

Naturewatch

Fact Sheet: What is Wildlife Crime?

What is wildlife crime?

We summarise the main categories of wildlife crimes, along with examples of actual court cases.

Badger cruelty – such as digging and baiting. Dogs are used to pursue badgers within their setts until they are cornered; men will dig down, either to kill the badgers straightaway, or to catch them in order to be baited elsewhere. During the subsequent fights between dogs and badgers, large sums may be exchanged in bets. This deliberate cruelty is amongst the most vile of wildlife crimes, and the injuries sustained by the dogs as well as the badgers are appalling. There is a perception that not all crime against badgers can be treated in the same way: poisoning of badger setts – perhaps by farmers whose cattle are suffering from Bovine TB – while abhorrent in itself – lacks the evil of the deliberate cruelty of baiting.

- *In July 2005, eight men (seven from Wigan) were each sentenced to three months in prison for badger digging. They had been found near a badger sett, along with 13 dogs, spades and electronic tracking devices. This prosecution resulted from an undercover operation conducted by the RSPCA. Only one or two such convictions occur each year, despite around 10,000 badgers believed to be victims of such crime every year.*

Hare coursing – usually set up as a contest between two dogs to catch a live hare. The hare may have been captured some weeks previously in order to be trained to run in the right direction up the course. Although only recently banned under the Hunting Act 2004, it had previously presented a problem because of those who pursued it illegally: it often happened without permission from the landowner, with the perpetrators refusing to move on when asked to.

- *Hare coursing is particularly strong in the east of England, where people will travel to do it. In June 2005 a persistent illegal courser from Southall, London, was given an anti-social behaviour order (ASBO) to prevent him from entering Cambridgeshire with lurchers or any other variety of dog for three years, as well as being fined and banned from driving for six months.*



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Hunting with hounds –

outlawed since 2005, many hunts are testing the ban to the limit. How this plays out will be seen in the coming months and years.

- *In August 2006 the first successful prosecution under the Hunting Act took place. It was brought by the League Against Cruel Sports against Exmoor Foxhounds: video evidence showed hounds in a “prolonged period of pursuit” against a fox on two occasions. The judge decided that what took place was not one of the forms of hunting which are exempt under the Act (such as chasing a scent trail or flushing out foxes to be shot). The result was a £500 fine (although it cost the LACS £65,000 to bring the case).*

Raptor persecution – this may take a number of forms, such as laying poisoned bait and nest destruction. This is a particular concern for endangered species which are especially vulnerable, of which the persecution of the hen harrier is a prime example. However, it also illustrates some of the main problems in wildlife crime. Taking place mainly on remote grouse moors in Scotland, where the birds are perceived as a threat to the grouse-shooting industry, the crimes are hard to detect and even harder to pin on a particular individual. The RSPB has established that the decline in grouse numbers is more closely related to degraded habitat than to the presence of hen harriers.

- *Surrey Police have been conducting a co-ordinated campaign to combat poaching in their area. In the summer of 2005, three men were arrested when police saw an air rifle being thrown from a car; a dead partridge and a near-dead pheasant were found inside. They were charged under the Prevention of Poaching Act 1862, and fined just under £250 each.*

Egg collecting – collection of any live egg is illegal. Nevertheless a small number of individuals will go to huge lengths to collect from as many species as possible, and thus pose a serious threat to endangered species. The personality profile of egg collectors seems to be rather different to those who, for example, hunt with dogs: they are typically solitary obsessives who tend not to be involved with other forms of crime.



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- *In January 2006 a Coventry man received his 14th conviction for egg collecting, and was imprisoned for 4 months. Of the 75 eggs he was found with on this occasion were those that belonged to the little ringed plover and hawfinch; previous victims include the avocet, golden eagle and osprey.*

Poaching – this is the most significant wildlife crime in Scotland, and the second-ranked in England. Although it does not attract the political attention of hunting with hounds, it is a major problem in rural areas. In particular, those involved in poaching are believed to be connected with other forms of rural crime, particularly theft of equipment from outhouses.

- *The first conviction under the Hunting Act 2004 came in Merseyside in October 2005. A 19-year old, in possession of two lurchers and lamping equipment, admitted to hunting rabbits on an estate without permission, so was therefore guilty of poaching. He was fined £155 and ordered to pay £55 costs. Although the Act deals predominantly with hunting, it may also be used to cover some poaching offences.*

Illegal Destruction of Habitat – this is Britain's most significant wildlife crime, according to Naturewatch's survey of police wildlife crime officers, conducted in 2005. The habitat of certain species – such as water voles, great-crested newts and bats – is protected, so that building developments on or near these sites may not take place unless suitable mitigation is performed that provide alternative habitat elsewhere. Suitable mitigation may be very expensive, however, and the

temptation exists to ignore the regulations and pay the much lower fine that would result. Naturewatch is campaigning for the fines for illegal habitat destruction to be raised to levels that would act as a deterrent.

- *In July 2002, a housing developer from North Yorkshire was fined £7,600 for destroying a large colony of great crested newts at a former Butlin's holiday camp. According to English Nature, "A wildlife survey found at least 272 newts living in an old swimming pool, boating pool, disused water tanks and smaller ponds on the derelict site, with the total newt population estimated at over 1000. The mix of rubble, rough grassland, trees, shrubs and derelict buildings were perfect for the thriving population.... The developers applied for a licence after consulting with English Nature and carrying out a detailed survey of the site but were turned down in September last year as they did not have valid planning permission. Weeks later they levelled the site."*

Trade in Endangered Species – this is a highly lucrative area of illegal trade which is of major importance nationally and internationally. Interpol estimates that it is worth US\$5billion per year, making it second only to the drug trade. London is a focus with its major airports. It has many different aspects – such as the sale of ivory (banned since 1990) from elephant and rhino; the sale of animal parts for traditional Chinese medicine (such as the tiger, bear and rhino); the exotic pet market; and the bushmeat trade. The rise of internet auction sites has provided yet another avenue for this trade.

Internationally the trade is governed by CITES, the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species: while it is hailed as a model of international co-operation, many countries are poorly equipped to provide the enforcement to go with it.

- *In 1997 an exclusive shop in London's Mayfair district was raided by the Metropolitan Police, and 138 shahtoosh shawls were seized. These were made from the wool of the Tibetan antelope, and it is estimated that about 1,000, or 2% of the world's population, had been slaughtered for the manufacture of these shawls. The average price for each one was £2,500 – the most expensive being £15,000. For this crime, the shop was given the farcical fine of £1,500.*
- *In December 2005 a 19-year-old from Norfolk was ordered to do 200 hours of community service, and received an 8-month suspended prison sentence, for his trading in stuffed wild animals on eBay. Some of the items sold were in contravention of CITES.*

The differences in sentence for these crimes, eight years apart, probably reflects the growing awareness of the importance of wildlife crime in recent years.

- *In 2001, a pair of traders at Dalston market in north London were jailed for four months for smuggling endangered species into the UK as part of their trade in bushmeat. Amongst other species, they sold monkeys, giant scaly anteaters and antelopes and – at £5,000 each – also offered whole lions – all obtained from West Africa.*

Connections between wildlife crime and other crime

The connection between the abuse of animals and that of humans has been suspected for many years in the United States. In 1988 FBI research found "substantial rates of severe animal abuse in childhood and adolescence in a sample of serial sexual homicide perpetrators". More recently, "a 1997 survey of 50 of the largest shelters for battered women in the United States found that 85% of women and 63% of children entering shelters discussed incidents of pet abuse in the family." Recognition of this in the UK has been rather slower: as a start, in 2001 the RSPCA and NSPCC published a review of the existing literature.

UK-based evidence tends to be anecdotal. For example, the child killers of the Liverpool toddler James Bulger had already been involved in animal abuse before the murder. Signs like this could be used to alert authorities before crimes against humans are committed.

These studies are, however, restricted to domestic situations. In the Naturewatch wildlife crime survey, a number of police officers stated that there were strong connections between those who were involved in either badger cruelty or poaching and other forms of crime. The anecdotal evidence is strong - although systematic research is still needed.

What are the main problems?

The biggest problem in the battle against wildlife crime is the low profile that it currently receives. Indeed, this was a major theme running through the Naturewatch survey of wildlife crime officers.

- **Levels of staffing:** while some forces have invested significant resources in this area, some have officers working on wildlife crime only on a voluntary basis. This has caused considerable frustration. Overall, 82% felt that there were 'too few' or 'far too few' involved.
- **Leadership from Government:** there was a strong feeling that insufficient priority is being given to wildlife crime. 87% of respondents agreed that "The Home Office needs to take a stronger lead in tackling issues related to wildlife crime".
- **Making wildlife crime notifiable:** a similar proportion also agreed that "Severe wildlife crime, such as badger cruelty or destruction of bat roosts, should be made notifiable to the Home Office so that police forces can give sufficient priority to tackling it". It's the notifiable offences which are used to produce the performance indicators for individual police forces

For more details on our campaign against wildlife crime, visit www.naturewatch.org/campaigns/wildlifecrime.

How can I get involved?

This is an area where active participation from members of the public can make a major difference. Those belonging to local Badger Groups play a crucial role in establishing which setts are actively being used by badgers and subsequently monitoring them. Likewise, bat roosts need to be identified and monitored. Although all bats are protected by law, this is of no use if their roosts are unidentified, so that unscrupulous developers can destroy their roosts without being found out. Almost all conservation groups depend on volunteers. The RSPB, for example, depends on volunteer wardens to provide protection at its most sensitive locations.

Support Naturewatch! – We depend on the active participation of supporters. We have been campaigning on badger cruelty for a number of years, and we have just broadened this out to include other forms of wildlife crime. Unless there is a greatly increased commitment from Government and the police for tackling wildlife crime, it will continue to be seen as a 'low risk, high yield' form of crime. To help Naturewatch to campaign on this issue, go to our web-site www.naturewatch.org for more details, or email us on info@naturewatch.org.

This fact sheet has been provided as a service to visitors of our web-site. If you found it helpful, you might like to consider making a donation to help us continue in our campaign against animal cruelty.

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