

Eric's Online Diary

This is the online diary of Eric Rayner, updated quite often.

Friday, 29 April 2016

Harsh face of the countryside

I am walking the Coast-to-Coast path in May and have been doing a little (not enough) training to prepare myself.

I walked up Knarr Fen Road and back across the fen to Thorney on Monday morning and, if you add in Toneham, it's a six-and-a-half mile walk. I'm doing the walk with David Jones and he came with me on Monday.

As we came off the fen and back onto the higher ground of the village, we came across an old chap in a Land Rover Discovery. Amazingly, he had got stuck in mud on the track at the field edge.

There wasn't anything we could do to help and he'd called for a friend to come to tow him out, so we stood and had a chat for a while. He had a trailer, which he'd unhitched, containing a cage with a live magpie inside. David knew what he was up to and said: "I see you're out with the old Larsen traps."

The chap told us he was catching magpies and gave us a bit of a speech about saving songbirds and how many eggs and chicks a magpie would take during a season. I detected a whiff of bullshit and my suspicions were confirmed by David when we walked on.

David told me that Larsen traps were legal and that you didn't need a licence to catch and kill magpies or other corvids because they were classed as vermin. Quite why anyone would consider a fairly rare Jay to be vermin is anyone's guess, but that also gets caught up in the corvid group.

Of course, they're only vermin if you're running a shoot and releasing thousands of pheasant chicks and also trying to encourage pheasants to breed on your land so you have even more for the guns. Millions of pheasant chicks are released each year for the purpose of shooting and they certainly put the natural balance out of kilter.

A magpie will take eggs and (probably) pheasant chicks, so they're a target for gamekeepers and laws back up their needs by classifying these birds as vermin. They do take eggs and young from songbirds, of course, but there's a natural balance to be struck there and songbirds are somewhat better at hiding their nests than pheasants.

A Larsen trap (and there are other variations) involves using a live bird as bait. A bird is taken from one area and placed in a trap in another territory. Resident birds will come down to challenge it and chase it away and the trap is constructed in such a way that they can get through the wire to challenge the rival, but can't get out again, so you end up with two magpies in the trap. The new bird might become bait itself, or simply have its neck wrung.



Larsen traps were invented by a Danish gamekeeper called Larsen, but are now illegal in Denmark. I think they should be illegal here as well.

I don't like the idea of a live bird being used as bait and even though legal use of the traps requires the gamekeeper to provide food and water for the trapped "bait" bird, you do have the situation where a wild creature is restrained for some period of time (at least 24 hours) in a state of massive stress.

Also, they should not be used while birds are nesting, so the chap setting traps on the edge of the village was certainly cutting it fine. I'd be very surprised if all the rules surrounding bait-bird welfare are obeyed. This chap said he hated magpies, so I can't really see them getting a fair deal from him.

It's a shame that the Labour Party saw fit to ban foxhunting, but was happy to leave these things as perfectly legal.

If you're interested in knowing more about trapping of corvids and perhaps joining a campaign to get the traps banned, there's a very good website here:

<http://www.againstcorvidtraps.co.uk/corvid-traps/larsen-traps/>

Posted by [Eric Rayner](#) at 09:20