

Trail Cameras, a window into wildlife's unseen lives

Wade Muggleton

So much of wildlife watching is about luck and chance, the random stumbling across, the chance sighting, the being in the right place at the right time. All of which means so much wildlife recording could well be skewed by where the observer happened to be, when and for how long, in what weather and season. Which does bring us to question some historical recording as to how much was seen and what went unseen.

Much of that has now potentially changed with the introduction of quality, affordable trail cameras (or camera traps as they are also known). Even 20 years ago remote cameras were largely out of the price range of us ordinary folk, being the mere preserve of the BBC Natural History unit and their like. Now great quality trail cameras are within reach of the amateur and as a result the entire scope of watching and recording wildlife (especially larger animals) has been transformed.

No more lengthy hours sitting in hides in the hope something might turn up, or hoping to witness certain behaviours. Simply set your camera traps, leave for days, weeks or even months and anything that went on within their field of view will be recorded for posterity. As a result, our view of and to some extent knowledge of local wildlife and what it is up to has been transformed.



01. Badger, a classic camera trap species. Wade Muggleton.

Whilst the classic camera trap footage might well be a passing Badger *Meles meles* or Fox *Vulpes vulpes*, a pheasant or squirrel they can equally throw up complete surprises. I am new to trail cams having only purchased one in early summer 2024 so I am still experimenting, trying different settings. And whilst I did indeed get Badgers, Foxes, Rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, pigeons, pheasants and an awful lot of activations by Grey Squirrels *Sciurus carolinensis*, there were a couple of real surprises amongst the expected footage. Twice I recorded Polecat *Mustela putorius*, a species that was not remotely on my radar. I would never have considered it as a likely sighting in our area on the Worcestershire and Shropshire border.



02. Polecat, a real surprise caught on camera trap. Wade Muggleton.

Then there was the Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*, not seen within miles of where I recorded this one, so they could just be unrecorded, or it could be an escape from the deer farm in the neighbouring parish. But I have seen it in the flesh and the camera trap has footage of what I am convinced is the same animal nine months apart, so it has hung around and survived in the locality.



03. Red Deer caught on camera, January 2024. Wade Muggleton



04. Possibly the same Red Deer as the one shown above, caught on camera several months apart, September 2024. Wade Muggleton.

The other thing these great little cameras can do is give us a close up on things we only normally see as a flash disappearing off in the opposite direction. Muntjac *Muntiacus reevesi* are actually stunning creatures, and it is a shame they are such a problem as it is not their fault they are here, they are beautiful and an incredible success story in terms of adaption and being able to thrive in new landscapes.



05. Muntjac in my view are beautiful creatures and have adapted to thrive in new landscapes. Wade Muggleton.

Again, in terms of showing what we might never see from the naked eye, we saw (on our trail cam) a buck with a deformed leg who we have recorded multiple times in a local wood, so despite his injury which causes him to walk in a limited way it looks long healed and he manages to survive.



06. The trail camera gives us close views of things we wouldn't otherwise see, such as this Muntjac with a deformed leg. Wade Muggleton.

The most obvious and widest use of these cameras is the simply seeing what comes by. But they can also be used to stake out boxes as per my Boxing clever articles (e.g. Muggleton 2022?), so now if in doubt about whether Barn Owls are using a box or how much coming and going the Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* are doing we just stick up a camera and see for ourselves.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my first season with a camera trap and been impressed and at times surprised by the results. The cameras come in a range of makes and price tags and to some extent it is the old rule "you get what you pay for". I bought a Browning which retail at about £190, the picture quality is superb, and the range of settings is impressive. But do your homework and find the right camera at the right price that suits your own needs.

Acknowledgements

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Images

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