

Stag Hunting, the Existing Law, and What Must Change - QUICK SUMMARY

Where Stag Hunting Happens

- Devon (Exmoor)
- Somerset (Quantocks and Exmoor)

Who is Involved

- Three registered stag-hunting packs:
 - Devon & Somerset Staghounds
 - Quantock Staghounds
 - Tiverton Staghounds
- Also, members, guests, mounted riders, foot followers, vehicles, and hounds.

What Happens on a Hunt

- Stags to be hunted are pre-selected by a harbourer usually the evening before.
- Hounds, mounted huntsmen and followers chase the stag for hours until exhausted.
- Stags are shot and butchered; body parts are distributed as trophies and for consumption.
- The hunts choose healthy deer because they want a long chase.
- To keep to the two-dog maximum allowed in the “exempt hunting”, two hounds are swapped with two fresh hounds when the first two tire. This is called ‘relaying’.

How Stag Hunts Operate

Roles and responsibilities:

- Harbourer: identifies stags ahead of the hunt
- Huntsman: directs the hounds
- Whipper-ins: keep the pack together
- Field Master & Hunt Masters: manage the hunt, liaise with landowners and follow the hunt on horseback.
- Field & Foot Followers: follow the hunt in vehicles, or on foot, guiding stags toward hounds or to ensure a long chase.
- Gun Carriers: kill stags when exhausted

- Public is misled into thinking hunts are unquestionably legal.

Stags Suffer

- Bateson Report (1997/2003): stags experience extreme stress, physiological damage, and suffering.
- Hunts maintain the appearance of legality while causing significant animal cruelty.

When Hunts Operate

- The stag hunting seasons are extensive, with only two months (June and July) free from hunting.

The Law

- Hunting Act 2004 makes it illegal to hunt wild mammals with dogs unless exemptions apply.
- Exemptions exploited by stag hunts include:
 - Stalking or Flushing Out
 - Rescue of Injured Mammals
 - Research and Observation

The Research and Observation exemption specifies that only two dogs may be used.

There is NO EXEMPTION in the Hunting Act for deer culling.

Abuse of Law

- Hunts use two dogs in relay to claim compliance. They use two dogs at a time, but employ two more when the original dogs tire.
- Other than this, stag hunting is the same as it was before the 2004 ban.
- Police rarely intervene; 75% of Hunting Act prosecutions fail.
- Hunts have considerable influence locally as they are large landowners. Stag hunting often takes place on land owned, or controlled by the hunts.
- Current law is vague concerning the use of two hounds, making it easy to abuse.
- Hunters carry a light burden of proof for exemption

Suggested Changes to the Law

- Remove all exemptions, especially research and observation.
- Ban all hunting hounds for pursuing wild mammals.
- Ban stag hunts as organisations.
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Problems with Changes to the Law

- Some think that legitimate deer culling is necessary and confuse this with hunting stags with dogs for fun.
- Injured deer may need humane dispatch and tracker dogs might be needed to find them.
- Tracker dogs must be trained using deer scent.
- If any new law does allow tracker dogs to be used to find injured deer, this **MUST** be properly controlled, possibly by the police. Stag hounds should never be allowed to chase deer.

British Deer Society Guidance - culling

- Deer populations are assessed annually; culls are carefully calculated.
- Deer are shot according to firearms regulations by trained marksmen (minimum DSC Level 1).
- Continuous culling reduces stress; humane tracking of injured deer may involve dogs trained on deer scent.
- Trail hunting bans should not impede legitimate culling or humane dispatch practices.
- BDS do not support stag hunting with dogs

Quantock Staghounds Conviction (2006–2007)

- QSH were found guilty of illegal hunting.
- Judge noted this hunt was primarily for sport and recreation.
- Dogs were used in relay to maintain the chase.
- Exemption claims rejected in court; hunt convicted and fined.