Wildlife crime

No minor offence

Wildlife and Countryside LINK

Cyswllt Amgylchedd Cymru | Wales Environment Link

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Wildlife crime
Introduction

The case for better enforcing laws to protect wildlife in England and Wales

An array of legislation is in place to protect wild species and wild habitats from unnecessary damage inflicted by people.[1] **These laws play a critical role in protecting cherished wild animals plants, fungi and green and blue spaces. Breaches of this legislation are known as wildlife crimes.**

Wildlife and Countryside Link, a coalition of environmental organisations, produces with **Wales Environment Link** annual reports on the extent of wildlife crime in England and Wales.[2] This report presents figures for 2023, assesses the challenges hindering efforts to tackle wildlife crime and makes the case for reforms to enable better enforcement of wildlife legislation.

Link wildlife crime reports are drawn from data collected by charities and eNGOs, including reports of suspected offences and the outcomes of any subsequent prosecutions. In the absence of official data, due to wildlife crime not currently having notifiable status (see more below), the reports attempt to fill the gap in order to provide a national level overview of wildlife crime. Due to the nature of the data it should be viewed as an indication of levels of crimes being committed, rather than a comprehensive record.

Link gratefully acknowledges all of the organisations who have helped to collect this data, and the National Wildlife Crime Unit and local police wildlife crime teams working at the wildlife crime frontline.

Key findings & recommendations

The charts below shows data collected by Link and members between 2017 and 2023 capturing reports of wildlife crime incidents, broken down by types of wildlife crime, and convictions obtained from those reports.

NUMBER OF **INCIDENTS** REPORTED							
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Badgers (England & Wales)	633	551	452	713	654	600	636
Bats (England, Wales & Scotland)	173	108	136	94	133	161	184
Fisheries (England & Wales from 2020)	4,169	2,681	3,095	4,163	3,337	2,972	2,474
Hunting (England & Wales)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Illegal trade (UK wide)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Marine mammals (certain countries only)	169	326	193	366	450	508	1,290
Birds of prey (England & Wales)	208	260	224	312	314	245	151
Total	**5,352**	**3,926**	**4,100**	**5,648**	**4,888**	**4,486**	**4,735**
Total (excl. fisheries)	*1,183*	*1,245*	*1,005*	*1,485*	*1,551*	*1,514*	*2,261*

NUMBER OF **CONVICTIONS** REPORTED							
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Badgers (England & Wales)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Bats (England, Wales & Scotland)	4	2	2	1	5	3	2
Fisheries (England & Wales from 2020)	2,648	1,626	2,037	679	846	497	432
Hunting (England & Wales)	22	21	17	17	42	21	15
Illegal trade (UK wide)	4	5	8	4	4	3	3
Marine mammals (certain countries only)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Birds of prey (England & Wales)	–	1	–	1	3	2	4
Total	**2,678**	**1,655**	**2,064**	**702**	**900**	**526**	**456**
Total (excl. fisheries)	*30*	*29*	*27*	*23*	*54*	*29*	*24*

Notes on 2023 data

- Reports of marine mammal incidents from 2017 to 2022 covered Cornwall only. The 2023 figures includes reported incidents from Cornwall, Devon, Yorkshire and Kent.
- Reports of hunting incidents are not presented here as they are collected per hunting season (August to March) rather than by calendar year. The text of the report cites reports of hunting incidents for the 2023/24 hunting season.
- Numbers for badger, bat and raptor incidents reported between 2017 and 2022 will differ slightly from previous reports, due to new data. Number in this table should be used over previous reports.
- Data on UK crimes relating to wild plants and fungi is not available

Seven years of Link wildlife crime data presents a concerning picture.

10,244 reports of wildlife crime (excluding fisheries)[3] between 2017 and 2023 led to 216 prosecutions – a rate of 2.1%. To put this in context, across all crimes in England and Wales in 2023, 6,262,947 recorded crimes led to 425,445 convictions – a rate of 6.8%.[4]

This suggests that the completion rate between report of a wildlife crime and successful prosecution is less than a third of the average for all crimes. To put it simply, if you commit a wildlife crime, you are more likely to get away with it than you are with many other crimes. The data also suggests that the number of reported wildlife crimes rose in the years following 2020, with the number of convictions failing to keep pace with this rise and actually falling between 2021 and 2023.

The disappointingly low conviction figures for wildlife crimes are perhaps not surprising. There is still a perception that wildlife crimes matter less than other crimes, and this feeds through into limited resourcing across policing and the courts. To increase the number of wildlife crime cases that result in conviction, it is necessary to first address the perception the wildlife crimes are a second tier matter for the criminal justice system.

Recognising the importance of wildlife crime

Even if viewed purely through a human lens, wildlife crimes are not victim-free offences. Those who harm wildlife steal something precious from everyone.

Species and habitats on our island are in poor condition. Across Britain 16% of species are threatened with extinction,[5] and only 7% of native woodlands are in good condition.[6] The illegal killing of species, and deliberate damage to habitats, add to these pressures; the scale of wildlife crime is such that it is having a discernible impact on the populations of certain species, especially birds of prey.[7] These crime threatened wild populations include indicator species for the

Environment Act target to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030.[8] This legally binding target to recover nature will simply not be met if key indicator species,[9] used to calculate the success or failure of the target efforts, continue to decline due to human violence.[10]

In July 2024 Steve Reed MP, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, delivered a written statement to the House of Commons, setting out the new UK Government's commitment to achieving the Environment Act species abundance target, and to 'saving nature' more broadly. The statement observed: '*Parents now worry their children and grandchildren may never experience the beauty of the natural world as previous generations have*.'[11] A missed 2030 target and the ongoing decline of nature will mean such diminished engagement with the natural world. In contributing to nature' decline, wildlife criminals pilfer from a treasury of beauty held in common, they steal a source of joy and wonder meant to be enjoyed by all, as well as undercutting the foundations of our economy, reliant as it is upon the natural world.[12]

Just as wildlife offences constitute a crime against society as a whole, the maintenance of wildlife legislation touches upon society-wide confidence in policing. Laws like the Hunting Act 2004 were passed by Parliament in response to strong public pressure for more to be done to protect wild animals from unnecessary suffering inflicted by people.[13] It is important, both for the rule of law and for confidence in the democratic process, for these laws to be upheld to the best ability of the courts and police. In the words of a 2020 letter from the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) to the Home Office, the enforcement of wildlife legislation is '*critical for the reputation of policing*'.[14]

Better enforcement of wildlife legislation is also an effective intervention for community safety, as violence directed towards wildlife is also frequently a warning sign of escalating violence against people.

Major survey work commissioned in 2023 for the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) found that all surveyed police officers working in wildlife crime teams reported that wildlife offending is linked to other forms of serious crime. 50% of respondents highlighted wildlife crime links to firearms and violent crimes.[15] It is notable that the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour Based Violence Risk Identification, Assessment and Management Model (DASH) used across police forces includes questions around mistreatment of animals, as an indicator of violence towards women.[16] By working to convict wildlife criminals,

police forces and the CPS can sanction and deter reoffending from people likely to go onto to commit violent crime.

By getting a better grip on wildlife crime, law enforcement bodies can contribute to the achievement of vital nature recovery targets, reduce animal suffering, uphold the reputation of policing and help protect people from violent offenders.

Reforming the enforcement of wildlife crime

At every stage of the criminal justice journey, the enforcement of wildlife legislation is underpowered. An increased understanding of the importance of wildlife crime, as set out above, and the following package of policy recommendations would address these gaps and secure more wildlife crime convictions.

Policing

The National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) is a specialist police team which provides expert advice and support to help police forces across the UK to deter, detect and investigate wildlife crimes. At a force level, wildlife crime teams lead on wildlife work. The NWCU has an impressive track record of spearheading successful wildlife crime reduction efforts, but is hampered by a funding settlement that is only ever issued on a temporary basis by the Home Office and Defra. Force-level wildlife crime teams face similar resourcing challenges, with many consisting of just one or two officers, required to pursue a range of other

duties in addition to their wildlife crime specialism. In recent years, as policing budgets have tightened across England and Wales, many wildlife crime teams have been merged into wider rural and wildlife teams. In summer 2024 a real blow was inflicted to wildlife crime policing, through the Metropolitan Police's decision to halve the size of their world leading Wildlife Crime Unit, with all detectives reallocated to other work.[17]

Recommendations

- The Home Office and Defra should agree a rolling multi-year programme of funding for NWCU, to put the unit on a secure footing and allow it to expand.
- The Home Office should produce new guidance for police forces, encouraging them to invest in wildlife crime teams and to provide regular specialist training opportunities for wildlife crime officers. Guidance should also encourage training for call handlers, who can be unsure how to respond to reports of wildlife crimes.

Recording

The vast majority of wildlife crimes are not notifiable, meaning that no central, nationwide records are maintained. Due to the lack of notifiable status, wildlife crimes are typically only haphazardly entered into the incident recording systems of individual police forces, systems which may not match up with each other and do not feed through into regional or national crime databases. As a result, no one knows precisely how much wildlife crime actually takes place across the UK, requiring Link's voluntary efforts to fill the knowledge gap through annual wildlife crime report like this one. This lack of systematic knowledge inhibits strategic planning to better deter, detect and detain wildlife criminals and protect wildlife and people from their activities. Since 2020, bodies ranging from the National Wildlife Crime Unit, the National Police Chiefs Council and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime have all asked the Home Office to make key wildlife crimes notifiable, to allow for improved information to underpin better policing.[18]

Recommendation

- The Home Office should, by statutory instrument, add eleven key wildlife crimes to the notifiable register, to allow better understanding of offending and inform efforts to tackle it.[19]

Prosecution

The Crown Prosecution Service has struggled over recent years with high workloads and limited resourcing to meet these pressures. Wildlife crime cases have suffered from this, with Link members reporting a number of a recent cases where prosecution errors have resulted in wildlife crime prosecutions collapsing

"Custodial sentences are extremely rare and fines often fall far below the potential financial gains from the offending activity."

in their final stages.[20] The CPS Wildlife, Heritage and Rural Crime Community Involvement Panel, which had met regularly to bring all those working at the frontline of wildlife law enforcement together, has not convened since May 2023.

Recommendation

- The CPS should invest in new wildlife crime training for prosecutors, and reconvene the Wildlife, Heritage and Rural Crime Community Involvement Panel for regular meetings, to ensure CPS staff are fully supported to work through the specific challenges wildlife crime cases can present.

Sentencing

No sentencing guidelines are currently in place for wildlife crimes. This absence means that judges tend to err towards caution and opt for the lower end of the sanction scale when wildlife crimes convictions have been obtained. Custodial sentences are extremely rare as a result, and fines often fall far below the potential financial gains from the offending activity.[21] The need to increase the deterrent value of wildlife crime sentencing has led the Scottish Sentencing Council to actively develop wildlife crime sentencing guidelines.[22] There are early plans to explore sentencing guidelines for hare coursing in England and Wales, however the Sentencing Council currently only intend to produce guidelines for this specific offence.

Recommendation

- The Sentencing Council should consult on producing sentencing guidelines in England and Wales for a range of key wildlife crimes, including breaches of the Wildlife & Countryside Act, Hunting Act, Protection of Badgers Act, Habitats Regulations and control of trade in endangered species (COTES) regulations.

These recommendations echo those made in IFAW's August 2024 'System set to fail – prosecuting wildlife crime' report, informed by analysis from criminologists at Nottingham Trent University (now at Anglia Ruskin University) and the University of Gloucestershire.[23] There is strong consensus across nature organisations, policy experts and police voices that reforms to resourcing, recording, CPS practice and sentencing are all required to better tackle wildlife crime.

The new UK Government has the opportunity to work with the Welsh Government to implement this package of reforms, to better protect nature and people across England and Wales. These reforms are urgently needed. With the clock ticking to the 2030 species abundance target, and the consequences of recent under-investment and insufficient strategic focus on wildlife crimes across law enforcement still making themselves felt, Ministers must act now if wildlife crime pressures on species are to be turned around in time to help deliver the Government's critical nature recovery commitments.

Wildlife offences are no minor crime – they have a major impact on society. It is high time for policing and prosecutorial responses to reflect this.

What does wildlife crime look like?

This section of the report takes a deeper dive into wildlife crime, to illuminate this type of offending and how it impacts on wild species, habitats and people. It reports the latest numbers indicating the scale of offending against particular species, profiles prevalent forms of wildlife crime and highlights recent cases which demonstrate both strengths and weaknesses in current enforcement of wildlife legislation.

Species spotlight

Crimes against **Badgers**

Material prepared by the Badger Trust

Despite their mostly secretive nature, badgers have undergone extensive persecution throughout history. Crimes against badgers continue, from sadistic badger baiting from deliberate damage to badger habitats. Crimes against badgers have been a UK Wildlife Crime Priority since 2009, due to the scale of persecution.

The National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) carries out analytical work based on the incident data submitted to it by the Badger Trust, RSPCA and League Against Cruel Sports. 2023 saw an increase of 6% in reports of badger crime.

BADGER CRIME INCIDENT DATA

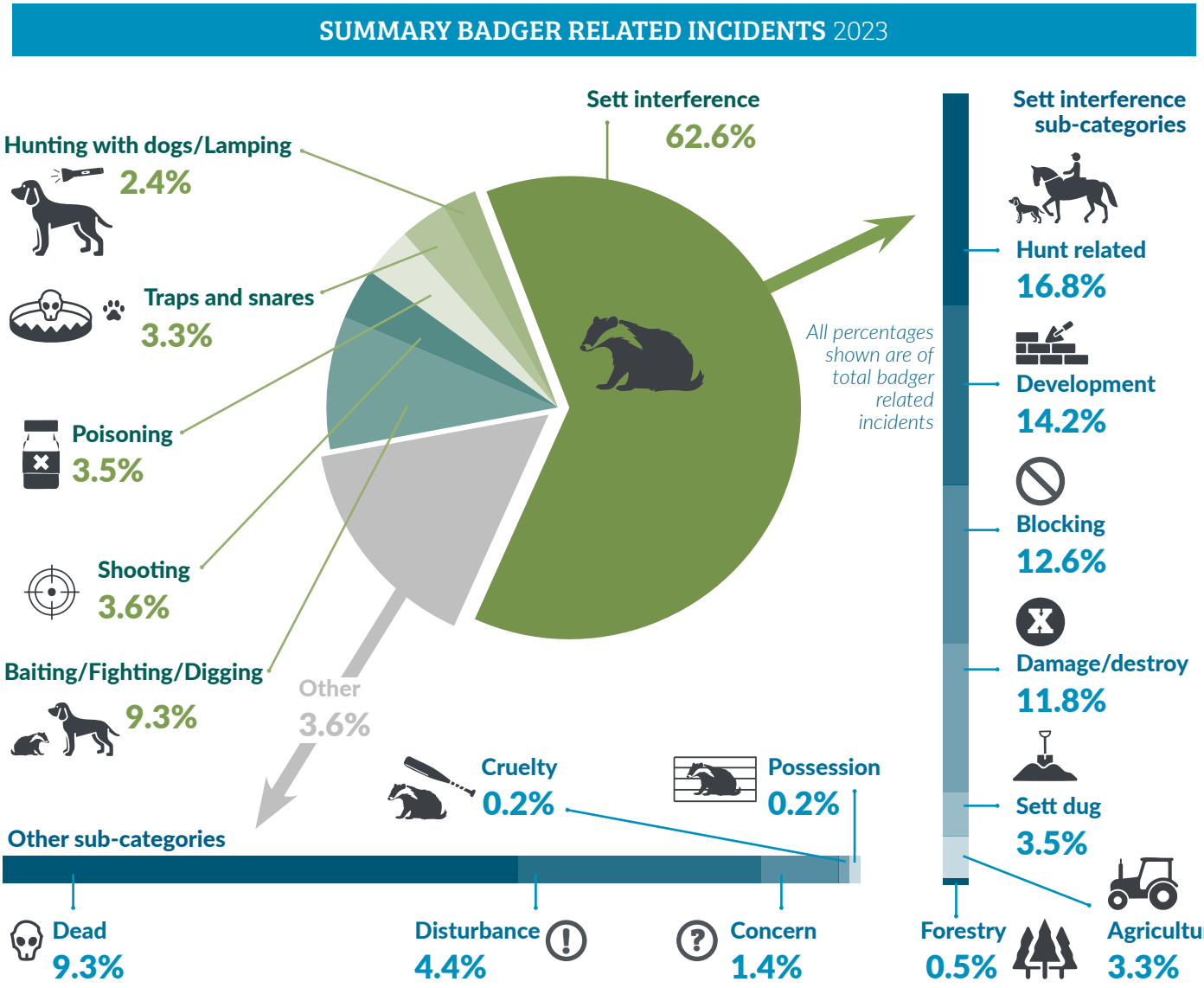
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	% change 2022-2023	Total 2019-2023	% of total incidents
England	427	680	619	569	602	+5.8%	2,897	94.8%
Wales	25	33	35	31	34	9.70%	158	5.2%
Total	**452**	**713**	**654**	**600**	**636**	**6.00%**	**3,055**	**100.0%**

Sett interference is the most common type of badger crime. The below table shows the main causes of reports of sett interference, as analysed by NWCU:

SETT INTERFERENCE CAUSES								
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total 2019-2023	% of sett interference	% of total incidents
Hunt related	87	106	53	115	107	468	25.4%	15.3%
Blocking	80	85	96	60	80	401	21.7%	13.1%
Development	33	112	70	67	90	372	20.2%	12.2%
Damage/destroy	14	59	77	60	75	285	15.4%	9.3%
Sett dug	46	38	46	25	22	177	9.6%	5.8%
Agricultural	16	36	24	17	21	114	6.2%	3.7%
Forestry	12	5	4	5	3	29	1.6%	0.9%
Total	**288**	**441**	**370**	**349**	**398**	**1,846**	**100.0%**	**60.3%**

In addition to the wider wildlife crime enforcement changes, badgers would particularly benefit from reviews of the role that role that hunt related activity has on sett interference, and in developer compliance with regulations designed to protect badger setts from development harms. Development projects are complex and involve many different agencies and companies. Information about badgers can be either missed, ignored or purposefully disregarded, leading to habitat disturbance and sett damage or destruction.

The below pie chart shows all of the different types of badger crime reported in 2023, including sett interference:



NB Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding. 2023 data only and differs from the rolling five year data

Recent case of note Dogs set on badgers

Videos found through a Naturewatch Foundation investigation showed two dogs attacking foxes and badgers and were passed to Cheshire Police and RSPCA. An RSPCA special operations unit investigated and worked with Cheshire Police as the owner was traced and charges pursued. In January 2024 the owner of the two dogs in the videos was found guilty of offences under Sections 4 (1) and 8(1) of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and was sentenced to 16 weeks custody, suspended for 18 months, and disqualified from keeping all animals for three years.[24]

Species spotlight

Crimes against **Bats**

Material prepared by the Bat Conservation Trust

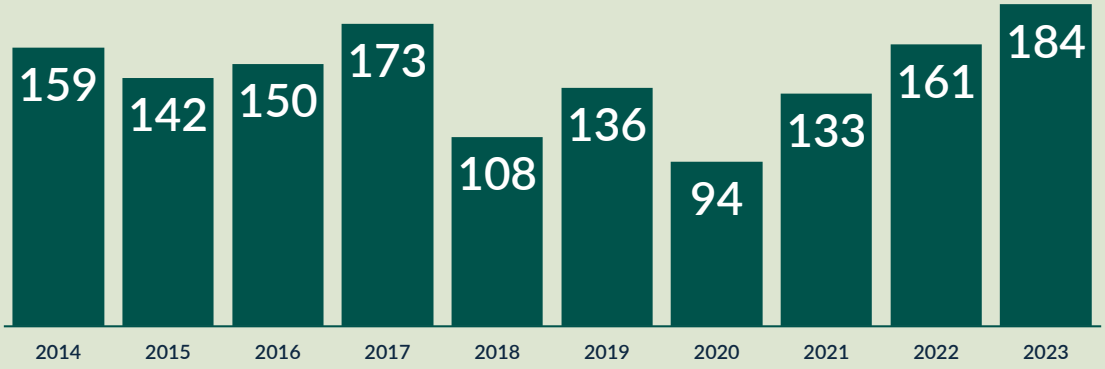
Out of the 11 mammal species at risk of extinction in the UK, four are bats.[25] Bats are highly dependent on their roosts, the spaces in buildings, trees and caves where they shelter, sleep and raise young. Damage to bats and their roosts is prohibited by the Wildlife & Countryside Act and the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, however these protections are sometimes deliberately flouted during building works to save money and time for developers. Such attempts to cut corners to maximise profit risks the future of threatened bat species.

The scale of the criminal damage threat to bats is such that combatting bat crimes is a NWCU policing priority. The below data combines reports of bat crimes collected by the Bat Conservation Trust, with those directly recorded by police forces and collected by the NWCU. Since 2022, both data sets are then examined by the Bat Crime Priority Delivery Group (PDG), involving both BCT and NWCU. The green bars show both BCT and police incident data and are therefore the most accurate record of bat incidents (data from before 2021 and before shows BCT data only).

In 2023, there were 93 incidents recorded by BCT. PDG comparative analysis showed there were a further 91 incidents a total of 184 bat incidents, in fact this figure is likely to be higher as not all police services were able to supply their figures. These figures are derived from England, Wales and Scotland.

Across the 184 incidents reported in 2023, Common Pipistrelle, Brown Long eared and Lesser Horseshoe were the most commonly affected bat species.

NUMBER OF BAT INCIDENTS BY YEAR



2023 INCIDENT DATA FULL BREAKDOWN WITH CASE OUTCOMES	
Bat Conservation Trust incidents recorded	93
Comparative analysis, additional Police incidents	91
Combined total for bat incidents	**184**
Number of Community Resolution, 'Out of Court' disposals	11
Number of defendant cautions	–
Number of defendants convicted	*2*
Pending Court cases	2

Recent case of note Destruction of bat roost

In January 2024, a development company was fined for destroying a day roost for Common Pipistrelles in Newport, Wales. The building, a former social club, was a confirmed roost but the developer went ahead with demolition before any mitigation work. The judge stated that the negligent failure of the limited company resulted in the loss of a day roost, and she ordered that the company pay £2,605, after having credit for a guilty plea.[26]

Cases like this also illustrate the problem with current levels of fines imposed upon wildlife criminals. It can be cheaper to commit the offence and accept a low penalty rather than follow legal process such as employing an ecologist, getting licences and putting in mitigation to protect the species at the development site. Sentencing guidelines for wildlife crimes are required to address this; Link, Bat Conservation Trust and the Bat Crime Priority Delivery Group have asked the Sentencing Council to urgently consider the case for such guidelines.

Such habitat destruction, in the name of cutting development corners, also effects other species, as well as the badgers and bats highlighted above. Protected amphibians,[27] plants and fungi, as well as whole protected sites,[28] can be damaged by alterations to the natural landscapes designed to maximise profits.

Species spotlight

Crimes against **Birds of Prey**

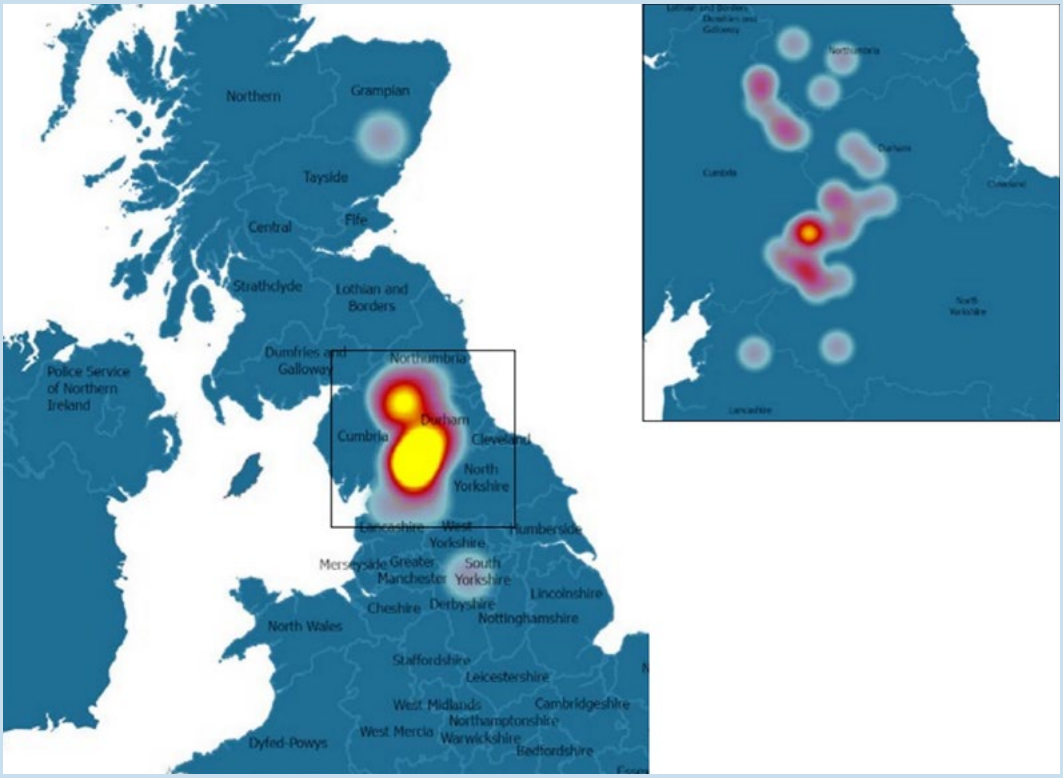
Material prepared by the RSPB

Many bird of prey species in the UK are still recovering from historical declines in England and Wales, largely as a result of persecution in the 18th and 19th Century.[29] Despite decades of legal protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and previously under the Protection of Birds Act 1954, these species are still the victims of illegal persecution in England and Wales.

The RSPB Investigations team regularly receive reports of shooting, trapping and poisoning incidents involving some of the UK's most rare and magnificent species, including Hen Harriers, Goshawks and Red Kites. 54% of confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents from 2014-2023 were linked with land managed for gamebird shooting. In these areas some individuals will deliberately kill birds of prey to remove any potential threat of predation and try to maximise the number of grouse, pheasant or partridge available to be shot for sport. Evidence shows that the majority of individuals found guilty of committing these crimes were associated with the gamebird shooting industry. Between 2009 and 2023, 68% of all individuals convicted of bird of prey persecution-related offences were gamekeepers.[30]

Decades of RSPB Investigations work, and partnership work with the police and NWCU have shown that the Hen Harrier (a Red Listed species) is the most vulnerable and most heavily persecuted raptor species for its population size in

A FOCUSED HEATMAP SHOWING ALL CONFIRMED HEN HARRIER PERSECUTION INCIDENTS AND SUSPICIOUS DISAPPEARANCES ACROSS THE UK, INVOLVING BOTH SATELLITE-TAGGED AND UNTAGGED BIRDS (39 INDIVIDUALS) BETWEEN JANUARY 2022 AND OCTOBER 2023



the UK, with the majority of these incidents occurring in northern England, on or near grouse moors. Despite being fully protected, to maximise the number of grouse available to be shot for sport some individuals deliberately kill Hen Harriers to remove the threat of predation on grouse. A shoot with high densities of grouse to shoot will benefit economically as shooting clients are willing to pay substantial sums of money for this activity.

As many of these wildlife crimes occur on areas of land that are remote or privately owned, it is likely that the number of confirmed incidents recorded represent a fraction of the actual number which take place in the UK. In recent years, information retrieved from satellite-tagged Hen Harriers has also uncovered many incidents of illegal persecution which would otherwise have gone unseen.

ENGLAND AND WALES BIRDS OF PREY CRIME INCIDENT AND CONVICTION DATA, COVERING ALL BIRDS OF PREY SPECIES

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Incidents reported	208	260	224	312	314	245	151
Confirmed incidents	62	78	55	110	92	60	50
Convictions	0	1	0	1	3	2	4

See the RSPB's Bird Crime Report 2023 for more information. www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/birdcrime

Recent case of note Sat-tagged Hen Harrier shot dead

Situated in the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, RSPB Geltsdale Nature Reserve is an ideal location for breeding Hen Harriers, yet due to persecution the number of successful breeding attempts remains low. Over the years many untagged breeding male Hen Harriers at Geltsdale have failed to return from hunting flights, away from the protection of the nature reserve.

In April 2023, a one-year-old male satellite-tagged Hen Harrier, known as Dagda, paired with a female on RSPB Geltsdale Nature Reserve. Early in the breeding season, nest monitors and wardens grew concerned as Dagda was seen showing significant damage to his tail feathers, which was consistent with shot damage. Dagda spent the next few weeks provisioning his female who was incubating their clutch of eggs. On 8 May the satellite-tag data showed that Dagda had travelled over the reserve boundary onto Knarsdale Moor and that at some point between 9 and 10 May he was no longer moving. Dagda's body was recovered from Knarsdale Moor by Northumbria Police and the NWCU on 12 May. An expert post-mortem confirmed that Dagda died after being shot with a shotgun. The post-mortem also confirmed that the feather damage to his tail was caused by shot and revealed that Dagda had historic shotgun injuries which he had recovered from. This evidence proved that this one-year-old bird had been shot at on at least two separate occasions, the final proving fatal. No one has been charged with this offence. In November 2023, this case featured on Channel 4 News in an exclusive report about raptor persecution on UK gamebird shooting estates. Dagda is yet another Hen Harrier to add to the growing list of persecuted birds of prey found dead on or near grouse moors in northern England.

Recent case of note Shot Goshawk – case discontinued by the Crown Prosecution Service

In early 2023 the RSPB Investigations team assisted with an incident in Wales involving the suspected shooting of a Goshawk on land associated with gamebird management. Although the forensic evidence gathered by the police provided overwhelmingly strong evidence, and a person was charged in connection to this alleged crime, the case was discontinued by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) at its first hearing in November 2023 due to procedural issues at court. This outcome is extremely disappointing and concerning as the failure to effectively seek justice for this wildlife offence sends out the wrong message to those who commit these crimes.

Species spotlight

Crimes against **Marine Mammals**

Material prepared by the Seal Research Trust and Whale & Dolphin Conservation

Marine mammals are highly sensitive to human disturbance. What can seem to be a novel interaction to people out on a boat trip or beach walk, can profoundly unsettle the travel, feeding, breeding and young-rearing behaviour of marine mammals. This is why it is an offence to hurt or recklessly disrupt whales and dolphins under the Wildlife & Countryside Act. The Act does not cover seal species,[31] but seal disturbance in Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is prohibited where seals are a monitored feature of the SSSI.

Monitoring by the Seal Research Trust in Cornwall and Devon recorded 336 seal disturbance incidents at all levels impacting 2250 seals in 2023 (45% of these incidents were in SSSIs where seals are a monitored feature). Monitoring by the Yorkshire Seal Group in Yorkshire recorded 926 seal disturbance incidents in 2023. Monitoring by Kent Wildlife Trust at the Pegwell and Sandwich Bay Nature Reserve and SSSI recorded 28 seal disturbance incidents in 2023, 26 of which were caused by motorized power craft. Early 2024 suggests that incidents are likely to be even higher this year. These numbers are likely to be the tip of the iceberg, as seal monitoring citizen scientists can only cover a small proportion of sites where disturbance is expected, and data collection around the UK is patchy.

Incidents reported by volunteers in 2023 included disturbance in Cornish SSSI's through drone use and by military aviation (the Ministry of Defence has now

listed all sensitive seal sites in Cornwall as flight avoidance areas, which is hugely welcome). In Kent, one incident saw a group of 10 watercraft deliberately race each other next to 30 resting seals in an SSSI, including seal pups, leading to most of the seals panicking and flushing into the sea. Such panicked movement results in marine mammals losing vital energy, affecting the weight and wellbeing of young mammals and nursing mothers at a critical time that may have impacts on their survival rates, adding to mortality. Data from the Seal Research Trust suggests that the number of seals who died in Cornwall in 2023 was more than the number born there that year, with disturbance potentially playing a role in creating these population pressures.

Recent case of note Seal disturbance

In December 2023 in a Cornish SSSI, 250 seals were seriously disturbed into the sea by 2 men accessing the seal's haul out beaches.[32] This is the worst seal disturbance event on record in the South West. As a SSSI where seals are a monitored feature this constitutes an offence, Natural England issued an enforcement letter in response.

Wildlife crime type spotlight

Breaches of the Hunting Act 2004

Material prepared by the League Against Cruel Sports

The Hunting Act was introduced to end the hunting of wild mammals with dogs, a practice which causes unnecessary animal suffering. Widespread contravention of the ban is suspected, including though the practice known as trail hunting, where dogs follow a trail of wild mammal urine through habitats where wild mammals are known to be present. Subsequent fatal encounters between packs of dogs and wild mammals are then described as accidental.

Every year sees a high volume of reports of hunts conducting trail hunting in a way that is functionally identical to the banned activity of hunting with dogs. The League Against Cruel Sports collated 622 eyewitness reports of hunts being involved in suspected illegal fox hunting in England and Wales during the latest hunting Season (from August 2023 to the end of March 2024, including the cub hunting season). This included 482 cases of hunts being seen chasing a fox.

These reports, and wider investigatory work by police forces, saw 26 prosecutions for breaches of the Hunting Act in 2023. 15 of these prosecutions resulted in convictions.[33] 15 represents a decrease on convictions obtained in previous years (21 in 2022 and 42 in 2021). The maximum penalty for conviction under the Hunting Act is a fine; in 2023 the average fine for individuals convicted of breaching the Act came to just £356.[34]

The new Government has committed to ban trail hunting. This welcome commitment must be delivered swiftly, with the closing of all loopholes exploited by hunts, and be accompanied by further action to better enforce the Hunting Act and to provide sanctions capable of genuinely deterring offenders.[35]

Wildlife crime type spotlight

Fisheries crime

Material prepared by the Institute of Fisheries Management

In freshwaters and around our coast, a range of fisheries regulations apply, designed to manage fish populations and prevent overfishing. These rules are frequently broken by those looking to plunder fish stocks for their own gain. These fisheries crimes take many forms, from rod fishing in rivers and lakes without a licence, to netting salmon from estuaries to the trafficking of baby eels (elvers) to Asia.

Regulatory agencies have a vital role to play in combatting illicit fishing, including the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales for freshwaters and the ten regional Inshore Fisheries & Conservation Authorities (IFCAs) for estuaries and the coast up to 6 miles out. Over recent years, there has been a steady reduction in funding for these agencies to carry out fisheries enforcement. Since 2010, there has been:

- A 90% reduction (£10.6m) in the grant in aid settlement provided to Environment Agency to protect migratory salmonid and eel stocks.
- A steady decline in rod licence income (used to fund fisheries enforcement) during the same period (33% when adjusted for inflation)
- The introduction of new legislation with incumbent duties on agencies, with no additional resources to deliver them (e.g. Eels Regulations)[36]

These have affected the agencies' ability to tackle fisheries crime and is reflected in the below statistics.

Number of reports & convictions of fisheries crime (2020-2023 England and Wales, before that England):

NUMBER OF **CONVICTIONS** REPORTED								
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Rod & line	3,415	3,616	2,245	2,680	3,673	2,727	2,376	2,236
Salmon, sea trout & trout poaching	24	72	21	26	10	75	85	161
Eel & elver fishing or export	2	4	–	4	1	2	4	1
Theft act (Stealing of fish from private waters)	10	2	17	7	2	25	8	13
Sea fisheries - nets, boats & shellfish	364	475	398	378	477	508	499	26
Total	**3,815**	**4,169**	**2,681**	**3,095**	**4,163**	**3,337**	**2,972**	**2,437**

NUMBER OF **DEFENDENTS** REPORTED								
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Rod & line	2,184	2,569	1,521	1,934	604	805	424	381
Salmon, sea trout & trout poaching	7	13	6	10	–	9	34	45
Eel & elver fishing or export	1	2	–	2	–	1	–	–
Theft act (Stealing of fish from private waters)	5	2	16	5	–	1	3	4
Sea fisheries - nets, boats & shellfish	65	62	83	86	45	30	36	2
Total	**2,262**	**2,648**	**1,626**	**2,037**	**649**	**846**	**497**	**432**

Wildlife crime type spotlight

Illegal wildlife trade

Material prepared by WWF UK and TRAFFIC

Wildlife products, including wild plants, objects from wildlife parts and live animals, are frequently traded across national borders to consumers wanting pets, ornaments, medicines and foods. When these products come from threatened species, the pressure put on populations by the trade can cause species numbers to plummet, even to the point of extinction. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) protects threatened species across the world from this trade. The UK implements CITES through the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (COTES) regulations.

The Border Force keeps records of attempts to traffic wildlife products into the UK in breach of (COTES) regulations. Their records for 2023 show the following seizures of trafficked items across the UK:

SEIZURE OF TRAFFICKED ITEMS ACROSS THE UK, 2023

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Caviar & caviar extract	4	2	2	–
Live coral & derivatives	3	8	1	4
Ivory & ivory items	5	33	14	32
Live animals and birds	2	5	4	6
Live plants	20	23	9	30
Parts or derivatives of animals and birds	31	153	30	82
Parts or derivatives of plants	8	7	5	10
Timber or wood products	7	26	26	10
TCM (parts or derivatives of endangered species)	1	13	1	19
Total seizures	**81**	**270**	**92**	**193**

The 2023 total of 637 seizures represents a slight decline 2022's total of 761 seizures.

The vast majority of seizures do not lead to prosecutions. NWCU is aware of 3 convictions for CITES offences in 2023, compared to 3 in 2022. This represents a long term decline in convictions, in 2012 convictions stood at 15, in 2013 they stood at 17.[37]

Recent case of note — Attempt to export ivory from endangered Asian elephants

In 2019 and 2020 Border Force intercepted a number of ivory items, intended for export out of the UK.

A subsequent investigation led by NWCU and Metropolitan Police Wildlife Crime Unit (the latter since greatly reduced in size) found that no export permits had been applied for and that ivory came from endangered Asian elephants. The London resident who attempted the exports was traced and pled guilty. He was sentenced in April 2023 to unpaid work, £2,072 costs to HMRC for unpaid re-export permits and a further £239 costs and surcharge[38]

Wildlife crime type spotlight

Attacks on animals with weapons

Material prepared by the RSPCA

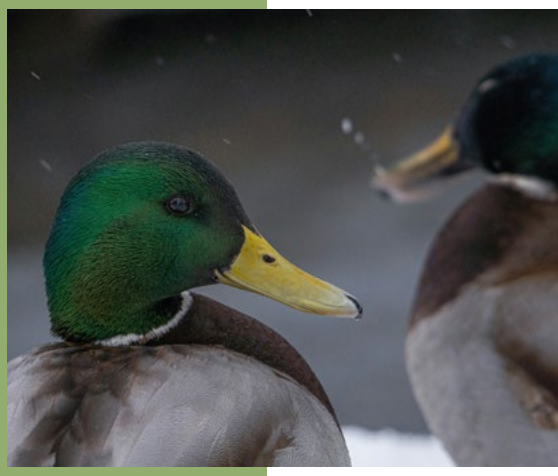
There are concerns from police and the RSPCA that incidents of weaponised attacks on animals, mainly wild animals, are increasing. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 provides some protection for animals from such random human violence, all wild birds are also protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act from intentional efforts to kill, injure or take them (except under licence).

In 2023, 136 incidents involving weaponised cruelty to animals were recorded by the RSPCA, involving 370 animals. This includes animals attacked by airguns, crossbows, and catapults and slingshots. These incidents do not include animals who succumbed to their injuries before the RSPCA reached them, so the actual total of attacked animals is likely to be higher.

Wild birds were the most common victims (214 out of 370 animals). Ducks (64), pigeons (52), geese (50), and gulls (16) were the most affected species. A small number of wild mammals (20) were also affected, including grey squirrels (6), deer species (7), and foxes (5). The below accounts illustrate some of the stories behind these numbers.

Case study Catapults

In December 2023, in Lingfield, Surrey, a male and female mallard were found bleeding heavily by a member of the public, who called the RSPCA. People had previously been seen in the area catapulting ducks. An officer attended, and took the ducks to a nearby Wildlife Aid, where a vet assessed them. The male duck was bleeding from his neck and the female had injuries to her eyes and skull. Due to the severity of their injuries, the ducks were put to sleep to end their suffering.



Case study Airgun

In February 2023, a man was witnessed by a member of the public apparently shooting a sparrowhawk with an air rifle, in Yorkshire. He was filmed carrying the sparrowhawk, and claimed that it had killed his pigeon, and that he would release it once the rest of his pigeons had returned. Witness evidence, as well as veterinary opinion, suggested he had killed the sparrowhawk. The man denied the charges, but was found guilty at trial under section 1, subsection 1(a) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. He was sentenced in January 2024, and fined £480 and told to pay a victim surcharge of £192 and costs of £1,500.

Case study Airgun

In March 2024, a hedgehog was found out during the day, in Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire, and taken to a local hedgehog hospital. The hedgehog had an injury on its shoulder, which when x-rayed by a vet was found to be dislocated by an airgun pellet. The vet euthanised the hedgehog on welfare grounds.

The RSPCA also deals with a wide range of other breaches of wildlife legislation. The below case is an example of where close working with the police led to successful conviction

Wildlife crime
Conclusion

The acts of cruelty and exploitation to wildlife set out above spring from a variety of motivations, from a misplaced desire to get close to marine mammals, to corners cut in hope of profit, all the way through to deliberate sadism. Whatever the motivation, they all contribute to the same overall effect – increased damaging pressures on wild species already struggling to survive as nature declines.

The data presented in this report, spanning the past seven years, suggests that these impacts have grown worse in this decade. Reports of many types of wildlife crime are increasing, while across the board convictions are declining. This may be a consequence of the significant capacity and resourcing pressures now affecting the whole justice system, with the perceived 'second tier' nature of wildlife crime meaning that such cases are disproportionally falling victim to triaging by police forces and the CPS.

As the new UK Government seeks to deal with the range of deep-seated issues in the justice system, it will require only relatively limited budgetary and political commitment to resolve the wildlife crime problem. Making the NWCU budget permanent, creating new guidance for police forces and sentencing and new additions to the notifiable list – together these would deliver a swift, cost-effective transformation of a historically neglected part of law enforcement. This would benefit both public safety and the reputation of policing, and crucially, increase the contribution that criminal justice makes to the UK and Welsh Government's missions to save nature.

Wildlife and Countryside Link is the largest environmental coalition in England, bringing together 86 organisations to campaign for the protection of the natural world.

Wales Environment Link (WEL) is a network of environmental, countryside and heritage non-governmental organisations working across Wales since 1990.

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References

1 The primary legislation for wildlife protection is the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, which protects key species from injuring, killing and disturbance. Further protections are provided for specific species and circumstances by other legislation, including the Hunting Act 2004 and the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (COTES) regulations.

2 See previous reports here: *https://www.wcl.org.uk/wildlife-crime.asp*

3 Given the differing structures around fisheries crime compared to other wildlife crimes, Link reports usually present two sets of wildlife crime statistics, one including fisheries, one not. We tend to use the latter for headline figures.

4 *https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/criminal-justice-system-statistics-quarterly-march-2024*

5 *https://stateofnature.org.uk/*

6 *https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/51705/state-of-the-uks-woods-and-trees-2021-thewoodlandtrust.pdf*

7 See Wotton, S.et al (2018), Status of the Hen Harrier in the UK and Isle of Man: *https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00063657.2018.1476462* & Smart, J. et al. (2010), Red Kites: *https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232361176_Illegal_killing_slows_population_recovery_of_a_reintroduced_raptor_of_high_conservation_concern_-_the_Red_Kite_Milvus_milvus*

8 The target currently only applies in England, but an equivalent target is due to be put in place in Wales soon, building on existing nature recovery commitments from the Welsh Government: *https://www.gov.wales/written-statement-environmental-principles-governance-and-biodiversity-targets-greener-wales*

9 See list of indicator species here: *https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2023/91/made*

10 See the Nature 2030 campaign for more on the species abundance target and how it could be reached: *https://www.wcl.org.uk/nature2030.asp*

11 *https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-07-30/debates/24073046000012/SavingNature#contribution-FAF50B3D-800E-4A23-B447-A7568A855E25*

12 *https://www.weforum.org/press/2020/01/half-of-world-s-gdp-moderately-or-highly-dependent-on-nature-says-new-report/*

13 *https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/manifesto-pledge-is-fulfilled-after-21-years-8004410.html*

14 *https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/assets/uploads/Notifiable_status_for_wildlife_crimes_Evidence_dossier_17.10.22.pdf* p12

15 *https://www.ifaw.org/uk/journal/make-wildlife-crimes-matter*

16 *https://proceduresonline.com/trixcms/media/6627/dash-risk-assessment.pdf*

17 *https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cv2g37zn9d5o*

18 *https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/assets/uploads/Notifiable_status_for_wildlife_crimes_Evidence_dossier_17.10.22.pdf*

19 See Link dossier for the eleven offences recommended for addition to the notifiable list: *https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/assets/uploads/Notifiable_status_for_wildlife_crimes_Evidence_dossier_17.10.22.pdf*

20 See Link letter to CPS: *https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/assets/uploads/COPY_Dyer_Parkinson_19.03.24.pdf*

21 See *https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Link_Wildlife_Crime_Sentencing_Briefing_02062017.pdf* & *https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/assets/uploads/Dyer_Baroness_Carr_17.05.24.pdf*

22 *https://www.scottishsentencingcouncil.org.uk/sentencing-guidelines/guidelines-in-development*

23 *https://www.ifaw.org/uk/resources/system-set-to-fail-prosecuting-wildlife-crime*

24 For more details on this case, see *https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/man-banned-keeping-animals-after-28458781*

25 *https://www.bats.org.uk/news/2020/07/bat-species-at-risk-of-extinction*

26 *https://www.bats.org.uk/news/2024/01/newport-company-fined-bat-roost*

27 *https://www.nwcu.police.uk/news/wildlife-crime-press-coverage/vale-of-glamorgan-man-prosecuted-for-destroying-valuable-wildlife-habitat/*

28 *https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/apr/21/farmer-jailed-for-damaging-river-lugg-herefordshire*

29 *https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/british-birds-of-prey-raptors-under-threat*

30 RSPB figures, see RSPB Bird Crime report *https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/birdcrime*

31 For more on these gaps, and the need to fill them through reform of marine mammal legislation in the UK, see *https://wcl.org.uk/docs/Protecting_Marine_Mammals_in_the_UK_WCL_Briefing_July_2024.pdf*

32 *https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3rdj8jll2yo#:~:text=Video%20of%2two%2male%20walkers,in%20its%2025%2Dyear%20history*

33 *https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6646118dbd01f5ed32793d44/outcomes-by-offence-2023.xlsx*

34 League Against Cruel Sports data

35 *https://www.league.org.uk/news-and-resources/news/kings-speech-2024/*

36 *https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2009/3344/regulation/26*

37 These figures are not publicly available, the Government should consider making the details of all CITES convictions public to allow for greater scrutiny.

38 https://www.nwcu.police.uk/news/wildlife-crime-press-coverage/lewisham-man-convicted-for-illegally-exporting-ivory/

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