

# Naturewatch

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CAMPAIGNING AGAINST ANIMAL CRUELTY

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## Police Wildlife Officer Survey

April 2011

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PATRONS: POLLYANNA PICKERING ALEXANDRA BASTEDO CHRIS PACKHAM HAYLEY MILLS JENNY SEAGROVE

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## Introduction

Five years ago Naturewatch conducted a survey of Police Wildlife Officers across the UK, revealing major concerns about low staffing levels, insufficient legislation and powers of arrest, and a high level of recognition that the Home Office needs to take a stronger lead on wildlife crime; in particular for badger crime to become recordable to the Home Office.

In 2010 Naturewatch conducted a similar survey in order to measure progress, with intriguing results that reflect the economic crisis, the introduction of the National Wildlife Crime Unit, the increased powers of arrest, and the success of Operation Easter.

Police officers provide a unique insight into wildlife crime. Being at the forefront, not only do they directly encounter the crime, they are also able to take an overview of the whole field.

As with the 2005 survey, the responses from police wildlife and environment officers to the 2010 survey revealed a high degree of dedication and passion for their role.

With over 80% of forces returning the completed survey, this clearly illustrates their enthusiasm to tackle wildlife crime, and their desire for increased resources and funds to effectively enforce the UK's extensive wildlife legislation - as without proper enforcement, this legislation is futile.

## Key Results

Since 2005 there has been a huge shift in confidence for investigating incidences that fall under the Protection of Badgers Act and more respondents now believe they have enough powers of arrest at the scenes of wildlife crime.

The National Wildlife Crime Unit is proving to be a highly valuable resource with 84% of respondents contacting the unit at least once a month.

Concerns about Wildlife & Environmental Crime Officer staffing levels has reduced since 2005, with the gap closing significantly between 'enough' and 'too few'. However, wildlife and environmental roles could well be threatened in coming months given the public spending cuts. It was also mentioned that whilst some forces have many Wildlife & Environmental Officers, as the role is often performed in addition to their regular duties, they have little time to investigate wildlife incidents properly.

Whilst egg collecting has reduced considerably since 2005 as a result of Operation Easter, poaching is undoubtedly the new area of concern, ranking as the most significant wildlife crime. In 2005, illegal habitat destruction was the most prominent wildlife issue, but has now dropped to third place, which is a clear reflection of the economic downturn that has caused the slowdown of the development trade.

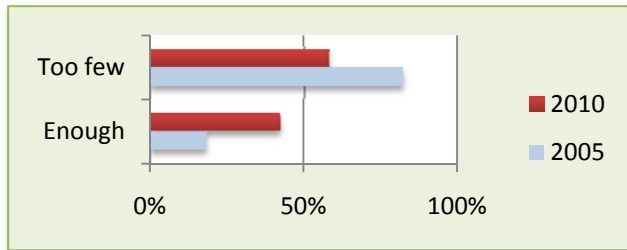
Badger crime was rated as the second most significant; with 98% of respondents believing those engaged in this criminal activity are also involved with other serious crime.

Whilst there is still a strong feeling that insufficient priority is being given to severe wildlife crime, (E.g. badger digging) from the Home Office, the percentage of respondents supporting this statement, and those believing badger crime should be recordable, has fallen slightly. As the government is moving towards a police performance rating system that increases democratic accountability, whether an offence is recordable to the Home Office is having less of an effect on how offences are prioritised.



## Staffing levels

The survey asked respondents to rate their force's level of staffing involved with wildlife and environmental crime.



Whilst the void between 'Too few' and 'Enough' has closed since 2005, there is still a view from most respondents that there are too few Wildlife and Environment Officers.

Those forces with at least one full-time Officer and a number of part-time Officers consider themselves to be in a more fortunate position than other forces, though some of these respondents still believe this to be too few.

One respondent, who rated the force's wildlife staffing levels as enough, offered a statement that rings true with many other respondents: *"The force has enough Wildlife Officers, but as this role is in addition to their regular duties, there is little time for them to give to wildlife investigations as wildlife crime is a low priority."*

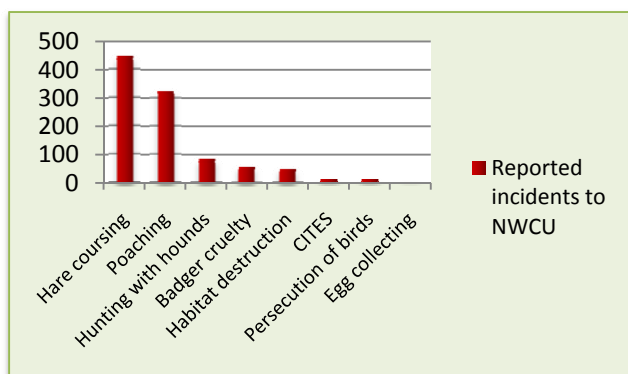
## Most significant wildlife crime

The graph (right) compares the 2005 and 2010 survey results for the most significant wildlife crime.

The graph (below) displays the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) statistics of the reported number of incidents between December 2009 and February 2010.

Whilst hare coursing incidents rate the highest in the NWCU statistics, the Lincolnshire force alone reported over half of them. In line with our survey, poaching incidents rate next, with the official NWCU statistics revealing poaching to be a widespread problem across the whole country.

**National Wildlife Crime Unit Statistics**  
Number of Incidents – Winter (Dec09-Feb10)



Since 2005, there are four areas of wildlife crime where a notable shift of concern has occurred: Egg collecting, illegal habitat destruction, poaching and badger persecution.

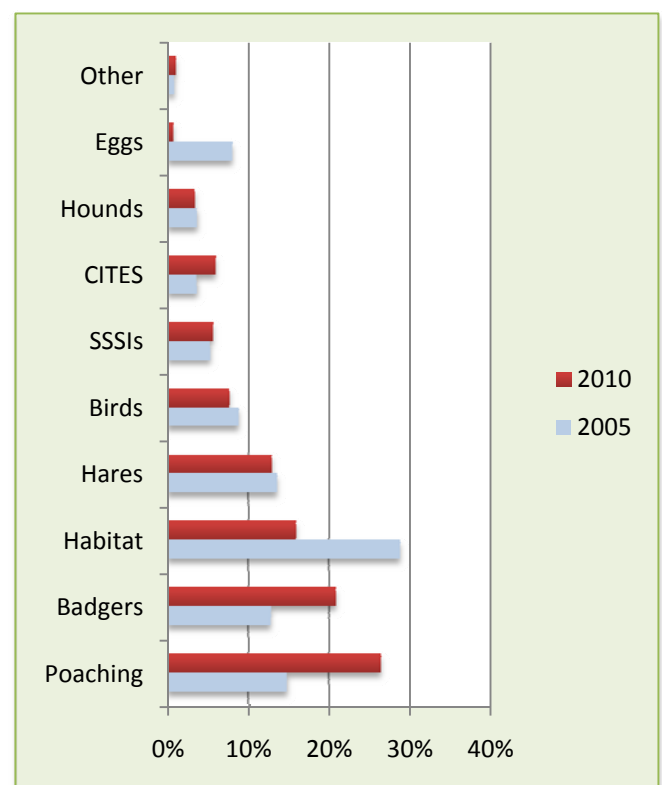
Egg collecting is now rated as the least significant crime, after rating 6<sup>th</sup> in 2005, confirming the success of Operation Easter.

Illegal habitat destruction was rated the most significant wildlife crime in the 2005 survey. During the 'years of plenty', the construction and building industry was highly lucrative, with many developers incorporating habitat destruction fines into their budget.

The recent survey reveals a significant reduction in illegal habitat destruction, falling from first to third place. Whilst this is good news for wildlife, this is only a temporary reprieve, as nothing has changed within the law to deter this criminal activity. Once the economy is flourishing again, the building industry will pick up, resume its criminal habits and illegal habitat destruction will rise once again.

Unfortunately, badger offences are on the rise, which can be the most violent and severe of any wildlife crime. Since 2005, the impact that badger crime has had on our respondents has increased the most out of all other forms of wildlife offences. The RSPCA has also noticed a significant increase in reported incidents, as has the NWCU.

As a result, the NWCU has placed badger crime on its priority list, which means Police Constables are advised to provide funds and resources to fight this criminal activity.



## Statements

The final section of the survey asked officers to register their agreement or otherwise with a set of statements. The results are illustrated in the graph at the bottom of this page, displaying the percentages of those who agreed with each statement in 2005 and 2010.

As in 2005, there is little support for the statement that bovine TB is connected with badger baiting. There are still concerns that fines for illegal habitat destruction are too small, though not as much as in 2005. This could be a reflection of the slowdown of the construction and building industry.

Worryingly, since 2005 there has been a 14% increase in respondents agreeing that those involved in serious wildlife crime, like badger baiting, are often involved in other forms of serious crime, with 98% agreeing with this statement.

Plus 84% believe severe wildlife crime such as badger cruelty should be regarded as seriously as offences like drug possession, theft and indecent exposure.

With this in mind, there continues to be huge backing for the Home Office to take a stronger lead on wildlife issues, with 82% of respondents agreeing with this statement.

This line of thought continues with 86% of respondents agreeing that severe wildlife crime should be made recordable to the Home Office.

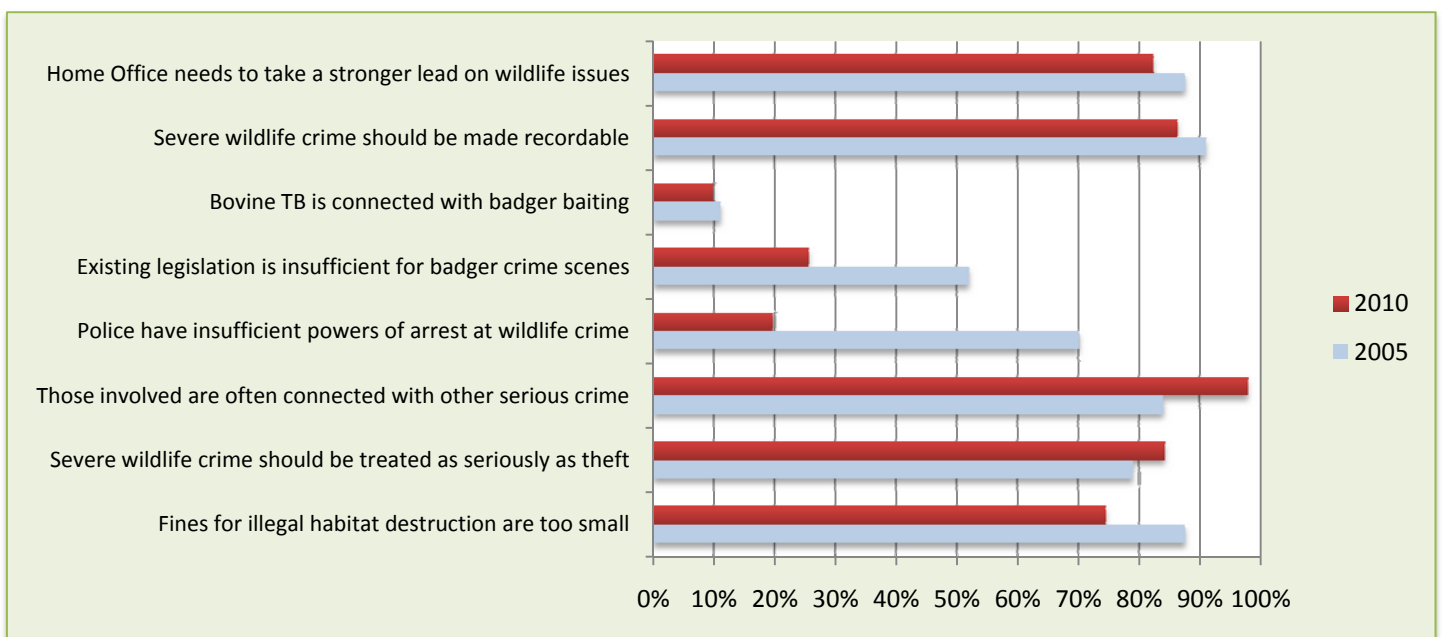
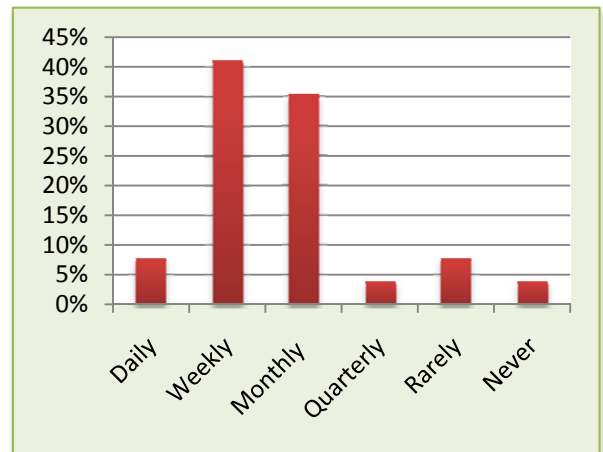
Interestingly however, both of the above statements relating to the Home Office are not supported as much as they were in 2005. Naturewatch believes this is due to the improved police accountability proposal that is much more community-driven, and removes government intervention, targets and bureaucracy.

There is a positive shift in confidence in the Protection of Badgers Act, with only a quarter of respondents agreeing with the statement “Existing legislation does not allow for incidents of badger baiting to be properly investigated by the police”. This is also the case for the statement “The police do not have sufficient powers to arrest suspects at the scenes of wildlife crime”.

This is a huge improvement from 2005’s results. It is a clear reflection of the introduction of *The Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005*, which has significantly extended and simplified powers of arrest, and the success of the *National Wildlife Crime Unit*, which gathers intelligence on wildlife crime and provides analytical, investigative and educational support.

Since its launch in 2006, the NWCU has proven to be “a highly useful and valuable resource” - a comment that was resonant amongst completed surveys.

The table below illustrates how often respondents are in contact with the NWCU, clearly indicating its value.



## Conclusion

As in 2005, police wildlife and environment officers show a high degree of passion and commitment towards their work, but they are woefully under-resourced.

Whilst there is evidence of improvement in the last five years, it is still widely believed that more needs to be done to tackle wildlife issues, especially as nearly 100% of respondents are in agreement that those involved in wildlife crime are often involved with other serious criminal activity.

The purpose of our survey was to research how we should best use our resources to help bring badger persecution to an end.

In the past, Naturewatch has campaigned for the Home Office to make badger persecution recordable, as it seemed there was no other incentive for valuable police funds and resources to be made available to investigate severe wildlife crime.

However, having collated our survey results, held meetings with Wildlife and Environmental Officers and representatives from the NWCU and Operation Meles, and spoken with David Cameron and the then, Conservative Shadow Home Secretary, Chris Grayling, we have made the decision to shift our campaign focus to increase community awareness about the changes to the police accountability scheme.

By 2012, the government plans to make “the most radical change in policing for half a century”<sup>1</sup>. Police and Crime Commissioners will be elected by the public, who will then be held to account for how their force delivers its policing.

In addition to this, it is clear that more is being done within the police community to tackle badger crime, with the NWCU awarding badger offences as a priority, and the launch of Operation Meles.

Naturewatch is following the progress of Operation Meles with keen interest, and given its strategically-planned approach is based on that of Operation Easter, we are hopeful it will prove equally as successful.



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/consultations/policing-21st-century/chapter-two-html?view=Html>

Many thanks to the Wildlife and Environment Officers who took part in the survey from the constabularies listed below. We would also like to give a special thank you to those representing Operation Meles and the National Wildlife Crime Unit for sharing their comprehensive knowledge with Naturewatch.

Cambridgeshire Constabulary  
Central Scotland Police  
Cheshire Constabulary  
City of London Police  
Cleveland Police  
Cumbria Constabulary  
Derbyshire Constabulary  
Dorset Police  
Durham Constabulary  
Dyfed-Powys Police  
Essex Police  
Fife Constabulary  
Gloucestershire Constabulary  
Grampian Police  
Greater Manchester Police  
Gwent Police  
Humberside Police  
Kent Police  
Leicestershire Constabulary  
Lincolnshire Police  
Lothian and Borders Police  
Merseyside Police  
Metropolitan Police  
Norfolk Constabulary  
North Wales Police  
North Yorkshire Police  
Northamptonshire Police  
Northern Constabulary  
Nottinghamshire Police  
Police Service of Northern Ireland  
South Wales Police  
South Yorkshire Police  
Strathclyde Police  
Suffolk Constabulary  
Surrey Police  
Sussex Police  
Tayside Police  
Thames Valley Police  
Warwickshire Police  
West Mercia Police  
West Midlands Police  
West Yorkshire Police  
Wiltshire Police