap and why

We suggest that trapping effort is restricted to spring and summer. This is the period of maximum prey vulnerability and the time when Larsen traps are most effective. In most areas, the overall population of crows and magpies is far greater than the number of breeding pairs. This is apparently because only a limited number of territories with a suitable nest tree site can be fitted into a given landscape. Non-breeding birds usually feed in flocks, roaming over areas much larger than the usual territory size, and using

different foods from those of territorial birds. As a result, they may pose less of a threat to conservation. Flock birds should be thought of as a reservoir of frustrated would-be breeders or young birds. If a territory becomes vacant, it will normally be claimed by fresh birds of breeding age from this reservoir. However, until they are established, newcomers are less likely to find the nests of vulnerable species. If you trap outside the period March to July, you will have to diminish the reservoir population over a very large area to cause

any benefit to your wild bird population in the breeding season. Also, consider that when catching flock-living corvids you may actually educate other members of the flock and make them trap-shy. This might jeopardise your efforts in spring when it really counts.

Why call-birds work

A call-bird is a previously caught magpie or crow, which is kept alive in the special decoy compartment of the trap. Uncaught territory holders think a single call-bird is an intruder and will try to drive it away. They are very aggressive, and if the trap is left in peace, few are so shy that they will not get caught. In a scientifically conducted experiment by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust in 1989, traps with call-birds were 15 times more efficient at catching crows, and 10 times more efficient for magpies.

Taking care of your call-birds

Look after your call-birds well. They will work best for you when in good health, because they move about more in the trap and catch the attention of territory holders. They also call vocally but won't if they are miserable.

The General Licences impose a legal obligation to physically visit each call-bird at least once a day at intervals of not more than 24 hours to renew food and water. If call-birds are seen by territory holders to be actively feeding, they will arouse special jealousy. (Apart from this, you are bound by animal welfare laws, and are furthermore responsible for the public reputation of game and wildlife management.) These birds drink a lot of water and the General Licences stipulate that it should be free from chemical additives and changed regularly to ensure that it is clean. Earthenware hamster bowls make good non-tipping receptacles,

A nipple drinker provides a clean and reliable water supply for the decoy.



but a better option is to use a nipple drinker bottle as used for pet rabbits. This helps to prevent the water becoming dirty and reduces evaporation loss in hot weather. Please also note if you are trapping in cold early spring weather, you must ensure that the water remains unfrozen in daylight hours. [Note that under the current licences operators are required to avoid using traps in extreme



Look after your call-birds as they will work best for you when in good health.

weather conditions, whether hot or cold.]

Various kinds of food are suitable for feeding the decoy, but we have found 'sausages' of brawn-type dog food, fed with bread, to be very convenient. Another choice is complete diet dog food (soaked in water) or even lamb pellets. If you feed your call-bird with carrion, make sure it is cut up, or at least cut open, as magpies can have great difficulty in getting into an intact carcass. Please also be aware that carrion can be attractive to non-target species and may look gruesome to members of the general public. We therefore suggest that the use of complete dog food is probably the best policy. The use of fallen farmstock as bait or food in traps is illegal under EU and UK Animal By-Products Regulations.

Remember to remove leftovers and clean the cages properly. Moving the trap

Soaked complete dog food is an ideal diet for call birds.



a few yards on to fresh ground each day prevents a build-up of droppings and old food in the decoy compartment. Rotten food is not a suitable diet and certainly does not convey a best practice image. The licences allowing use of Larsens specify that you must provide adequate food, water at all times, appropriate shelter and a perch.

Magpies and crows need a perch particularly for roosting at night, and the licence requires you to provide the call-bird with a suitable perch "which will not cause discomfort to the bird's feet". Make sure the perch cannot accidentally fall down. There must be adequate shelter from hot sun, rain or wind. When early season trapping in upland areas it is worth considering the use of a side cawling to keep the wind off the call-bird and fresh captives.

The General Licences do not permit you to keep decoys in Larsen traps that are not set or not in use. Larsen traps are too small for long-term housing – you must use a suitable aviary, large enough to allow the birds to stretch their wings freely, and it must have food, water, shelter and ideally more than one perch. A 3m x 1.5m A-frame shaped pen of the type often used for gamebirds has been found to work well. Remember that birds kept in an aviary should be checked every day.

Do not wing-clip your birds!

A well-publicised court case addressed the issue of whether a wing-clipped decoy (i.e. feather clipped) was 'maimed' and therefore illegal to use under the Provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Although the case concluded that wing clipping was not a maim, we are against this practice not least because it could be a legal grey area under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

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 there is a high risk that it will suffer a slow death by starvation. The liberator is unlikely to realise that the decoy is

wing clipped until it is out of the trap. Interestingly, a recent study conducted by GWCT looking at magpie predation on songbirds showed that leg-ringed magpies were often re-caught many times over, so released decoys which have been well-cared for may well be recoverable.

Which species to use as a call-bird

In the wild, crows are dominant to magpies and drive them from their territories. For this reason, crows can be caught to magpie decoys, but the reverse is rarely true.

The General Licences allowing Larsens specify that they may only be used with carrion crows, magpies, jays, rooks,

jackdaws and ring-necked or monk parakeets as decoys. Use of the parakeets as decoys is advisable only where they are present in the wild, for example, in the south east of England.

After a while, call-birds become quite tame and phlegmatic. Some people believe that recently caught territory-holders make the best call-birds, as they are more restless and aggressive, but we do not have evidence to support this. In fact, we feel that keeping the same caller is easier and less disruptive to the birds. A bird like this could also be a good option for transferring to an aviary for the non-trapping period to help ensure a quick start to the next season.

Where to put the trap

If you are familiar with your land, you will know the specific trees that always seem to attract crow or magpie nests. If you are just getting to know the area, look out for nest-building activity from the beginning of March. Before bud-burst, magpie nests are very obvious in the trees. Crows, and to a lesser extent magpies, often sit high in the trees near the centre of their territory, literally acting sentinel. You should aim to position the trap in plain view of sentinels, and in a prominent location within 100 yards of the nest site. If you haven't time to watch out for nests or sentinels, concentrate on small copses and spinneys, thick hedges and woodland edges – but have you really got time to check the traps every day if you cannot undertake reconnaissance?

Avoid placing traps too close to

rookeries, unless you want a full-time job dispatching or releasing rooks, in which case a multi-catch trap is a better option – please see our fact sheet on multi-catch traps for more information. We suggest that crows and magpies are your main target in the conservation of wild-breeding game birds and other vulnerable wildlife species.

Place the trap on the ground, especially for crows, which like to approach on the floor. However, when trapping magpies among bushes, or in a dense hedge, raising the trap above brambles gives it a better chance of being seen. Do not be afraid to experiment with setting traps in cover. A good call-bird will often reply to the calls of the territory holder even though the trap is out of sight. Indeed, this ploy can account for trap-shy individuals, there is also the

benefit of the trap not being easily seen by people. Where local situations allow, for example, areas with low public access, placing the trap so the call-bird appears dominant, such as in direct sunlight if conditions are not too hot, rather than in the shade, may improve trapping success.

If you have not caught anything within two days it could be either because the birds are not yet fully territorial or, the trap is not close enough to the heart of the territory or, as can be the case with crows, the call bird is a young bird which possess little threat to the pair. In some cases, it may be best to move the trap and use it elsewhere. If you know that there are dominant birds which will not go in, rest the site for a few days and then bring back the trap with a new decoy.

How to catch both birds of a pair

It is not strictly necessary to catch both birds of a pair. They defend their territory together, and to remove one will prevent the remaining bird defending the area against a speculating pair of intruders; in this way its breeding effort is disrupted. Furthermore, the male bird feeds the female while she is incubating the eggs – if he does not turn up, the hen bird must leave the nest. If you keep up your use of Larsen traps throughout spring and summer, the establishment of territories will be continually disrupted and, while present, fresh birds will be pre-occupied with territorial defence and nest building. Their demand for food is never swollen

by the need to feed young, and they have little time to watch the movements of incubating game and songbirds. In a well-run trapping programme, you will have caught each original pair before they have young, and then gone on to remove new ones before they are fully established.

Crows and magpies learn very quickly, and a bird that witnesses its partner being removed from a trap by a human and killed may subsequently be very shy of traps. If you catch a bird in one compartment of a Larsen trap, leave it disputing its case through the wire with the call-bird. Its partner will very often join in and get caught in the other

compartment. This is one advantage of the three-compartment Larsen trap. However, if you have not caught the other bird by nightfall, you probably never will, so take out the first capture. Do not leave trapped birds overnight without a perch and with no food and water until the next morning. Siting traps where you can view them with binoculars allows you to check without scaring potential captures. Do remember, however, that you are legally required to go to the trap and undertake a physical inspection of food and water at intervals of not more than 24 hours.

Catching the difficult ones

Perhaps as a result of a previous fright, some magpies and crows can be very shy of a Larsen trap. Crows, in particular, will often dance around a trap but refuse to jump on. Moving the trap deeper into the territory is the most likely route to success. Otherwise it can pay to lift the trap up onto a bale or some other solid object. Raising the decoy in this way sometimes infuriates the territory holder into jumping on. Do not just add legs though – if the territory holder can see the decoy through the floor of the trap it may attack from below and never land on the top.

Another popular choice is to use a side-entry Larsen. There are various versions available from different manufacturers, many of which work well. However, please be careful to choose a trap of adequate size, we specifically warn against reducing any of the dimensions of compartments of the Larsen trap design dimensions as offered by the GWCT. They are the minimum needed for the welfare of captive birds. Other single-compartment traps with no decoy compartment, known variously as Larsen Mates, Larsen Pods or 'clam traps', have become very popular. The intended use is either with bait alone (e.g. a good option to help catch the first call-bird); or to catch birds that are unwilling to enter the Larsen trap catching compartment. These single-compartment traps are now explicitly lawful in Scotland, but in England and Wales their use is currently a grey area. We hope they will be explicitly approved in both England and Wales in future GLs.

How to handle call-birds

Both crows and magpies can give a fairly painful nip and their claws are also sharp, but neither are really capable of

breaking the skin of an adult human. However, it is wise to use a gardening glove when handling them for health reasons. Concentrate on handling the bird securely, but gently. As you put your hand into the trap, a magpie will flutter round the roof, whereas a crow will try to cram itself into a bottom corner. Pin the bird gently against the floor, roof or side of the trap, sliding your first and second fingers round its neck so that they meet at the fingertips. The bird can't bite you now, and so long as you don't let it wriggle its head between these two fingers, it can't get away from you. Your palm will be over the bird's back, and you can use your thumb and fourth and fifth fingers to pin the wings against the body as you pick it up. Both species grip with their feet: use your free hand to gently prise them open again. When taking call-birds out of the decoy compartment of a Larsen trap, you will find you have to bring them tail first through the access hole.

Birds can be transported humanely to another trap in a dark rigid box with proper ventilation. Remember it is in your interests to look after the bird. A sack is not good enough and may well be illegal.

How to dispatch a captured corvid humanely

Any birds to be killed under General Licence must be dispatched humanely. The General Licences clearly describe humane dispatch as taking all reasonable precautions to ensure that any killing of birds under licence is carried out by a single, swift action as soon as reasonably practicable after discovery. If you are right-handed, hold the bird as described above in your left hand. With your right hand, grip the legs, tail, and wing tips together. In one movement, draw the bird out of your left hand, so that it doesn't have time to bite you, and strike the back of its

head very hard against the edge of a hard surface. Alternatively, you can use a short stick, or a fisherman's 'priest'. It takes a surprising force to kill one of these birds. Do all you can to make death instant. Breaking the bird's neck after this makes certain that you have not just stunned it.

There is currently (March 2020) a question mark over dispatching birds in sight of others of the same species. Existing General Licences for Canada geese and Egyptian geese require that these birds must be killed out of sight of each other but there is no mention of whether this applies to other trapped species. GL33, the *Standard Licence Conditions* for trapping wild birds and using decoys under a Natural England licence, proposes that all trapped birds must be killed out of sight of others of the same species. It seems hugely anthropomorphic to suppose the decoy bird will care a jot about seeing the captured bird killed, when a few moments earlier that bird was trying to beat it up and drive it away. GWCT advice at this stage is to take the precaution of killing all birds out of sight where possible until we have further clarification. With Larsen traps and the normal small number of captures, it doesn't take much effort to turn your back or step behind the vehicle.

Where to get your first call-bird

Please do not contact us to ask where you can get a call-bird. Ask your gamekeeper friends or catch your own. Larsen traps work quite effectively with bait alone. You may even care to keep a couple of captive birds from year to year to start you off each spring. They are really fascinating creatures, and if you take an interest, you will learn a lot. Please also remember that it is illegal to trade in live magpies and crows.

Operating with bait alone

As mentioned above, Larsen traps do catch crows, magpies and other corvids when used with bait and no call-bird. You may need several traps to be sure of success and the strategy is rather different from the call-bird approach. Without the ability to get a decoy bird from someone else who already has a spare bird (perhaps from aviary stock) the only option is to use bait to make the first capture when your trapping season starts.

Where to put the trap

Although the trap should be obvious, birds will be more wary of it when there is no call-bird. So it is probably unwise to stand it out in the open. Put it among bushes, or at the base of a hedge or tree.

In contrast to using call-birds, it may take a while for your bait to be spotted (because it doesn't move), or for birds to overcome their natural fear of novel objects (placing the trap in a livestock

farm yard may reduce the time taken to catch the first bird). So anticipate quite a long effort but do check your traps daily. Pre-baiting (with the trap unset) is completely unnecessary - if a bird goes in, you might as well catch it.

If your trap catches nothing at first, don't blame the trap. It is probable that no corvids have found your bait, (after all, many natural bird nests escape predation). After 10 to 14 days without success, it

may be best to move the trap to try another site

What bait?

The bait most likely to achieve success is probably the one the birds in the local area are familiar with and switched on to. Therefore, be mindful that seasonal variations are likely to apply and there is some evidence to suggest that effective spring and summer baits, such as eggs, are less effective outside of the nesting season. Outside of the spring and summer meat baits comprised of healthy fallen wildlife (livestock use is prohibited) or other recognisable food items may be the best option. Of the meat baits, open rabbits or grey squirrels have been found

to be very effective and it is the freshly glistening viscera that attracts corvids. Both crows and magpies have limited powers of opening carcasses, so this presents an easy option for them. Be aware that meat baits may increase the risk of non-target capture of species such as buzzards. If persistent problems are encountered, then a change in approach to non-meat baits is a responsible move. Of the non-meat options, white bread can be used: it is eye-catching, fairly common in the countryside, and corvids develop a taste for it. Again, a scattering of bait is more noticeable, but don't overdo it, or the birds will see no reason to enter the trap.

During the nesting season the best bait by far is the egg. When using them,

aim to make the offering look like a depredated nest. Make a 'nest' of dead grass in one (only one) of the catching compartments and arrange a clutch of five or six eggs in it. Cracked or oversize gamebird eggs from the laying pen are ideal, but hens' eggs (brown or white) seem just as attractive. Break two or three eggs around the trap, and leave the eggshells lying about. Most importantly, on the flat board that shelters the call-bird when present, or on the flat top between the two catching compartments, carefully break an egg so that the contents lie in a tempting puddle. Renew this egg regularly: it is the glistening fresh egg that catches the corvid eye.

When you have finished trapping

A number of incidents of accidental captures of protected species have been reported when traps have been left out. As a result, the licence requirements now state that the trap must be rendered incapable of catching or holding birds when not in use, examples of how to do this include securing the door in a fully open or closed position or removing the doors completely. Please remember that

if a top entry trap is left with its doors closed, a heavy bird or animal landing on one of them could force the door down and trap itself. We recommend that wherever possible, traps that are not in use are taken in for storage. This prevents the risk of accidental captures, avoids the chance of someone else setting or vandalising the trap and extends its working life.

Keep in touch

There is still much to be learnt about the efficient control of corvids. If you have experiences at variance with the advice given here, or make any significant improvements to the trap, bait, or strategy, please contact the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust's Advisory Service on 01425 651013, or email advisory@gwct.org.uk

Game & Wildlife Conservation Trading Limited, is a company limited by guarantee (Registered number 1503620) which carries out all trading and advisory activities for the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust. VAT Reg No. 323 7013 94.