

16th July 2024

Safety concerns at the rifle range at Ladshaw Fell, Craik Forest, also known as Eskdalemuir Training Area No. 4

Hello,

At around 2 PM on Saturday the 13th of July, I went for a ride on my bicycle. Leaving from Craik Village, I planned to cycle a loop on the forestry tracks in the forest. I intended to go South, past Old Howpasley (Junction at Grid Ref NT 353 067), around a hill called Ladder Law (NT 325 046), taking the road above Craikhope Outdoor Centre (The centre is at NT 324 055), and straight downhill to the other side of Howpasley (NT 344 078) before heading home for a nice cup of tea.

It's a fairly straightforward route, although I hadn't cycled all of it in several years. I took an OS map with me, to check the trails against new tracks added to the forest, as they aren't always on even the most up-to-date maps. I spent most of my youth as a Guide and a Scout, and consider myself pretty well trained in navigation and in understanding the principles of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

I was enjoying a relaxing solo ride until I cycled through an open gate at approximately NT 344 044 with a sign stating "When this gate is closed and red flag is flying STRICTLY NO ENTRY Live firing range" and a phone number:



I was already aware that there is a gun range operating in this area of the forest, and had attended a public meeting in 2022 where locals expressed their concerns about the range's existence, its safety procedures, and its planning status, amongst other issues.

I was also aware that it is my right, as a person in Scotland, to access the countryside, as I have done in this very area since I was a child. I cannot remember ever not feeling at home in this forest, including places like the picnic area, areas of ancient woodland, streams and rivers, as well as on the forest tracks.

As there was no flag flying on the flagpole at the gate, and the gate itself was open, I continued on my way. The track is going uphill at this point, before levelling off after about 100m and starting to drop down again. When I arrived on the flatter section, I heard several gunshots. The sounds appeared to be coming from more than one direction, as I understand it is likely to, when high-powered rifles are used, and large metal targets are being shot at. With the large number of gunshots within a short space of time, I was certain I was not hearing a deer stalker. There is nothing else in the area that could be producing sounds like it.

I hesitated, not sure what to do, then carried on a handful of metres downhill to where I could see in the far distance a red flag flying in the general direction I understand the Ladshaw Fell firing range to be situated (approximately NT 319 046). This flag was so far away that I was surprised that I could see it, and I suspect that I would not have seen it if I wasn't wearing my glasses, or if the weather conditions were different. This, combined with the gunshots, led me to the conclusion that the firing range was currently in operation, and I was within its boundaries.

I immediately phoned 101 to contact the Police, and started to make my exit from the range, returning the way I had come. As I spoke to the operative, I became more and more aware of the danger I was in; I did not know where the guns were, which direction they were firing in, whether they could see me, or if they could be aware of my presence. I left the range, on the phone and trying not to panic, so I could focus on getting out of the dangerous area. I was asked by the police operative if I could shut the gate, and I pushed it to, as of course I did not want anybody else to find out that there is shooting happening the way I just had or in another, far worse way. I had already seen multiple visitors on foot and on bike within the forest that day.

The Police have assured me they'll be contacting the range operators, although I am yet to hear back from them, and am unsure of the timescales that this could involve. I was given an incident number.

I was very shaken because of all this, and absolutely horrified that sufficient safety measures are clearly not being taken at the range. I am scared, I am upset and I am angry.

It is everyone's right to be able to cycle safely within the forest without being in danger of losing their life.

This range is being run dangerously. The managers (I understand this to be Gardners Guns, whose business address, as stated on their website is at Longtown, Carlisle.) clearly have no regard for the safety or the rights of other forest users. Even if the range was properly marked while in operation, its existence is incompatible with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, as it is denying access to all other users of the forest in favour of their own activities.

I am asking you to do what you can to make myself and my fellow cyclists, walkers, riders, and nature lovers safe in Craik Forest again, ideally by working to cease the operation of this firing range. Its existence is incompatible with lives being safe in the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway*.

*It is my understanding that the range falls across the boundary between both council authorities. I understand that this could cause bureaucratic complications, however due to the importance of range safety and rights of access in Scotland as a whole, I trust this will not be a barrier to action.

Yours with optimism,
Jessie Growden