

Saboteurs try to outfox hunters in England's countryside

December 22 2023, by Sylvain PEUCHMAURD



Hunting with hounds was once an integral part of country life across the UK.

Emerging from woods in a quiet corner of rural England, a small band of anti-foxhunting campaigners have just one goal: to confuse the pack of dogs chasing a fox and prevent its death.

These "[hunt](#) saboteurs" regularly gate-crash meetings across the country in what has become a fierce clash of cultures.

"Kermit to Animal, are you receiving?" crackles the radio from one old Toyota 4X4 to another, each with their own codename.

The field sport of foxhunting, in which a pack of hounds chases and kills a fox accompanied by riders on horseback, was once an integral part of country life.

But the use of dogs to hunt [wild animals](#) has seen outlawed in England and Wales since 2004.

Trail hunts, which allow packs of dogs to follow a route artificially laid with fox scent, are allowed.

But critics say they are used as a cover for fox hunts to continue as before.

They say dogs still chase and kill live animals on these hunts, with organizers then claiming it was accidental.

Hunters counter that they comply with the law and that it is the saboteurs who are illegally interfering with their monitoring activities.

Today the saboteurs' target is the Thurlow Hunt in rural Suffolk, eastern England.

Armed with maps on their phones and drones overhead, around 20 saboteurs exchange information over their radios about the position of the riders, taking care not to risk driving the fox back towards the pack.



Even drones are used.

Spotting a saboteur, one rider—dressed in a traditional red huntsman's jacket—looks unhappy and turns back.

The barks of the dogs echo in the distance and hunt members including children on ponies gallop past.

"We don't want to lose sight of them," says Angela Vasiliu of the North London Hunt Saboteurs.

'Prolific'

The saboteurs try to distract the dogs with loud cries and by spraying lemongrass to confuse their sense of smell.

If they fail to put them off and a fox is killed, at least they hope to gather evidence for prosecutions under the 2004 law.

Video taken by the hunt saboteurs led to the conviction of one member of the Thurlow Hunt in 2019, with the footage showing hunt members and saboteurs fighting over a fox's remains during the traditional Boxing Day hunt on December 26, 2017.

Despite the ban, hunt saboteurs like Philip Walters insist that foxes are still being illegally hunted.



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A senior police chief earlier this year said he believed unlawful foxhunting was "prolific" in the UK.

Matt Longman, the national police spokesman on foxhunting, even urged [police forces](#) to work with "volunteers" monitoring hunts to learn how to gather the sort of evidence that leads to successful prosecutions.

The Thurlow Hunt association stresses that it only "conducts lawful trail hunting activities to comply with the Hunting Act and constantly assesses its procedures to ensure best practice is carried out".

And it complains of harassment and false accusations by the saboteurs, calling them "animal rights extremists".

In Scotland, the devolved government in Edinburgh this year introduced a ban on trail hunting.

The UK's main opposition Labour party has pledged to follow suit in England and Wales if it wins the next general election.

Vegan sausage rolls

Clashes between hunt members and saboteurs can often turn ugly—with accusations from both sides.



The well-organized saboteurs use radios and satellite mapping to follow the hunts.

"Why, when hunt saboteur monitors turn up, are some hunts so violent if they haven't got anything to hide?" asks Walters, also from the North London group, who says he has received death threats.

"I've had dead rats sent to me in the post, I've had dead foxes left on my car's windscreen," he said.

According to Polly Portwin, campaign director at the Countryside Alliance, which works to protect rural traditions, around 25 hunts out of the 200 that are active are being targeted by saboteurs, who claim 600 members.

Defenders of foxhunting say it is essential to control the number of foxes in the countryside and is more humane than shooting or poisoning.

After hours running through muddy woods, paths and fields, the saboteurs in Thurlow finally take a rest and restore their flagging energy levels with vegan sausage rolls and chocolate brownies.

They say they saw six or seven foxes that day but are hopeful they fulfilled their mission—to make sure that no fox is killed—because they did not see any dog with traces of blood on it.

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