Wildlife crime in the UK

What it is and why it matters

We were known as WSPA (World Society for the Protection of Animals)
Wildlife crime
What to do if you witness it

Contact the police
- If you are witnessing wildlife crime taking place dial 999
- For non-emergencies dial 101

You can also report crime anonymously to Crimestoppers on 0800 555111

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This report shows us that, far too often, people view our wildlife as some common reserve or resource into which they can dip, either for their amusement or profit.

People who carry this out in Africa when poaching elephants or rhinos, or in India when shooting tigers are roundly condemned as unscrupulous criminals. Individuals who know the price of everything, but the real value of nothing at all. But morally, nothing separates someone who kills a swan by throwing rocks at it in our country, from someone shooting a wild animal for fun on the plains of Southern Africa. Both are reprehensible and our perspective and condemnation of each should likewise be the same. And if we are to do that, then the British public has a hugely powerful role in playing its part - a potential army of eyes and ears who can report and watch out for people engaged in this sort of soulless activity, many of whom we know are already engaged in other types of criminality.

So although this report is by degrees shocking and sad, it could act as a clarion call to those concerned about our wildlife and to send a timely message to those who either enjoy or profit from harming it: the world has woken up to the seriousness of wildlife crime, people will no longer tolerate your actions, we’re taking a stand.

What comes to mind when you think about wildlife crime?

Are animals the only ones impacted by it, or are people somehow affected as well? Is it right to consider it a niche criminal activity, or should we treat it like any other criminal act?

Our report sets out what wildlife crime looks like in the UK and the widespread impacts it has on both animals and people. We find it to be far from the victimless crime it is sometimes painted as.

During the years when the international community dismissed the problems of elephant and rhino poaching, we now know organised criminal gangs were profiting; all the while their activities ignored as minor criminal transgressions.

On the global stage, hopefully this is something we have recognised while there is still time to do something about it. But at home in the UK, we must apply those hard-learned lessons to avoid making the same mistakes.

Although already a great concern to many people, general knowledge and awareness of wildlife crime as a policing responsibility is too low. As a result, it is all too easy for people to profit from wildlife criminality.

The public are concerned about the criminality and anti-social behaviour affecting wildlife and how animals suffer as a consequence, and how it impacts on conservation. Animal welfare and conservation are powerful and complementary concerns to inform the policies and practices needed to tackle wildlife crime. They must not be separated.

There is widespread support for more action to be taken domestically following the Landon Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade and UK Government’s Commitment to Action. Our partnership with the Metropolitan Police Service’s Wildlife Crime Unit shows just what is possible when enforcement is resourced appropriately.

In a recent poll carried out for us by YouGov, nearly half the people questioned felt that the UK Government should be doing more to tackle wildlife crime.

To political parties working to gain an understanding of the issues the public want addressed: a renewed commitment to tackling domestic wildlife crime represents an opportunity to deal with an issue that has spent too long on the periphery of concern and action.

You will discover it to be an issue close to the electorate’s heart.
Wildlife crime: causing animal suffering

Animal fact: The red deer is Britain’s largest native land mammal – stags can weigh up to 190kg (30 stone).
Wildlife crime in the UK

All types of wildlife crime carry the risk of a serious negative impact on the welfare of wild animals. Trapping, shooting and poisoning can all cause acute suffering and long, painful deaths. Hunting with dogs, baiting and other activities that involve chasing and killing wild animals are often highly stressful and painful for the victim animal. They cause it acute fear and exhaustion whilst being chased, and then end with a violent, inhumane death.

Wildlife trade is one of the biggest threats to wild animal welfare worldwide. Wildlife trade also affects and is relevant to the UK given its position as a source, transit and end-user country for those seeking to profit from wild animals and their parts.

To supply the trade, millions of wild animals are trapped and killed annually using inhumane methods or transported, farmed and held in unsuitable captive conditions for the rest of their lives. Individual animals endure limb loss, self-mutilation, broken bones, crushed internal organs, asphyxiation, dehydration, starvation, malnutrition, disease, chronic high stress levels and fear. Wider welfare implications include orphaned animals left to starve and the disruption of social groupings.

Poaching
Poaching is the most commonly reported type of wildlife crime by UK police forces. It accounted for 44% of all intelligence submitted to the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) from April 2011 to March 2013. Several different species of mammals and fish, many of which are endangered species, are illegally hunted and killed in both rural and urban areas of the UK. These animals, which include deer, hares and native fish such as salmon, are poached for their meat or their parts are used as trophies.

Poisoning
Many British species are the victims of poisoning, either deliberately or accidentally. The animals affected often experience excruciatingly painful symptoms that lead to protracted, inhumane deaths. Foxes, badgers and endangered birds of prey are often targeted, but secondary victims are also frequently reported. These include cats and dogs that have come across poisoned baits or carcasses. During 2012, the most commonly encountered poison was carbofuran, which is illegal and fatal to humans in tiny dosages.

Case study: Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime (PAW)
PAW brings together all organisations working to stop wildlife crime across the UK. These include NGOs, interest groups, the police, and the UK Government’s Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). It provides opportunities for statutory and non-government organisations to work together to combat wildlife crime.

Every two years, the UK wildlife crime Tasking and Coordination Group (TCG) sets the UK’s wildlife crime priorities, and its Priority Delivery Groups manage prevention, intelligence and enforcement activities in these areas. The UK’s wildlife crime priorities for 2013-2015 are: badger persecution; bat persecution; Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); poaching; raptor persecution and freshwater pearl mussels. Find out more at www.defra.gov.uk/paw.

Case study: wildlife rescue and rehabilitation
The UK has a number of wildlife rescue centres, such as the Riverside Animal Centre in London, specialising in the rescue, rehabilitation and release of wildlife. These centres are on the frontline of caring for the animal victims of wildlife crime. However they must work with an absence of government funding and low public and governmental awareness of the problem. Despite the seriousness of the issue there are also relatively few of these centres compared to those specialising in the care of domestic animals, such as dogs and cats.
Wildlife crime: exploiting protected species

Animal fact:
Buzzards, which are thought to be the most common bird of prey in the UK, mate for life, and perform spectacular aerobatics during breeding season to impress potential mates.
International trade in endangered species is tightly controlled by the CITES, which accords varying degrees of protection to more than 34,000 species of endangered plants and animals. Illegal trading is a persistent problem, whether in shops, on the internet, or on market stalls. Any CITES-controlled animal product must be sold with a certificate.

Illegal trade is a serious threat to elephants, rhinos, reptiles, and marine mammals from around the world, many of which have passed across UK borders. During 2012-2013, the UK Border Force intercepted live tortoises, wild serval cats and seahorses, as well as hundreds of accessories made from crocodile and alligator skins. In just three months, between July and September 2013, they seized 228 items of ivory.

This is not just a threat for ‘exotic’ species. There are increasing fears that native protected wild species such as birds of prey, eels and deer, and their parts, may be illegally targeted and exported from the UK. This is to satisfy a demand for luxury items in the Middle East and Asia.

In February 2014, the UK Government hosted a landmark international conference, aimed at bringing governments from around the world to an agreement about tackling the global illegal wildlife trade.

The conference resulted in a ‘London Declaration’. This included commitments to eradicating the market for illegal wildlife trade products, ensuring effective legal frameworks and deterrents, strengthening law enforcement, and actions concerning sustainable livelihoods and economic development.

Exotic pets
Border Force and Animal Health officials have found a range of different live animals being illegally imported or kept as exotic pets in the UK. These include monkeys, crocodiles, and even dangerous wild cats. Demand for such animals has even led to fears that wildlife ‘farms’ are on the increase within the UK. Licences are required to ensure that animals receive appropriate housing and care; enforcement officers try to stop those who try to import or keep animals without proper authorisation.

Case study: Border Force
The UK Border Force has a dedicated CITES Enforcement team, based at Heathrow Airport but operating across the entire UK. Their role is to provide specialist assistance to enforcement officials on all CITES issues, including detection and seizures of illegal products crossing UK border points. They use a range of methods to intercept banned items including a team of detector dogs that are specially trained to sniff out endangered species products such as animal skins, ivory and rhino horn.

Cybercrime
The internet has played an increasing role in facilitating the illegal sale of protected species and promoting illegal activities such as hare coursing on social media sites. Despite an eBay ban on the sale of ivory products, criminals are still finding ways to use it as a viable marketplace by changing the wording describing their products. Both the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) and Metropolitan Police Service’s Wildlife Crime Unit (WCU) monitor the website for wildlife-related cybercrime. However, their resources are far outweighed by those of the criminals using this method to exploit wildlife in and out of the UK.

Did you know?
The Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) is often employed as an effective deterrent for criminals who seek to make a significant profit from crime. Wildlife crimes are currently being tested under POCA’s framework for the first time, but the potential for significant sums of money to be recouped as a result is very high. The value of rhino horn is currently estimated at $40,000 per kilo, and a single 20kg carp can fetch £12,000 or more.
Wildlife crime: damaging our economy

Animal fact:
There are 32 species of hare. The European land hare is the fastest land mammal in the UK, reaching speeds of up to 45mph.
Freshly-cut rhino horn is more valuable than gold on the black market; it currently sells for around £40,000 a kilo; higher than the estimated street value of cocaine. Organised hare coursers can make thousands of pounds in just a few weeks – it’s been reported that an individual can make up to £30,000 in three months of ‘bets’.

For this reason, serious and organised criminals are increasingly viewing wildlife crime as a lucrative source of funds for other illegal activities including drug smuggling, money laundering and even terrorism. Poor detection rates and disproportionately low penalties mean that there are currently few deterrents for those seeking an ‘easy’ way to make a quick profit.

Thankfully, this particular problem has been increasingly recognised at high level, with President Barack Obama, the UN’s Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and His Royal Highness The Duke of Cambridge all speaking out about the issue.

Firearms
Many wildlife crimes involve the use of firearms, and police have frequently reported the seizure of illegally owned guns as part of wildlife crime investigations. These weapons pose a risk to all animals, both wild and domesticated and also to people.

Wildlife crime sentences
Conviction rates for wildlife crime across the UK are sometimes disappointingly low. Prosecutors often do not have the expertise in wildlife legislation to present cases as effectively as they could, and quite often, cases do not even make it to court, as they are deemed either ‘victimless’ or ‘not in the public interest’. Even when convictions are secured, some sentences are disproportionately low; often just a few hundred pounds in fines, which is not enough of a deterrent for serious and repeat offenders (see pages 12 and 13 for case studies). Magistrates and judges often do not understand the gravity of the crimes nor are they provided with information that allows informed sentencing.

Did you know?
The Home Office recently gave a small number of wildlife offences their own classification in crime counting rules, meaning that the police can now produce and analyse crime statistics for those particular offences. However, the most common wildlife offences still cannot be independently recorded, despite many of them being imprisonable crimes. This means it is currently impossible for the Government and police to analyse trends and crime rates, and accurately estimate the true scale of wildlife crime across the UK.

Case study: Scotland’s specialist wildlife crime prosecutors
Scotland’s Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) has a dedicated team of full-time wildlife and environmental crime prosecutors. This team acts as a central hub of expertise on all wildlife legislation, which is notoriously complicated and is relatively unknown by prosecutors without specialist training. Since 2011 COPFS has been responsible for investigating, marking and prosecuting all wildlife and environmental cases in Scotland. In 2012, 39 prosecutions were completed in court, with 74% resulting in a conviction.
Wildlife crime: across the UK

1. Lanarkshire (2012)
Following the recovery of a poisoned buzzard and bait, members of the UK National Wildlife Crime Unit and Strathclyde Police found banned pesticide carbofuran on a local farm. The possession of carbofuran is illegal in Scotland, and just a few granules can kill a person. The perpetrator claimed that the poison was for controlling rats and mice. He received a £365 fine.

2. Wales (2013)
A housing developer demolished a school even though ecological surveys had identified that the school buildings were used as day and night roosts for common and soprano pipistrelle bats, which are protected species. The developer received a £600 fine.

Video clips were found showing cats and a badger being brutally attacked and killed by dogs. The defendants admitted to causing unnecessary suffering to animals, keeping and training animals for use in animal fighting and possessing items designed for use in animal fighting. They were given six-months’ imprisonment, suspended for two years.

Raiders broke into Blackpool Zoo and took one baby and two female cotton-top tamarin monkeys (a critically endangered species), and two male emperor tamarins. Four of the five monkeys were found in Yorkshire and returned to the zoo but the baby was not recovered.

5. Yorkshire (2012)
Six men and a teenage boy dug out and killed two badgers from a set near York. Dogs played tug-of-war with one badger before it was shot in the head, while a pregnant badger was torn to pieces and bled to death. Four defendants were jailed for 16 weeks, while two were handed 12-week custodial sentences, suspended for 12 months.

Two men broke into Ipswich Museum and wrenched the horn off a stuffed rhino, before also stealing a rhino skull and fleeing. This is just one in a spate of rhino horn thefts that have taken place across Europe. It is thought that the crime wave is being driven by a demand for powdered rhino horn in the traditional medicine market.

7. Gloucestershire (2012)
An antiques dealer exported six ivory items to countries outside of the European Union without obtaining licences. He sold the items on eBay to a man in New Zealand, who then illegally imported them. The defendant was fined more than £1,000 while the man in New Zealand was fined NZ$12,000.

8. Devon (2013)
Police in South Molton investigated a case of deer poaching when they found 11 stag’s heads with their antlers shorn off dumped in a lay-by, close to Exmoor National Park. People have been known to pay up to £200 for a single dead deer and antlers can fetch hundreds or even thousands of pounds.

A large quantity of live carp was discovered being smuggled into England aboard a lorry. There is a big illegal, organised trade for fish like these because carp in the UK do not grow as big as those in France. A single carp can fetch up to £12,000. The tragedy in this case was that all of these fish had to be destroyed.

10. Wandsworth (2014)
An ivory trader admitted to illegally selling whale and dolphin bone and marine turtle ivory on eBay. His home had been raided after detectives from the Metropolitan Police Service Wildlife Crime Unit discovered his account on the site. The defendant received a £1,375 fine.

Two women from Romania arrived at Heathrow with 13 San Salvador rock iguanas stuffed into their suitcases. Luckily 12 survived but one died in transit. The species is so rare, only a few hundred are known to be in existence. Both women were jailed for 12 months and the iguanas were repatriated to the Bahamas.

12. Lincolnshire (2014)
Three men were found guilty of offences relating to hare coursing after being spotted by a local gamekeeper. A dead hare was found in a nearby hedge bottom. All three men were disqualified from driving for six months, ordered to pay costs of £600 each, and fined all £300 each.
Wildlife crime: harming our communities

Animal fact:
All swans native to the UK have white feathers, whereas all of those native to the Southern hemisphere have black, or partly black plumage.
Frequently we think of wildlife crime as a problem only affecting the elephants and rhinos of Africa, rather than species native to the UK. While the import and export of endangered exotic species is of serious concern, wildlife crime is very much a domestic UK problem as well.

Public interest in protecting our wildlife is high. Local communities consistently report this as a priority issue to their local MP through letters, emails and campaigning actions organised by NGOs or local community groups.

Wildlife crime is also not just a rural problem; it affects our urban environments too. All of our towns and cities are rich with wildlife that need our protection just as much as those in the countryside.

Theft, violence and anti-social behaviour
Criminals known for wildlife crime are also sometimes known for their involvement in other types of crime, such as metal theft, rogue trader offences, violence and intimidation, and anti-social behaviour.

And criminals are not always linked to a single type of wildlife crime. Some hare coursers have been known to diversify into badger baiting, for example.6

Some police forces are now linking specialist areas together to ensure a coordinated approach. The NWCU has recently recommended that all local forces link their wildlife crime work to Operation Liberal – a national operation that focusses on distraction burglary.6

Did you know?
The UK has a National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU), comprised of 13 staff, whose main focus is the gathering and analysis of wildlife crime intelligence from across the UK. They also provide round-the-clock support to police forces and enforcement agencies around the country using Investigative Support Officers to ensure that local officers have the resources they need to undertake effective investigations. The NWCU is currently funded by multiple government and policing bodies, although its financial future is currently only confirmed until April 2016. Find out more at www.nwcu.police.uk.

Wildlife Crime Officers
Every police force across the UK has a Wildlife Crime Coordinator and/or Wildlife Crime Officer(s) (WCOs) who are the main liaison for wildlife crime policing in their area. Unfortunately, the WCO role has not been formalised by most police forces. Consequently officers often have to undertake their wildlife crime work in their spare time. It also means they may not have access to the resources and support from their seniors, that they do for other types of crime. Recent polling data that has revealed only 14% of the UK public have heard of Wildlife Crime Officers.1 All of these factors inevitably have a serious knock-on effect on their ability to tackle wildlife crime effectively at local level.
Wildlife crime: risking human health

Animal fact:
The name ‘pangolin’ comes from the Malay word pengguling, which means something that rolls up. When pangolins feel threatened, they curl up into a tight ball, depending on their scaly armour to protect themselves.
There is deep concern that the illegal import of exotic animals and their parts may lead to the spread of animal-borne disease that threatens human health, and indigenous wildlife.

When smuggling goes undetected, diseases such as rabies are at risk of entering the UK. And when animals are slaughtered by unlicensed practitioners, consumers are not protected by the rigorous food safety checks that regulated meat producers must go through.

Illegal meat including wild fish, venison and various types of ‘bush meat’ (such as primates and cane rats) can pose a significant threat to human health. Without widespread education about these dangers, demand will continue to drive the market for these products.

Traditional medicines

It is widely reported that the trade in wildlife and their parts is being increasingly driven by the demand for traditional medicines. Pangolins, monkeys, bears, and lions are among the protected species being poached or farmed for their body parts, which are then used as ingredients. There are, however, humane, herbal, synthetic and modern medicinal alternatives available that are equally (if not more) effective.

Did you know?

During 2012-13, the UK Border Force seized items including monkey’s blood, lion’s brain and spinal cord and whale liver. One haul contained more than 1,300 items including tiger and leopard’s bone, bear bile, rhino horn, pangolin scales and seahorse intended for use as traditional medicines.4

Case study: working with migrant communities

The Angling Trust’s Building Bridges scheme has been running for nearly four years. It aims to educate anglers about good practice and integrate migrant anglers with UK anglers and clubs. The objective is to reduce the number of people who fish without a licence, illegally remove fish and poach club waters. With the help of groups such as the Polish Anglers Association, migrant anglers in many different regions are increasingly becoming involved in local fishing groups and are encouraging responsible angling practices.

Many angling clubs have also asked the Angling Trust for help to develop better relationships with migrant anglers as they contribute a lot to the local angling economy and club incomes.
Wildlife crime: destroying biodiversity

Animal fact:
There are 18 species of bats in the UK, the most common being the Pipistrelle, which can eat 3,000 insects in just one night.
Our lives are enriched by experiencing wildlife. The UK Government has put in place plans, such as Biodiversity 2020, to protect the UK’s biodiversity. These plans include recognition of the devastating impact wildlife crime can have on both habitats and species.

Clearance of habitat such as scrub, long grass and trees during the spring and summer could have an adverse effect on nesting birds, invertebrates and reptiles. Yet this is a common occurrence. Once an area of habitat has been cleared, wildlife rarely returns. The impact on species comes from humans killing them – either because they are seen as pests, or because people mistake them for another species. For example, stag beetles are killed by people who mistake them for scorpions. Overall, wildlife crime wears away the UK’s biological resource.

Habitat disturbances
Badgers, bats and nesting birds are among the wild species most commonly affected by habitat damage and disturbances across the UK. Many of these animals are protected species vulnerable to a range of threats. This is why they and their habitats are protected by law. Bats, for example, are highly dependent on man-made structures for roosting, and on surrounding habitats for foraging and commuting, but these are being destroyed. The most typical crime against bats is roost damage and obstructing access.

Did you know:
In London, Greenspace Information for Greater London (GiGL) has recently partnered with World Animal Protection and the Metropolitan Police Service to add a ‘wildlife crime’ layer to their online maps. This enables London boroughs to access the wildlife crime intelligence reported into police each month from their neighbourhoods. GiGL’s wildlife crime map can be accessed at www.gigl.org.uk/online.

Case Study: Environmental Records Centres (ERCs)
Local ERC’s play an important role in collating and analysing species data in set geographical regions, enabling communities and local authorities to monitor and protect wildlife in their area. This data can be presented in the form of interactive maps that can be accessed online.
Local wildlife crime strategies

In the absence of a national domestic plan for tackling wildlife crime, a number of forces across the UK are developing and implementing wildlife crime strategies at a local level.

Other forces, such as those in Wales, have established a Wildlife Crime Enforcement Group. This group is charged with developing a wildlife crime strategy, developing codes of practice and data sharing agreements with the aim of tackling the Welsh wildlife crime priorities. Cheshire, Devon and Cornwall, Scotland and Cumbria are also leading the way in developing strategies on wildlife crime and feeding intelligence to the National Wildlife Crime Unit.

For example, PCC Alan Charles in Derbyshire has been working with the Chief Constable to formalise the Wildlife Crime Co-ordinator role and recruit Wildlife Field Volunteers. These volunteers are the ‘eyes and ears’ for Wildlife Crime Officers across the vast rural moorland in the area.
Acknowledgements

World Animal Protection would like to thank the following for their invaluable contributions to this report:

National Wildlife Crime Unit
British Transport Police
Metropolitan Police Service Wildlife Crime Unit
Cumbria Constabulary
Devon and Cornwall Police
Lincolnshire Police
Natural Resources Wales
Police Service of Northern Ireland
The Angling Trust
Bat Conservation Trust
Border Force CITES Enforcement Team
Crimestoppers
RSPB
Stephen Fry
Deborah Meaden
Charlotte Uhlenbroek

References
1 YouGov/WPSA polling of 3037 GB adults online between the 11-13th Feb 2014.
4 Freedom of Information request to UK Border Force. Response received April 2014.

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Company limited by Guarantee in England and Wales, registration No. 4029340. Registered Charity 1081849.