

Getting ahead in the rat control game

KtB asks how gamekeepers can be prepared as rules surrounding rodenticide use change.

Controlling rats on game shoots in open areas away from buildings is possible without using any anticoagulant rodenticides, believes the NGO's national vice-chair, David Wiggins, head-keeper on the Englefield Estate in Berkshire.

To show how it's done in readiness for new restrictions next year which will confine all five second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs) to use inside and around buildings only, he welcomed *KtB*'s visit to find out more.

The shoot occupies Englefield's 800 hectares (1,200 acres) farmed 'in hand' using regenerative and wildlife-rich principles. Since 2009, for example, a grey partridge restoration project has seen numbers increase from just two breeding pairs to 80.

Insect-rich habitats have been created including five miles of pollen and nectar strips, four miles of flower-rich grass margins and more than six miles of weedy cereal margins. In addition to grey partridges, other wildlife also benefit hugely from this sympathetic regime. Lapwings number at least 30 nesting pairs and brown hares are flourishing. Nest boxes for tree sparrows have been installed and other target species include turtle dove and corn bunting. The success of Englefield's permanent commitment has been recognised by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust's Cotswold Grey Partridge Trophy.

In this context, the essential business

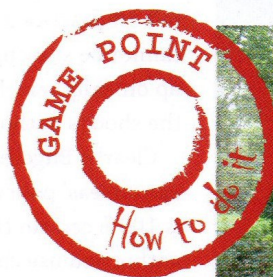
of controlling rats on the shoot needs to be conducted on compatible wildlife-friendly lines. As it happens, David Wiggins says there is no point using the SGAR bromadiolone anyway due to the estate's location in central southern England, where rats with resistance to that compound are widespread across several thousand square miles.

Although gassing is still an option and may be appropriate in some areas, at Englefield, the shoot's rat control work in open areas is made up of three essential components:

- Constant observation,
- Efficient trapping, and
- Shooting.

Observation and trapping

Careful, constant observation determines where to set up to 200 traps and these are checked daily. The preferred types of trap are Perdix and DOC 150, both set in simple, rustic, home-made tunnels. David explains that the vertical wood/chipboard baffles are DIY modifications to ensure every target pest is positioned for an instantly fatal skull impact. Unlike outdated traps that can catch some targets by a limb or around the body and cause slow inhumane deaths, both types used at Englefield are approved for rats, grey squirrels, stoats and weasels. (Other approved brands may also be available.)



David Wiggins, head-keeper at Englefield.

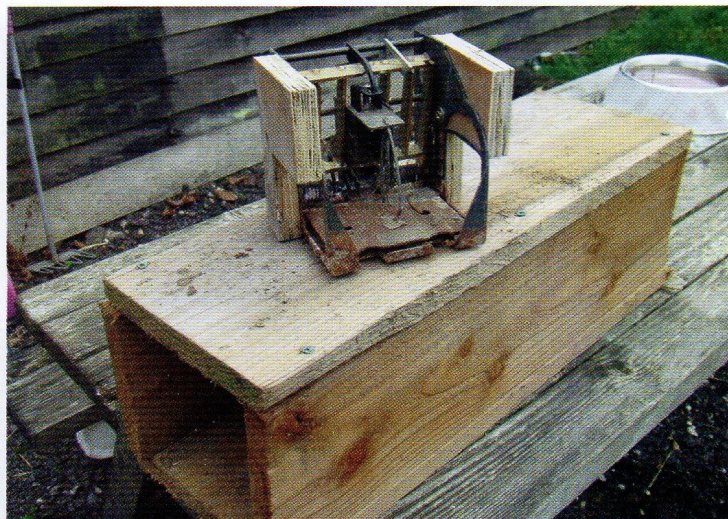
"Once a trap has been triggered, it's then out of action until you clear the catch and reset it, hence the value of daily checking," David points out.

Shooting

"One important change that has improved our strike rates markedly in rat hot spots is the availability of affordable thermal imaging sights. We've found these are better than infra-red because the red laser can be seen by rats, despite their supposed poor eye sight."

As night falls, he and his assistant keeper work together, taking turns at spotting and shooting with a 0.22 calibre rifle, using sub-sonic cartridges for near-silent operation at 40 to 50 metres from their targets. →

Weathered and rusty, but still working good as new. Rats are scared of new shiny things appearing in their domains (ie. they are 'neophobic'). Once purchased, traps such as these (DOC shown left, Perdix right) can be in use for a number of years.





Although Fenn traps can still be used for rats, they cannot be used if there is a chance of catching stoats, for which they are illegal.

Compared with poisoning, when you can never be quite sure how successful or not it's been, David adds that trapping and shooting have the advantage that every kill is visible. "This is quite important for job satisfaction," he says. "And how many gamekeepers don't enjoy shooting rats?"

Around buildings

The one exception to his no-SGARs rule

is around the shoot's farmstead, where rodenticide bait is laid in tamper-proof bait boxes and inspected routinely according to best practice guidelines. To ensure they cannot be scavenged, dead rats are picked up on daily searches and any found go into the shoot's authorised incinerator.

Clearly, Engelfield's 'zero-SGARs-in-open-areas' policy is ahead of the game. It is 100% certain that next year's rodenticide authorised use changes will happen. Chair of the Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use (CRRU), Dr Alan Buckle, wonders how many NGO members already

have a similar policy or can be persuaded to make changes now rather than when it's forced upon them.

"Now you know this change is coming, maybe experiment with an increased level of trapping this winter and see what happens," he suggests. "The cost of some new traps should be offset anyway by lower rodenticide purchases and, once you have them, they'll become an asset that returns a dividend for years to come. Perhaps a future issue of *KtB* could devote a page for readers' feedback about the results you've had and refinements that got you there." •

RODENTICIDE RULES

A summary of the rodenticide authorisation changes coming into force in July 2024 can be found now at tinyurl.com/yc6phzlx. And to help you understand how this will affect gamekeepers, the Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use (CRRU) is updating its *Rat control and game management* booklet. Once completed, details will be published in *KtB* and it will be available from NGO, SGA, BASC, GWCT and the Countryside Alliance.

TRAP GUIDANCE

Guidance how to make best use of DOC traps is available in a Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust factsheet here: tinyurl.com/GWCT-factsheet. The principles apply equally well to Perdix units. •

KEEPING THE BALANCE

