

## **National wildlife crime unit (NWCU) faces closure within weeks**

Government failure to confirm funding for the police unit responsible for investigating crimes against British wildlife has been met with widespread condemnation. Chris Packham, the naturalist and TV presenter, has said: “It is disgusting and disappointing that the UK's wildlife crime agency faces closure in six weeks unless the government renews its funding.” The NWCU was established in 2006 to investigate offences including rare-bird egg theft, deer poaching, the trade in endangered species, hare coursing, illegal taxidermy and cruelty to wild animals. George Osborne's spending review, announced in November, did not confirm government funding for the agency beyond the end of March and it is now expected to close within weeks. The body, which receives the bulk of its funding from Defra and the Home Office, was told shortly before Christmas that a decision would be made about its future before the end of January but it still hasn't heard anything. “This is a specifically trained, unique and dedicated branch of the police force which is able to respond to an increasing range of crimes in its attempt to implement the law of the land” said Packham. The BBC broadcaster said: “They are thus invaluable if we have any desire to protect our wildlife and countryside. Given the financial saving, one can only imagine there are ulterior motives to scrapping their funding.”

## **Hunted hare dies in saboteur's arms**

The Easton Harriers Hunt – Sutton, Suffolk is nick-named “the chaos hunt” owing to its inability to control its hounds which have been chasing hares and causing chaos on roads week in and week out. In an account written by a sab present at a recent meet he said: “the sabs kept with the hounds all day and were successful until the horrific moment when the hounds discovered a hare hunkered down in the middle of a field. With the hounds dwindling in and out of cry, the hare made a break for it only to run into the hounds more or less straight away. I was only metres away when this happened and I sprang into action as best I could. Some of the hounds began to tug at the hare and the remaining hounds tried to join in. The hare screeched as it was momentarily being treated like an old rag doll. That noise can only be described as horrific and will haunt me. I dived straight into the pack of hounds and reached with both arms and managed to pull the hare free from the hounds' grip. As the hunt left the scene the poor hare started to tense up. As I carried it off the field it died in my arms moments later. We believe this was the result of shock or possible internal injury but this will be confirmed in due course as a post-mortem is to be carried out. The Police were in attendance but made it clear they had no interest in the illegal actions of the hunt. They even had the audacity to hand out Dispersal Orders (Section 35) which meant we would be arrested if we refused to leave the area.”

## **The case against bird shooting**

In a recent report LACS says that, on average, over 100,000 birds are shot and killed every day during the shooting season. 40% of birds shot are wounded, not killed outright. 200 wild and domestic animals are snared every hour to protect game birds. That's one every 20 seconds. Mountain hares and hen harriers are targeted by gamekeepers, both now threatened with extinction. The full report can be downloaded here: <http://www.league.org.uk/~media/Files/LACS/Publications/The-Case-Against-Bird-Shooting-2016.pdf>

*Prior to the hare shooting close seasons in Scotland around 390,000 brown hares were shot in Britain annually, mainly to keep the Neanderthals amused after pheasant shooting season closes on 1 February. That includes HRH the Duke of Edinburgh. Between 25 and 30% of hares shot were wounded, but retrieved and 10% wounded escaped to an unknown fate. We have no figures since the Scottish close seasons were brought in but, hopefully, they will show an improvement. Ed.*

## **Mortality of snowshoe hares in western Montana**

Researchers used radio tagged collars to track snowshoe hares every week over 2-3 years. They found that animals with mis-matched coat colour with respect to their surroundings had a 7% lower survival rate. This is one of the most direct demonstrations of mortality costs for a wild species facing climate change. While snowshoe hares aren't currently endangered the biologists predict that the higher death rate will lead to a significant drop in population levels by the end of the century. These findings could have relevance to mountain hares re-introduced to Dartmoor.