

Predation of Poultry by Buzzard

Background

The owners of a free-range poultry unit have been suffering significant losses of poultry due to predation by buzzards for about 2½ years. Predation is particularly significant while the buzzards are breeding, during harsh weather conditions and when a fresh batch of 'naive' chickens is introduced to the flock. The poultry unit occupies a 3 ha field.

2 buzzards, believed to be the territorial pair, are regularly seen flying in the area and it is these specific buzzards that are believed to be responsible for the predation of chickens. Recently, a third, sub-adult, bird has been seen; this is believed to be one of their recent offspring.

All practical non-lethal methods available to the applicant have been tried to solve the problem but none has worked. In 2011, the applicant applied to Natural England for a licence to shoot the buzzards to protect their chickens and their business. Given the sensitivity of this request, consideration was given by Natural England to all other options including capture and relocation of buzzards, and capture and taking into captivity.

Due to the scale of the continuing losses to buzzards (circa 9% of the flock each year) and because it appears that this pair has established a firm hunting preference for chickens (which appears to be quite unusual) it was decided to authorise the removal of the birds.

Natural England considered relocation, permanent captivity and lethal control as options. We were unable to identify a suitable site to relocate the birds, but with the assistance of [REDACTED] we were able to identify suitable candidates to keep the birds in permanent captivity. This was considered a preferable option, in the first instance, to lethal control on this occasion. Arrangements were made for any captured birds to be examined by an avian vet, micro-chipped and fitted with a colour ring.

A licence to take up to 2 buzzards by means of a variety of traps and mist net (of mesh size appropriate to buzzard) was issued on 13th March 2013. A [REDACTED] with the appropriate skills and experience of trapping and handling birds of prey was authorised to act under the licence to the point of delivering any captured individuals to the nominated avian vet.

It was decided that a [REDACTED] would undertake the operation on behalf of the Applicant due to the fact it would be the first time such an operation has been authorised and it was important to (i) ensure the welfare of the birds, and (ii) to evaluate the different methods to inform future decisions and advice.

Action taken under licence: 18-21 March 2013.

The following traps/capture methods were attempted:

- Larsen trap with live chicken decoy
- Large sprung cage-type trap with chicken or rabbit carcase bait
- Flip over spring trap with rabbit carcase bait
- Type 1 'Noose carpet' (loops of fishing line woven into a chicken carcase of a size designed to entangle a buzzard's feet) on a chicken carcase securely anchored to the ground
- Type 2 'Noose carpet' as above on an anchored chicken carcase together with nooses on a mesh around the chicken carcase.
- Mist net ('Ecotone' 18m long four shelf 110 denier nylon mist net with 45mm mesh diameter suitable for medium to large raptors) with stuffed tawny owl (fitted with snowy owl eyes) decoy
- Mist net (as above) with chicken carcase bait.

- Observations of the buzzards' behaviour were made from a camouflaged hide in an adjacent field during daylight hours. A log was kept of the presence and behaviour of buzzards, corvids and any other predatory birds, together with reactions of the birds to the capture methods.
- 3 buzzards were seen in the fields adjacent to the chicken field; although other buzzards were seen in the vicinity none entered this territory. It is likely that the 3 buzzards were an adult pair with a sub-adult offspring.
- Of the above capture methods, the buzzards ignored the Larsen trap, the sprung cage trap and the flip-over trap. One buzzard flew towards the mist net with the tawny owl but flew around the mist net. A larger decoy bird may have been more effective for this method.
- On the morning of 19th March (second day of observations and trapping attempts) one buzzard was caught in the nooses attached to the chicken carcass ('Type 1' above) within an hour of it being deployed. A sub-adult buzzard was safely removed from the trap and transported to the avian vet. No further trapping was undertaken that day due to time taken to transport the bird.
- On 20th March the chicken noose carpet was used in the same position. The remaining two buzzards came to the bait on three occasions despite one of them being present the previous day and witnessing the first capture. The buzzards picked at the guts and were flushed by vehicle disturbance twice, and on the third visit when the giblets had been eaten one individual (possibly the female) buzzard was briefly caught by one leg but was able to work free of the noose before it could be extracted. In response to this the 'Type 2' Noose carpet chicken was made but bad weather prevented its being deployed effectively.
- No further trapping was undertaken from 21st March due to strong winds and rain.
- The trapped buzzard underwent the following veterinary examination: full physical examination, faecal parasite test and haematology and biochemistry blood screen. It was found to be healthy and fit for transfer to captivity. It was reported to be eating within 24 hours of capture.

Next steps

It has been agreed that one further attempt to trap and remove one of the pair of adult buzzards will be attempted. If this can be achieved it will prevent the birds from breeding this year so reducing the predation pressure on the poultry. This needs to be done before eggs are laid, which is likely to be in the next 2-3 weeks.

Weather permitting, it is intended to deploy chicken noose carpet baits the week beginning 1 April. In the days leading up to this, the Applicant will be asked to put down a chicken carcass at first light every other day in the field to encourage the buzzards into the location.

As before, a detailed log of the presence of buzzards and their behaviour will be kept.

Natural England
26 March 2013