

# Practical guidance

# Dealing with pests



**Pests are the scourge of smallholdings and farms across the UK. *The Ark* examines the best means of protecting your livestock.**

## Introduction

Pests can pose a real threat to the financial and mental wellbeing of smallholders and farmers. Foxes are a particular concern and are notorious for sporadically preying on lambs, poultry and piglets. According to the Rural Development Service the frustratingly unpredictable nature of killings can lead to 'hasty and sometimes illegal action' on the part of farmers. The advice points

out that it is often difficult to tell if a new-born lamb has been killed by foxes or died after an onset of bad weather or mis-mothering.

As a protected species, badgers are another pest that can cause frustration for farmers. Setts can undermine buildings and grazing land and badgers have been known to attack chickens and lambs. The most controversial issue around badgers is their link to the

spread of bovine TB.

Another threat is from small predators such as stoats, weasels and mink which will viciously slaughter chickens if they get into a coop. As these mustelids can get into small spaces, it is vital to ensure that fencing is well maintained.

And last, but not least, the rat. Top of many a farmer's hit list, these rodents can move between farms carrying diseases that pose a

threat to livestock and farm-workers. They can also cause structural damage to buildings and gnaw electrical wiring, creating fire hazards.

## Pest control in practice

RBST member Peter Hayford has run Bearscombe Farm in South Devon for over 40 years. He currently has over 500 birds including chickens, ducks, turkeys and guinea fowl as well as horses, pigs and cattle. This makes him

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## Action on: Rats

Chemical rodenticides should be the last line of defence against rodents. As well as being linked to the deaths of rare birds, excessive use of rodenticides can lead to the pests becoming resistant.

Ian Carter, senior ornithologist for English Nature, explained: "The type of rat poison and the way in which farmers control rodents can make the difference between life and death for some of our most spectacular birds of prey. We would encourage smallholders to consider trapping to remove small infestations before resorting to poisons. If the local rat population is not resistant to first-generation rodenticides, then that is also a better option as there is less chance that birds of prey will be affected."

So before reaching for the poison jar, put in place the following preventative measures:

- Sort out your storage – store bagged material on pallets and ensure bulk bins are structurally sound;
  - Keep it clean – avoid letting rubbish and stored materials build up around buildings;
  - Fill it in – inside buildings, fill in gaps in walls, repair damaged drain covers or vents to stop them becoming entrances for rats;
  - Cut it back – vegetation around livestock accommodation and farm buildings can provide shelter for rodents.
- There are various methods for controlling a rat infestation.
- Cage traps need to be checked twice a day and large numbers are needed for them to be effective.
  - Spring traps need to be approved by the Spring Traps Approval Order (1995) to be used in the UK. Visit [www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/vertebrates/approved-traps.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/vertebrates/approved-traps.htm) for the full list.
  - Shooting with an air gun or shotgun may be a suitable way for killing rats as they exit burrows or are flushed out.
  - The most effective rat poisons available are anticoagulant rodenticides. Available as ready to use baits (chopped cereals generally being the most effective) they usually kill the rats within two to four weeks. Baits should be placed where they are not accessible to livestock, wildlife or domestic pets and monitored regularly.

In some areas of the UK, rats have developed resistance to anticoagulants. For information on areas of resistance visit [www.bpca.org.uk/RRAG](http://www.bpca.org.uk/RRAG).

something of an expert in the pest problems that face modern farmers.

"I am at constant war with foxes," he said. "They are a big problem in this area."

For Peter the main solution is keeping his chicken pens secure. Running parallel to the wire mesh fence around the outside of his chicken pen, Peter has two strands of electric wire supported by sturdy posts. He explained: "The electric fence is eight inches out from the wire mesh, and consists of two electric wires. The first is eight inches from the ground and the top wire is eight inches above the first. This lower wire stops the fox from digging underneath the fence, and the top one stops him from stepping over the first."

It is important to keep fences and pens well maintained, Peter said: "Although they may look

impressive when they go up, after a few years rot can set in making pens vulnerable to foxes. Electric fences also need to be kept clear of vegetation in order to avoid them shorting out."

Peter also controls foxes using a well baited cage trap, which catches around 25 a year.

Badgers are another pest that cause headaches for Peter. "They tend to be too slow to catch chickens in wide spaces and they are more interested in the feed," he said. "However, they can cause a lot of damage to pens and fences creating holes that can then be exploited by foxes."

The damage caused to land by setts is another badger-related problem that can prove disastrous for farm animals. Peter explained: "One of my horses got its leg caught in a badger sett and was lame for two years."

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Badgers also bring with them the worry of bovine TB. "We have had huge problems in this area with bTB. All my neighbouring farms have been affected by the disease but I have been very lucky so far. Farmers need more powers to legally deal with badgers that spread the disease."

Rats are a constant menace and Peter believes that mild winters are partly to blame for the recent increase in their numbers. "With old barns, it is very difficult to protect food stores from rats," he said. "I have a regular routine of placing poisoned bait and change the poisons now and then."

Birds are another problem with crows, jays and magpies all invading pens to steal eggs. As well as shooting offending birds, Peter has developed a novel solution to this problem. He explained: "Crows can be discouraged by creating a

sheet door for the pop hole from an old fertiliser bag cut into strips. The chickens quickly get used to this door but it discourages unwanted intruders for a while. Care should be taken to make sure the chickens go safely in at night on the first few occasions."

Peter has few problems with stoats and weasels and mink prefer the trout farm down the road. He did, however, have some useful tips for protecting chickens from these particular visitors. "Mink are very bold and like going down dark passageways. Building a tunnel around the edge of a pen using a drainpipe and then placing a Fenn trap under the surface of the ground is a very effective control method. As with all other traps this needs to be checked daily for welfare reasons and to ensure it has not sprung without catching anything."

## Action on: Badgers

As a protected species, it is illegal to kill or injure badgers or interfere with their setts without a licence. Preventative measures can include fencing off areas that badgers use, raising water and feed troughs so they are at least 30 inches off the ground, and keeping buildings secure.

If badgers continue to be a problem then you can apply to Defra's wildlife advisors for a licence to kill the rogue badger. This requires good evidence that badgers are responsible for the damage. A separate licence is needed to destroy or interfere with badger setts.



## Action on: Foxes

As with any pest, it is vital to make sure your livestock is secure. Measures can include:

- Repellents and deterrents – substances approved by the Pesticide Safety Directorate (PSD) can be effective in discouraging foxes.
- Fences – fox-proof fences need to be 6'6" tall with an overhang and a buried section of at least 1'6" deep. An electric mesh fence or multi-strand wires around a field can be a successful deterrent.



- Llamas – the use of llamas to protect sheep and goats is widespread in the USA. With an innate dislike for canines, llamas integrate easily with flocks of sheep and chase off foxes.

The lethal control of foxes is only effective if it is part of a long term culling solution. Hunting with dogs has been banned with a few tightly drawn up exemptions. Remaining deadly fox-control options include:

- Shooting – shooting foxes at night, using a rifle with the aid of a spotlight is known as 'lamping'. The shooters need to be competent shots who know the area well. A rifle of .22 calibre or above should be used.
- Snares – snares must be free-running and self-locking. They need to be inspected at least once a day and snared foxes killed humanely by shooting.
- Trap cages – trapped foxes should be dispatched in the same way as snared foxes.
- Middens – a technique used to improve the effectiveness of other techniques. Bait is buried to attract foxes to an area with snares or traps.

## Call in the professionals

If you cannot solve a pest problem yourself you may be able to get help from the local authority environmental health department. Otherwise, there are a wide range of private companies that can help.

A good place to start is the British Pest Control Association whose members have to agree to a strict code of practice and conduct. You can search for local companies registered with the association online at [www.bpca.org.uk](http://www.bpca.org.uk).