

After a long night working their lurchers: Craig Martin with Cain, Ed Cook with Rum and "Collie" John Smethurst with Dan

LEAVE IT TO THE LURCHERS

It's the final countdown as Ed Cook and his team come to the end of their Hebridean adventure on probably the biggest rabbit cull in UK history

After nine weeks on the island, we were well into the cull, we knew the location pretty well and we were – almost – accustomed to the Hebridean weather. We were hitting the required targets and we could certainly see a big difference in the rabbit numbers. There were some spots that still held large numbers of rabbits, but the areas deemed important from a farming point of view were now mostly clear of rabbits. We had been utilising almost every method of control and in as systematic a manner as the weather would allow us. But, predictably, the rabbits were starting to learn what our presence meant and becoming a little bit wise.

Photography: ED COOK

We were still catching with the ferrets, drop boxes were working well, although not catching as many as at first, snares were picking up good numbers in areas that hadn't been targeted and shooting with the rifles both day and night produced decent bags. However, I felt that we still had to up our control program. I wasn't going to be beaten by those rabbits and I certainly wasn't going to give anyone the chance to even think we couldn't do the job. We all knew we had just a few weeks left to do this, it was apparent from day one that it was never going to be a walk in the park, but everyone stuck together and it was a case of getting by with little sleep and spending as much time catching rabbits as possible.

Time for the lurcher

The lurchers had been doing really well on the lamp and each of the lamping dogs was adding to the tally by 20-plus rabbits a night. This may not sound a lot to those who shoot, but it was often more productive, although the terrain was not for the faint-hearted. By now we had lamped the lower and flat fields to death, and any rabbits left would be picked up by other means, so we had to venture into the hills. This is where we had to be very wise on the type of lurcher we used. They had to be experienced, obedient and careful of their surroundings – not so keen that they would fly after a rabbit and go over a cliff face. They had to stop when they were told and know when they should "pull off" or "jack." A dog that just flew after every illuminated fleeing rabbit would have simply died in such a place. The dogs we lamped with learned not to run rabbits that vanished out of the beam and over declining ground. They picked the illuminated rabbits up well while dodging boulders and »







Clockwise: Lamping equipment, Luke "Nick Nack" Welsher baiting cage traps with carrot, Red and Flea marking a dropbox

even when they momentarily vanished into patches of heather. None of these dogs were very fast, but they didn't need to be, as they used their heads to outwit the rabbits. We used all sorts of lamps and battery packs, but overall the Lightforce lamps and Cluson battery packs worked the best. We had to use equipment that was reliable.

We had started using cage traps by now and they were adding to the tally really well. These were often placed where the odd straggler had been seen, including a pair that had moved back in to the garden of our accommodation! These were baited with carrots.

I had been shooting a far few rabbits in certain areas with my .17 HMR, but this was made much more effective when I purchased a thermal imaging spotting scope from Starlight NV. This really did up the ante. While I could see rabbits well through my night vision it was a lot easier to find them with this wonderful piece of kit. I would take it and the night vision with me on foot and survey the area. I could see rabbit-shaped glows wonderfully through the thermal imager and up to 300 yards or so on a good night. No rabbit was then safe, as I'd find them with the thermal, get to a decent and safe shooting spot, lie down and shoot them off my permanently fixed bipod. The thermal made finding rabbits a doddle in the dark as they still produced heat when recently shot. This was also helpful when shooting rabbits on the rocky shoreline, as they often fed there at low tide on the seaweed.

Lamping with the quad

We were soon in our last week of the cull and were thankfully graced with decent dry weather. This meant the fields were dry and that we could use the quad for lamping alongside all the other methods, which were still being used to their full extent. Up until now we couldn't use the quad for lamping, as we would have left tire marks everywhere in the sodden flatland. This was our last chance to try a fresh approach on the rabbits – a control method they hadn't yet experienced. Nathan drove while Luke or Vince shot with the Hushpower moderated .410 shotgun. Any rabbits left in those areas accessible to the quad were soon taken care of. While Nathan drove and lamped, the shooter would pick off any illuminated rabbits. This is an extremely effective method of getting big bags fast and one that Nathan has perfected over the years, to the point that I would happily argue this is a better and safer form of lamping than using rifles while on flatland. It also works well to catch up with lamp-shy rabbits.

Sadly our time was eventually up, we made our target and the customer was happy with our hard work. I was certainly proud of everyone who helped on this project, including the dogs and ferrets, and I certainly wouldn't have completed it without all involved. It is said that this was the biggest rabbit cull in UK history. It was certainly hard graft either way. There was a certain amount of sadness leaving that special place, this perhaps was increased as we boarded the last ferry home. I guess the next question is how long before they get those numbers back again? Well, that is, as they say, another story. **SG**



The team gathers for a final farewell, l-r: Vince, Richard Edwards, Luke "Nick Nack" Welsher, "Collie" John Smethurst, Geraldine MacKinnon (the island's farm manager), Nathan Cook, Ed Cook and Craig Martin, along with their lurchers