

7.25pm

Perran Moon
(Camborne and Redruth) (Lab)

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Meur ras, Mr Speaker. I am delighted to secure my first Adjournment debate, and for it to be on an issue so close to my heart: trail hunting and, more broadly, animal welfare.

Put simply, animal cruelty should have no place in modern, progressive 21st-century Britain. Having spent most of my life living in rural areas, I have witnessed at first hand the brutal reality of hunting with dogs. Contrary to the views of some, that opinion is shared by many rural residents. It is imperative that as lawmakers we address the concerns surrounding trail hunting, particularly in light of the Hunting Act 2004 and the Government's manifesto commitments.

Fox hunting is not a sport. It is an activity that involves tracking, chasing and killing a fox, typically using a pack of hounds and riders on horseback. It was banned by the last Labour Government through Hunting Act 2004. Drag hunting is an activity similar to traditional foxhunting, but with a key difference: instead of hunting a live fox, a scent trail is artificially laid for the hounds to follow. The scent is usually created using a mixture of aniseed and other substances, and it is dragged along a predetermined route. Just to be clear, I have no issues with drag hunting.

Irene Campbell
(North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab)

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The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals says that out of control hounds on trail hunts have harmed people, pets and themselves in residential areas. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is urgent that trail hunting should be banned as soon as possible to close the loopholes in the Hunting Act 2004?

Mr Speaker

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Order. I advise Members that it is easier for us to hear them if they look to the microphone.

Perran Moon

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I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and I entirely agree.

Trail hunting, as it is commonly understood, involves a pack of hounds following a scent trail laid by a human, with the intention that hounds will follow the trail, rather than chase and kill a wild animal. The functional difference between that and drag hunting is that animal-based scents of the traditional hunting quarry are used in trail hunting. That is usually fox urine, but the body parts and carcasses of foxes, deer and hares can also be used. On the surface, it appears to be a harmless activity. However, there is now overwhelming evidence to suggest

that trail hunting has become a thinly veiled pretence for illegal hunting activities under the Hunting Act.

Sean Woodcock
(Banbury) (Lab)

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I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and for securing this important debate. In my constituency several hunts, including the Heythrop hunt and the Warwickshire hunt which crosses the county border, have been caught red-handed hunting live foxes. Does he agree that such incidents show how urgent it is for the Government to honour their manifesto commitment to ban trail hunting?

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Perran Moon

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I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Not only that, but in his constituency I have personally cleared land on which local hunts had created an environment for foxes to thrive. It is a complete nonsense to suggest that fox hunting is of any use in terms of pest control. It is not.

The 2004 Act was a response to the growing public outcry over the brutality of hunting practices. It made it illegal to hunt with hounds except in certain circumstances, in the case of registered hunts using scent trails.

Jim Shannon
(Strangford) (DUP)

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First, I commend the hon. Gentleman. I spoke to him before the debate, so he knows where I am coming from. I have a very different opinion, and the hon. Gentleman knows that; he respects that, and I respect him. I just wanted to put that on the record.

This is clearly a devolved matter, so England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales will make their own decisions separately. The hon. Gentleman has outlined his point of view, but does he agree that the hunting community deserve to have their voices heard and considered in that legislative process? The hunting community would dispute some of what has been said tonight. Just for the record, as a hunting man—one who has never hunted with horses or hounds—I think the hunting community should have the right to pursue it. What does the hon. Gentleman think? Before we go any further, let's get the other point of view.

Perran Moon

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I think it is absolutely right that all voices are heard, but that science is followed. Legislation should be based on evidence and science, and the evidence and the science suggest that the cruelty to the animal being pursued far outweighs the pleasure the hunt will give human beings. However, I am really happy for all voices to be heard in this debate.

Rachael Maskell
(York Central) (Lab/Co-op)

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The law must also be followed. The fact that 46% of registered trail hunts end up chasing a fox proves that the law needs tightening up and that we need tougher sentencing. Ultimately, this Labour Government will deliver that. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a priority?

Perran Moon

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I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I do agree, and I will be coming on to that later.

Andrew George
(St Ives) (LD)

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I am sorry to make another intervention on the hon. Gentleman—my neighbour in Cornwall. He is probably aware that I spent hundreds of hours in this House on this matter before the 2004 Act; I was pleased that in spite of all the intimidation and threats that I received at the time, the Act still went through. The point was made earlier that the voices of those who get their kicks out of chasing wild animals for sport need to be heard, and indeed they have been: we have already heard that the leaders of trail hunts admit that they are, indeed, a smokescreen. They have used that word themselves to describe what goes on with trail hunts.

Perran Moon

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I agree with the hon. Member, and thank him not just for his intervention but for all his work to raise awareness.

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The Hunting Act did not go far enough. It left certain loopholes, particularly the allowance for trail hunting, which has meant that the law is often undermined according to the RSPCA and the League Against Cruel Sports. Despite the requirement for hunts to obtain landowner permission and follow strict regulations, there is significant evidence that trail hunts often lead to the unlawful hunting of foxes and other wild animals.

According to sources in Cornwall, there are five foxhound packs. Alongside trail hunts, some of those packs have continued to hunt foxes illegally and have been filmed sending hounds to dig out foxes hiding in holes, woodland and hedges. Many landowners continue to suffer horse and hound trespass, and uncontrolled hounds regularly end up spilling out on to roads, causing a danger to road users, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell).

Dave Robertson
(Lichfield) (Lab)

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Meur ras th'am keren—that is my very best Cornish, and I will not try to repeat it unless I have time to practise. I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. To go back to his point about the difference between drag hunting and trail hunting, a lot of the negative things that he describes would not come from drag hunts, which have predetermined routes and use a different type of scent. For the avoidance of doubt for anybody listening at home, particularly those in the hunting community who may be concerned, might we just reconfirm that this is about trail hunting, not drag hunting?

Perran Moon

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I can say once again that I have no issues with drag hunting; this is about trail hunting. Trail hunts are often deliberately laid in areas inhabited by foxes, increasing the likelihood of hounds disturbing, chasing and killing a fox or other animals when the scent of live quarry is picked up.

These are not isolated incidents; they are part of a broader pattern of behaviour that undermines the intent of the Hunting Act. For example, between August 2023 and March 2024, during the last hunting season, several reports were made of illegal hunting incidents, including cub hunting, where the claim of trail hunting was used as a defence. In many of these cases, the evidence suggests that the scent trail is often a formality, with hunts continuing to chase and kill wildlife.

Several major landowners have taken steps to restrict trail hunting. The National Trust, Natural Resources Wales and Forestry England have all banned trail hunting. Additionally, United Utilities and the Lake District national park have suspended trail hunting activities, with the Lake District national park's suspension described as “indefinite”. The Ministry of Defence has also halted the issuance of any licences for trail hunting on its land.

Additionally, in February 2025, the national lead on fox hunting crime, Assistant Chief Constable Matt Longman, publicly stated that

“of all the cases that I have reviewed”—

this is a point that was made earlier—

“where there have been successful prosecutions of the Hunting Act, trail hunting has been used as a defence.”

His comments reflect the disturbing reality that trail hunting is providing a smokescreen for illegal fox hunting.

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Sir Julian Lewis
(New Forest East) (Con)

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The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. His thesis seems to be that, because the direct hunting of foxes was made illegal, trail hunting is being used as a cover for it. What would happen if he had his way and trail hunting was banned as well? Would it not

then be possible for drag hunting to be used in some way as a cover for illegal fox hunting? If so, is not this an endless process, and should he not come out and say straightaway that he wants every form of this activity stopped?

Perran Moon

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I think that I have twice made the point that I have no issue with drag hunting. With drag hunting, the scent that is followed is not that of the carcase of an animal or the urine of an animal. Therefore, the likelihood that there will be wild animals included in drag hunting is much, much smaller. The evidence from the RSPCA and the League Against Cruel Sports supports the view that drag hunting is completely different from trail hunting, and that there is no issue with drag hunting. It is really important that this is not seen to be a witch hunt against people who want to have a hack across the countryside with dogs on a specific and pre-planned route. It is a really important nuance within rural communities that we are not against all forms of horse riding. We want to make sure that wildlife and the natural environment are protected, so, respectfully, I do not agree with the right hon. Member.

In fact, the League Against Cruel Sports' own analysis reveals that trail hunting has been used as a defence in cases involving alleged illegal hunting by registered hunts. That highlights the major issues with the current legislation, as the existing law is often unable sufficiently to hold to account those who flout the regulations under the guise of trail hunting.

Moreover, enforcement in the field has proven difficult. Although hunts are operating illegally, knowingly or intentionally hunting live quarry, it can often be challenging to prove that in court. The impact on animal welfare is significant, with wild animals, particularly foxes, being forced to run long distances while being relentlessly pursued, after which they are torn limb from limb while still alive by a pack of uncontrollable hounds. The suffering does not stop there. Non-target animals, including domestic pets and livestock, have also been disturbed, attacked and even killed when hunts veer off course, creating havoc in residential areas and rural communities.

This issue is not a matter for one party alone. Support for banning trail hunting crosses party lines. MPs from various political parties, including the Conservative party, the Liberal Democrats and the Green party, have all expressed concern over trail hunting's role in perpetuating illegal hunting activities. This broad cross-party support demonstrates a shared commitment to protecting animals, wildlife and the natural environment. I strongly believe it is time for us to come together and close this loophole once and for all.

Public opinion on hunting in the UK has shifted dramatically over the years. Around 80% of the British public support the ban on hunting with dogs, and many of those people would like to see trail hunting banned as well. The moral case for ending trail hunting is clear: it is inconsistent with the values of a modern, compassionate society that respects animal welfare. Hunting, whether through traditional or trail methods, often takes place in areas of natural beauty and fragile ecosystems. The disturbance caused by hounds and hunters can have

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lasting effects on the local wildlife, disrupt natural habitats, and lead to long-term ecological damage. Given the increasing concern over biodiversity and the need to protect our natural

environment, banning trail hunting would be a positive step in safeguarding the UK's wildlife and habitats.

We need to strengthen the Hunting Act 2004 to make sure it delivers the protection that animals need. That means banning trail hunting, removing exemptions that enable illegal hunting and introducing custodial sentences for those who break the law.

Neil Duncan-Jordan
(Poole) (Lab)

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My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. While a pledge to ban trail hunting is welcome, I fear that it could be insufficient. If legislation focuses solely on the term "trail hunting", hunts may adopt new euphemisms to exploit existing loopholes to continue their activities. Does my hon. Friend agree that effective reform must go beyond a symbolic ban and address the entire framework that enables illegal hunting to carry on?

Perran Moon

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I agree with my hon. Friend. In addition to those changes, we must extend the time available to charge in illegal hunting cases, reverse the burden of proof of compliance with exemptions, and make hunting a notifiable offence. These steps would make it easier to enforce the law and ensure that those who break it face the consequences. I thank the Minister for his time today and I look forward to his response on this issue.

The way we treat our wildlife reflects the kind of society we are and the legacy we will leave for future generations. For me, hunting animals with dogs is nothing less than a profoundly cruel activity. It is an activity that I, like most of my fellow Labour MPs, campaigned during the general election to ban. Today I stand before this House to say that it is time to take decisive action and fulfil our promise to the electorate, and end trail hunting in the United Kingdom once and for all.

Dan Norris
(North East Somerset and Hanham) (Lab)

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I should declare an interest as chair of the League Against Cruel Sports. Drag hunting was invented 200 years ago. It is a peaceful activity. Trail hunting is not. It is designed to get around the current legislation. Why does my hon. Friend think that centuries of tradition are being ignored by the pro-hunting fraternity?

Perran Moon

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My hon. Friend raises a difficult question. Society moves on, and people's values change. Over the course of the last few decades, society has come to respect animal welfare far more than it ever had done before. Hunting was and is perceived to be a traditional rural activity, but that does not mean it is right. It is wrong. In a modern 21st-century Britain, it has to be banned. We have to bring in these changes. As I said, I have no issue with people who want

to have a hack across the countryside in a controlled manner, but I have a profound problem if the outcome of that activity is the destruction of wild animals and the local environment.

My question to the Minister is a simple one. When will the Government make available parliamentary time to bring forward the necessary changes to the Hunting Act 2004 to ban trail hunting?

7.44pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs
(Daniel Zeichner)

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I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) on

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securing his first Adjournment debate and speaking with such knowledge and passion about this important subject. I welcome the valuable opportunity to close the debate by outlining the Government's strong commitment to animal welfare priorities, including taking action on trail hunting. I also thank all hon. Members who intervened during my hon. Friend's speech, because they showed the interest and passion there is on this subject.

The Government were elected on a mandate to introduce the most ambitious plans in a generation to improve animal welfare, and that is exactly what we will do. Banning trail hunting is only one part of that. We will also end puppy smuggling and puppy farming, ban the use of snare traps and ban the importation of hunting trophies. We are supporting the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill, which will close loopholes in the non-commercial pet travel rules that are abused by unscrupulous traders. It will also give the Government powers to prevent the supply of low-welfare pets to the United Kingdom. We will prohibit the bringing into Great Britain of puppies and kittens under six months old, dogs and cats with non-exempt mutilations such as cropped ears, and heavily pregnant dogs and cats.

We are committed to tackling low-welfare dog breeding practices to bring an end to puppy farming. As part of that, we are carefully considering the results of the post-implementation review of the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, the recommendations from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's inquiry into pet welfare and abuse, and the animal welfare committee's opinion on canine breeding practices.

As was outlined in our manifesto, we will also bring an end to the use of snare traps in England. I am aware that both the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government have brought in bans on the use of snares in recent years, and we are now considering the most effective way to deliver on that commitment. We will set out the next steps in due course. In the meantime, anyone using snares has a responsibility under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to ensure that their activities do not harm protected species or cause any unnecessary suffering.

The Government are also committed to banning the import of hunting trophies from endangered animals. The UK has a long history of championing global conservation, and the Government are carefully reviewing how to introduce effective legislation as soon as possible. We welcome the establishment of the national animal welfare panel by the all-party

parliamentary group on animal welfare and look forward to working with it in the future. As a recent report from the animal sentience committee stated, there is work to do to improve compliance with animal welfare regulation. We will be considering recommendations and proposals as we work to bring that about.

I know that hon. Members in the Chamber will share my deep concern about the recent high-profile incidents of hare coursing that have been in the news. Hare coursing is an abhorrent activity that can quickly shatter rural communities' sense of safety and security. It is a serious crime, which is often carried out by organised criminal gangs. It is vital that rural communities are protected by effective policing to ensure enforcement of the law. DEFRA, alongside the Home Office, is working jointly with the National Police Chiefs' Council to

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deliver an updated rural and wildlife crime strategy. This joined-up approach between Government and policing will help to ensure that the entire weight of Government is brought to bear on tackling rural and wildlife crimes.

The Government are continuing to provide support to the national wildlife crime unit alongside the national rural crime unit. Those units will receive £800,000 from the Home Office in 2025-26. DEFRA will also provide the national wildlife crime unit with a further £424,000 to help prevent and detect wildlife crime by obtaining and disseminating intelligence, undertaking analysis that highlights local or national threats, and directly assisting law enforcers in their investigations. That includes cases of cruelty to wildlife and supporting local police forces to take positive action against those who break the law through illegal fox hunting.

Let me turn to the primary focus of this debate: trail hunting. As we are aware, the Hunting Act 2004 made it an offence to hunt a wild mammal with dogs, except where it is carried out in accordance with the exemptions in the Act. Those found guilty under the Act are subject to the full force of the law. However, as many have said here today, the nature of trail hunting makes it difficult to ensure that wild mammals such as foxes are not endangered. The trail is not laid constantly but is occasionally lifted for a distance and dropped again to allow the hounds to search for the scent. Huntsmen and followers often do not know where trails have been laid and that can mean that, at times, the scents of wild animals are picked up. That makes it challenging to protect foxes, as well as other wild animals such as deer and hares.

From November 2023 to March 2024, as we have heard, the League Against Cruel Sports reported nearly 526 incidents of suspected illegal hunting and 870 incidents of hunts causing distress or nuisance. That is why the Government are committed to going further by putting in place a ban on trail hunting. My hon. Friend asked for a specific timeline. I am afraid that, at the moment, I cannot give him that, but I want to assure Members that we are working to move this forward and will deliver a thorough consultation later this year to ensure that the legislation that is brought forward is effective in practice and that its impact is understood.

I also appreciate that, as we have heard, there are people in this House who will not welcome a change in the law. I want to reassure Members here today that the Government recognise the contribution made to the rural economy by supporting professions such as farriers, vets and feed merchants. We will, of course, look closely at the impact that any changes may make. We will consult relevant stakeholders at the appropriate time and further announcements will be made in due course.

More generally, we will pull together an overarching approach to animal welfare across farmed animals, companion animals and wild animals. We have been meeting key stakeholders from each of those sectors and want to work in partnership with them on improving animal welfare. I conclude by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth for securing tonight's debate, and I very much look forward to working closely with him in future to secure progress on this very important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

7.50pm

House adjourned.

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