

STORM-PROOF ISLAND RABBITS

In the second of his three-part series on a remote Hebridean island, Ed battles extreme weather as he hunts down the remainder of 12,000 increasingly elusive bunnies

I've always liked extreme places, most of my friends and people I work with are extreme in their own ways. My job and my hobbies can also be extreme. However, while I'm accustomed to this, I wasn't expecting the extreme weather that hit the island in the second week of the rabbit cull. To say that it rained would be an understatement – the stuff went vertical, horizontal and at one point I was convinced the high wind beating off the hill was pushing rain upwards.

The rain that could be seen from our thankfully warm and dry accommodation didn't once "fall". Instead, it blew back up in the air some 50 feet and back across the field some 100 feet. One of the islanders said that this was the wettest winter in 30 years. While this was far from inspiring, food had arrived on the ferry along with two fresh team members, Dave Haggers and Andy Young, as the others left with the last week's catch. The food was definitely a morale booster and if I was honest I was rooting through the stash of fodder long before I had even said hello to the new arrivals – but I'm sure they would have understood after my previous week's diet of corned beef.



Feature Photography: EDWARD COOK, ALAMY, LAURIE CAMPBELL

Above: Storm clouds gather overhead. Ed Cook and his rabbiting team battled a near-constant downpour that drove the bunnies deep into their burrows and out of reach

Everything was against us that week, while I had a good team on board, the rabbits seldom left their burrows or other places they chose as home. It almost seemed as though the rabbits had evolved on the island to cope with the weather.

I noted in the first week that a lot of holes had vegetation pulled into »

With a cull of this magnitude you need to be able to employ as many methods as possible to cover all outcomes

The team enjoys a welcome respite from the poor weather – the worst seen on the island in 30 years



A rabbit caught in a purse-net. With shooting, snares and drop-boxes not always proving fruitful, Ed and the team also employed nets and ferrets

them, such as heather and grass. It was far from mild enough for the rabbits to have young and we had not caught any pregnant does, so they had to be stashing food. I hadn't seen this before, but Hampshire is somewhat tropical in comparison to the Hebrides in January. It is said that a cow lays down if it is going to rain, well maybe if you see grass pulled down a rabbit hole in the Hebrides you best batten down the hatches and get ready for stormy weather.

With the rabbits not coming out in such conditions, it made life a lot more difficult, shooting was providing small bags and the drop-boxes and snares didn't perform as well as we hoped. I'm not a fan of gassing rabbits, and even if the method was effective there was no way anyone could carry out such activities in such weather. We got a few breaks, which helped, and on those occasions we did "bag up". I admired Dave Haggers' ability to get up at first light each day and walk the hills with his .22 in horrendous weather. On seeing him return you would think there is a fine line between dedication and stupidity, he would have been drier if had he been spear fishing! That said, he was there to do a job and he certainly shot a notable number of rabbits. The rest of us installed drop-boxes and repaired fencing as the rain persisted.

Ferrets to the rescue

By the middle of the second week it was very much apparent we needed to use ferrets. Up until now, the customer had requested that we didn't as there was a risk of escape and they could damage the birdlife like they had on other islands in the past. That said, a lot of the feral ferret populations on islands sprung up years ago when locater systems were not as common and ferrets could be easily lost. Echo systems on an island are very sensitive, and don't have the ability to balance themselves out like they can on the mainland in most circumstances. We made some negotiations and kept to strict rules and on the third week ferrets were allowed on the island. This was the break we needed to counteract the weather that was hampering us.



The use of ferrets was restricted on the island due to the risk of escape and the history of feral populations decimating seabird colonies on other islands

Sadly I had to leave at the start of the third week to take the rabbits back, but I had to try the ferrets before I went. So before the returning lads got off the ferry, Andy Young set a long-net around the nearest burrow to the ferry port. My brother Nath soon arrived armed with an armful of ferrets and it wasn't long before I had a ferret to ground.

At this point I should have been getting on the ferry and leaving the island, but there was no way I was going to miss out on seeing how well the rabbits would bolt. The captain of the ferry had a few checks to do so I took my opportunity. They didn't bolt well, but we did catch 15 rabbits in those 20 minutes alone – so it looked promising. Ferrets hadn't been used on the island for many years so it was exciting to see for all involved. We now had a method that let us go to the rabbits regardless of weather. With a cull of this magnitude you need to be able to employ as many methods as possible to cover all outcomes.

It wasn't long before I was back on the island and it was time to catch up with the rabbits in the garden of the property we had been staying in – they had been sticking their paws up at us for three weeks too long. David Blogg soon ferreted the burrows, as the others had already cleared the surrounding area of rabbits. They never really bolted that well and one can only presume this was due to the lack of mustelids that would hunt them in the mainland. They seemed to show no fear of ferrets, which certainly did not help with them bolting. Although if the same burrow had to be ferreted at a later date due to the rabbits moving around they flew right out. The ferrets were a massive ally and we were soon getting decent numbers again even if the weather wasn't so good. The rabbits were having everything thrown at them and I was happy with the results. **SG**



Ed and his collie-greyhound cross, Rum, inspect their latest batch of bunnies