



# Raptor Persecution at Hilborough: Royals’ Favoured Shooting Estate



The Hunt Investigation Team (HIT) have documented illegal raptor persecution on the Hilborough Estate in Norfolk in April 2022.

The Hilborough Estate’s reputation has been built upon and protected by its **royal connections** and **historical conservation credentials**. The Van Cutsem family, friends of Princes Charles, William and Harry, own the estate and manage it for shooting. In 2017, former head gamekeeper Geoffrey Gray, was lauded by the RSPB as a **conservation ‘hero’** for his management of wildlife on the estate. In 2022, HIT documented a very different picture of wildlife ‘management’ here.

Acting upon reports of illegal trapping on the Hilborough Estate, HIT began covert surveillance in spring 2022. Our team navigated the estate, day and night, evading the gamekeepers during their most active season. Two illegal active hawk traps were discovered: large ladder traps, each containing live white pigeons. Such traps are recognised as illegal because the **white pigeons specifically attract birds of prey, especially goshawks**. [Offence: Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 – the unlawful use of a cage trap].



White pigeons in ladder trap on Hilborough Estate

Covert cameras were installed by the team. Within days, a juvenile male goshawk was lured into one of the traps. As would be expected, he predated one of the bait pigeons but then remained caught in the trap himself. The next day, the trap was attended by a person wearing a full face mask and camouflage cap to conceal his identity. He entered the trap and efficiently removed the hawk, subduing it with a stick and taking it live back through the woods. [Offence: Wildlife & Countryside Act – the illegal taking of a wild bird]. The person discarded the predated pigeon, shutting the remaining live pigeon as continued bait in the trap as he left. [Offence: Wildlife & Countryside Act – maintaining an illegal hawk trap].

The goshawk was removed from the trap and not immediately released – which any legal trap operator would be required to do. His fate is unknown but he is presumed dead. Raptors are seen by gamekeepers as a potential threat to shooting stocks and are not tolerated on estates. The hawk was most likely brutally killed and disposed of out of sight.

In addition to the illegal taking of the goshawk, the bait pigeons were found to be inadequately provided for in the ladder trap. They had no fresh water and some had no food or shelter [Offence: Animal Welfare Act 2006 – causing unnecessary suffering]. When Norfolk Police raided the estate and recovered the pigeons, these poor birds were found to be dehydrated and underweight. The birds were rescued and taken for appropriate care.

Further evidence of systematic wildlife persecution was documented by HIT. A shooting hide containing plastic pigeon and crow decoys was camouflaged into the trees just meters from one of the hawk traps. Snares were set around stink pits of dead bodies (including deer and hare) and foxes were strung up in trees to draw more predators in. DOC traps and shooting towers added to the list of grim killing apparatus. An area which should have been abundant with springtime wildlife was being systematically stripped of its inhabitant species. The smokescreen of conservation fabricated by the shooting industry needs to be blown away for good.



Stink pit at Hilborough Estate snare site

This is not the first time the Van Cutsem Harriers have been associated with acts of illegal wildlife persecution. After two **Hen Harriers were shot dead** at nearby Dersingham Nature Reserve in 2007, the CPS confirmed that William van Cutsem had been interviewed as an official suspect by police, along with Prince Harry and David Clarke, a Norfolk gamekeeper. The case was closed without a prosecution due to a lack of evidence but the CPS noted that no one else was being sought in connection with the killings.

In 2016, **three illegal pole traps** were found set on a Van Cutsem grouse moor in North Yorkshire, in what was described as attempted hen harrier persecution in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. The gamekeeper was let off with a caution. The Van Cutsems attempted to distance themselves from him and sought to maintain their **conservationist claims**.

And now, HIT have now uncovered a third instance of raptor persecution associated with the Van Cutsem family, the royals’ shooting pals and close friends. The Van Cutsems hold powerful positions in UK society: will they seek to use their power and influence to suppress justice for this third shocking wildlife crime?

We hope but do not necessarily expect that our evidence will get to court. All shooting estates are well protected – few more so than Hilborough. Experienced gamekeepers are well-versed in evading the law. We know that wildlife is routinely failed by the UK legal system – even where individual police officers seek to uphold the law. We that those who speak out are often targeted in return. We do not believe in sitting on evidence for months and years on end, hoping for an unlikely prosecution whilst wildlife is relentlessly killed. People need to know what goes on within shooting estates and to be empowered to act.

Wildlife persecution – not only of raptors but also badgers, foxes, hares, deer and corvids – is rampant in the UK countryside. Legislation is often weak and unenforceable. Public awareness and action can be hugely efficient and effective in securing protection for wildlife. Decent people everywhere can mobilise to protect wildlife from bloodsports crime and cruelty.

Thankyou to the individuals who assisted with this operation behind the scenes. You know who you are and your impact for wildlife has been massive. Everybody can help to stamp out wildlife crime. If you have information about the Hilborough Estate or any other wildlife persecution, contact HIT with as much detail as possible.

HIT undertake undercover investigations throughout the UK, to expose and end bloodsports wildlife crime and cruelty. We are an autonomous unit, working on the frontlines of covert animal cruelty operations.

For more information, see our website [www.huntinvestigationteam.org](http://www.huntinvestigationteam.org)

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**Additional notes:**

Goshawks are protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Despite this they are intensively persecuted, especially on shooting estates and especially during the springtime breeding season.

Pigeons are protected in this case under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The pigeons were held in an illegal trap and were not provided with adequate food, water or shelter whilst held under the control of the trap operator and therefore were subjected to unnecessary suffering.

Hawk traps are illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. See **this case** for a judicial assessment of such traps.

Ladder traps such as those used on the Hilborough Estate can be used legally in some instances (under the terms of the General Licence) but never with live pigeons as bait or intended to catch raptors. The use of live bait birds in any trap, legal or otherwise, involves inherent animal welfare concerns. HIT opposes all live bait traps.

There is another point to note here. The Hilborough Estate’s former gamekeeper was **publicly celebrated by the RSPB** for his conservation of stone curlews in 2017. However, while this positive reputation lasted, other practices on the very same land appear to have gone unnoticed in the years since. Most notably, the use of multiple illegal hawk traps. HIT contacted the RSPB for advice on the illegal active hawk traps in good faith. We also hope, in good faith, that the RSPB will consider whether publicly praising gamekeepers could in fact give estates lasting protection from scrutiny which allows wildlife crime to flourish. We fear it could.

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