

The Countryside Alliance Guide to trail-hunting

Q: What is trail-hunting and when does it take place?

A: Trail-hunting involves laying of a scent across the country which a pack of hounds then searches for and follows using their noses. The season starts in the autumn and continues throughout the winter, with most packs finishing during March.

Q: When did trail-hunting become a regular activity?

A: When the Hunting Act 2004 was enforced in February 2005, many hunts wanted to retain their infrastructure so took up trail-hunting with their hounds to comply with the new law that had banned traditional foxhunting. There are other exempt activities which hunts use in addition to trail-hunting that also comply with the law.

Q: Who goes trail-hunting?

A: Anybody is welcome to go trail-hunting. Many people that hunted before the change in the law continue to support their own packs, however there are new people taking up following hounds each year.

Q: What is the difference between trail-hunting and drag hunting?

A: Drag hunting is regarded as mainly an equestrian activity where the drag line is laid over a predetermined – and generally known – route for the hounds to follow, often incorporating a number of fences for the riders to negotiate. A drag hunting day usually takes place over a period of up to three hours with either three or four different lines. Trail-hunting – which can last all day – is regarded as more of a hound-based activity where much of the emphasis is on watching the hounds work out where the scent has been laid in a way to simulate traditional hunting. This is of great interest to people riding but also for those following on foot or watching from a car.

Q: How does the trail get laid and what scent is used?

A: Somebody drags a scent-infused sock, cloth or sack along the ground. It is often done from a horse, a quad-bike or on foot, although results may be best achieved using a combination of all three. Common sense dictates that it is easier to walk or run through thick cover than to try to ride a bike through it. Most foxhound packs use an ethically sourced, quarry-based scent. The hounds have been traditionally bred to follow this scent and they know what they are searching for. This prevents offering hounds an element of choice which could lead them to deviate onto the scent of another quarry species.

Q: Who decides where to lay the trail?

A: Generally, each hunt has one - or in some cases several - trail-layers throughout the course of each hunting day. Trails can be laid by people on foot, on horseback or from a quad. The trail-layers know where they can and can't go – such as in woods, across fields, through hedgerows, into farm yards, across rivers or along ditches etc - so that is where they lay the trails ahead of the hounds in order for them to search and follow the trail. The timescale for laying a trail before the hounds start to search for it varies considerably, while the hounds' ability to hunt that trail can depend on a

number of environmental factors such as the terrain, wind, rain, air pressure, temperature and many other influences outside human control.

Q: How do the hounds know where to look for the trail?

A: The huntsman will know which overall area the hunt is allowed access to on a specific day so will encourage his hounds to search for the trail within those parameters by using his voice and the hunting horn. The huntsman and his whipper-in – who helps the huntsman to control the hounds – do not know exactly where the trails have been laid so the focus is on locating the laid scent using the hounds.

Q: Do hounds sometimes pick up the scent of a live fox and, if so, what happens?

A: Live quarry species naturally live in the countryside, so on occasion, the hounds may pick up the scent. If this occurs, the huntsman and other members of hunt staff stop the hounds as soon as they are made aware that the hounds are no longer following a trail that has been laid.

Q: Why do people go trail-hunting?

A: As with traditional forms of hunting, people hunt for different reasons and follow in a variety of ways – either on horseback, on foot or following in a car. Some enjoy the freedom of being out in the fresh air, others like riding their horses, many go to watch hounds work while some followers simply delight in being able to access different parts of the countryside which wouldn't necessarily be open to them if they weren't out following a pack of hounds. There is a huge social element involved too.

Q: What enjoyment do the followers get from trail-hunting?

A: Trail-laying was designed to replicate traditional hunting so for those on horses, the days follow a similar pattern as they did before the Hunting Act 2004 came into force. People still wear their traditional hunting kit, they follow a nominated "field master" who keeps them in touch with the hounds and enables them to see the hounds searching for and following their trail. The same applies for those that follow hounds on foot such as the beagles and basset hounds.

Q: How does anybody know when the hounds have found a trail?

A: Hounds will use their voices when they locate the scent and start to follow it – this sound is known as "the cry".

Q: Does the trail follow a specified route?

A: Unlike drag-hunting where there is a planned route which usually involves jumping a line of fences, trail-hunting is designed to replicate traditional quarry hunting where there isn't a set route or a finishing time.

Q: Does the trail-layer want to make it easy for the hounds to find and follow the trail?

A: A good trail-layer will try to make the hounds work hard to locate the trail and quite often they may follow it for a while but then lose it again, perhaps where the trail-layer lifted the scent before dropping it again.

Q: What happens if the hounds lose the scent?

A: The hounds would be encouraged to search again for the scent where it was lost – this is known as casting - and it looks like the hounds are fanning out while all the time using their noses to seek the trail.

Q: What scent is used for the trail?

A: Most foxhound packs continue to use an ethically sourced quarry-based scent based on fox urine. The hounds have been traditionally bred to follow this scent and they know what they are seeking.

Usually this, rather than an artificial scent, prevents offering the hounds an element of choice which could lead them to deviate onto the scent of other quarry species.

Q: Is trail-hunting legal and humane?

A: Trail-hunting is a legal activity that was put forward as an alternative to traditional methods of hunting when the Hunting Act 2004 was enforced.

Q: Who wants to stop trail-hunting taking place?

A: Trail-hunting was supported by anti-hunting activists as a suitable activity for hounds and hunt followers after the traditional hunting ban came into force. The same activists called for trail-hunting to be banned on National Trust land during a vote in October 2017 however the motion was defeated.

Q: Do the hunt followers still dress the same to go trail-hunting as they did when they went traditional hunting?

A: In order to retain the heritage and traditions of hunting, very little has changed regarding where hounds meet, the dress and the hunting terminology used, so overall hunting scenes appear much the same as they have done for hundreds of years.

Q: How can I get involved in trail-hunting?

A: It is best to contact the local hunt secretary who will offer you advice about the most suitable meets to attend. To find a pack in your area, visit www.mfha.org.uk

If you have any further questions regarding trail-hunting please email hunting@countryside-alliance.org