
2022



Birdcrime

Fighting raptor persecution



Produced annually by the RSPB, Birdcrime is the only comprehensive report which documents raptor persecution in the UK. These cases are collated by the RSPB's Investigations Team, working in support of the police and statutory agencies.

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Appendices

Download the Birdcrime 2022 appendices [here](#)



A Red Kite recovered by the RSPB Investigations Team in October 2022, in County Durham. A post-mortem confirmed that the kite had been shot and had lethal levels of poison in its body.

When will the killing stop?

This report reveals the confirmed incidents of raptor persecution for 2022 in the UK: shooting, trapping and poisoning of protected birds of prey. It also features the latest investigations and cases of national interest. 61 confirmed raptor persecution incidents were detected in the UK in 2022: 46 in England, four in Scotland, eight in Wales and three in Northern Ireland. Read the full breakdown in the Appendices.

In 2022, Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) continued to significantly impact wild birds, including raptors. Frustratingly, many dead birds of prey collected by Defra (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) for avian influenza testing did not undergo further analysis to identify their cause of death, but were incinerated regardless of whether they tested positive or not. This meant that possible cases of raptor persecution were not identified or reported.

Additionally, fewer birds of prey were tested by the Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme (WIIS) in 2022 than in previous years. This, combined with a lack of information gathered when dead raptors were recovered is likely to have resulted in a number of persecution incidents being unreported and not investigated, impacting the overall persecution figures for 2022. We need urgent action to rectify this.

If we extrapolate satellite-tagging studies for key species, it suggests that the true number of raptors killed is far greater than the documented totals. This has been demonstrated by numerous studies, including a new landmark paper ([Ewing et al., 2023](#)) focusing on the illegal killing of Hen Harriers published in *Biological Conservation*, by the RSPB Centre for Conservation Science. In the case of Hen Harriers, together with Natural England we have lost a significant number of satellite-tagged birds due to confirmed and suspected persecution, including eight birds in one small area of driven grouse moor in North

Yorkshire alone since January 2022. You might assume a Hen Harrier breeding on an RSPB nature reserve would be safe, but one satellite-tagged male named Dagda, which was breeding on our nature reserve at Geltsdale, was found shot dead just off the reserve in early May. Sadly, we have lost many untagged Hen Harriers in unexplained circumstances in areas surrounding Geltsdale. If that wasn't enough, one of Natural England's tagged Hen Harriers was killed, with the perpetrator savagely pulling its head off whilst it was alive. If the killing doesn't stop, this species has no viable future in England regardless of any increase in breeding bird numbers.

Sadly, 2022 will also be known as the year the White-tailed Eagle reintroduction programme in England was dealt a serious blow, with two confirmed poisoned eagles – the previously well documented case in Dorset and another on a pheasant shoot in West Sussex. At the same location, a dog belonging to a member of the shoot died from the same substance, the soon-to-be banned insecticide Bendiocarb – just three days later. The fact that no prosecution has been brought for either case is hugely disappointing. As always there are far more confirmed incidents than prosecutions. In 2022 there were only two convictions, both involving gamekeepers in the lowlands. There is great difficulty in gathering evidence to criminal prosecution standards.

This report documents the clear connection between raptor persecution and gamebird shooting. At least 64% of all confirmed raptor persecution incidents in 2022 occurred on land managed for gamebird shooting, similar to data for the last two years. In Scotland, the licensing of grouse shooting is very close. But until there is more accountability for the criminal activities associated with the shooting industry, raptor persecution will remain a persistent problem.

So, when will the killing stop?



White-tailed Eagle tagged G408, found poisoned on a pheasant shoot in West Sussex.

The problem

Intensive gamebird shooting

Intensive management on some shooting estates includes the illegal killing of birds of prey, which are seen as a threat to gamebird stocks. This illegal practice is evidenced by decades of RSPB and government data, scientific studies, intelligence and police prosecutions.

In 2022, at least 64% (almost two thirds) of all confirmed incidents of raptor persecution related to land managed for gamebird shooting, compared to 62% in 2020 and 71% in 2021. It is absolutely clear where the primary problem lies.

Raptor persecution on driven grouse moors continues to be an issue. The RSPB Investigations Team has been involved in a number of investigations on grouse shooting estates in 2022, principally relating to the disappearance of satellite-tagged Hen Harriers.

Driven grouse shooting also gives rise to other environmental concerns, including burning on precious peatland to create habitat for Red Grouse. There is growing evidence that burning not only damages peatland flora, but also releases stored carbon into the atmosphere, fuelling climate change. RSPB was instrumental in the first ever Defra-led prosecution for burning on deep peat in 2023, after we gathered evidence of illegal burning on Midhope Moor in the Peak District National Park in October 2022. We understand more legal cases are imminent.

Two of the worst counties for raptor persecution, based on 2022 data, were North Yorkshire (12 incidents, 19.67%) and Norfolk (6 incidents, 9.83%). These are perfect examples of both upland and lowland areas, dominated by gamebird shooting where the police, supported by the RSPB and the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU), have detected persecution incidents and are involved in ongoing investigations. Norfolk was the worst county in

2021 and North Yorkshire was third. The latter has rarely been out of the top three in the past ten years.

Until the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, more than 40 million non-native gamebirds were released into the UK countryside every year, which growing evidence suggests negatively impacts native wildlife and habitats. This industry has reached unsustainable levels. The RSPB believes that better regulation of the larger, intensive shoots is the only way to drive up environmental standards and limit overall release numbers. Voluntary approaches have failed. Additional regulation is the only option.

Existing laws are failing to protect birds of prey. The actual punishments act as little deterrent. The sentences available (custodial prison sentence and/or an unlimited fine) are not being utilised to their full extent by the courts.

In 2022, there were only two convictions for raptor persecution, both involving gamekeepers on lowland shoots. In some previous years, there have been none at all, demonstrating how difficult it is to get these cases to court.

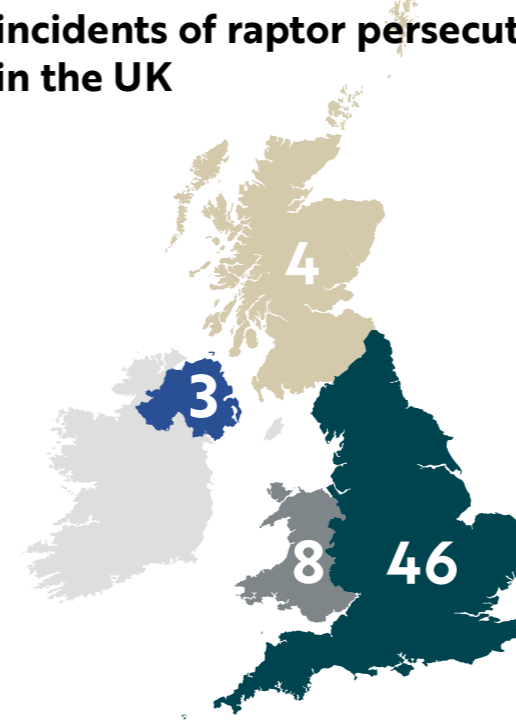
There must be better enforcement of existing laws, plus essential new regulation, to protect raptors from persecution. In particular, strong statutory pressure needs to be brought on those who own and manage grouse moors, who direct or allow their staff to commit these crimes.

The [Raptor Persecution Map Hub](#) shows hotspots of confirmed raptor persecution across the UK over the last 16 years.

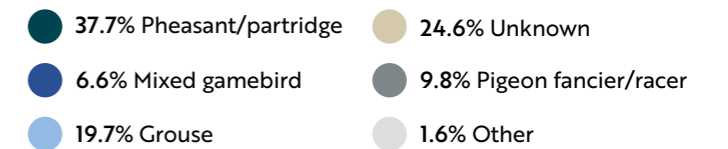
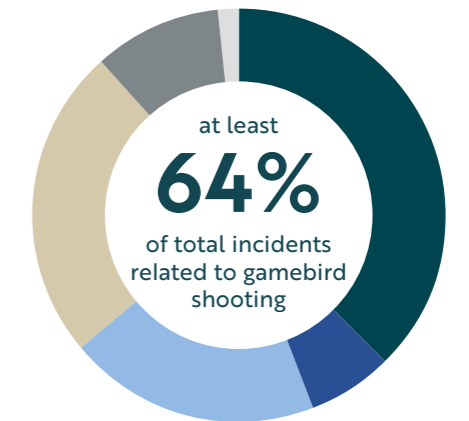
2022 in numbers

Raptor persecution is an ongoing problem, and the majority of the incidents occur in connection with land managed for gamebird shooting.

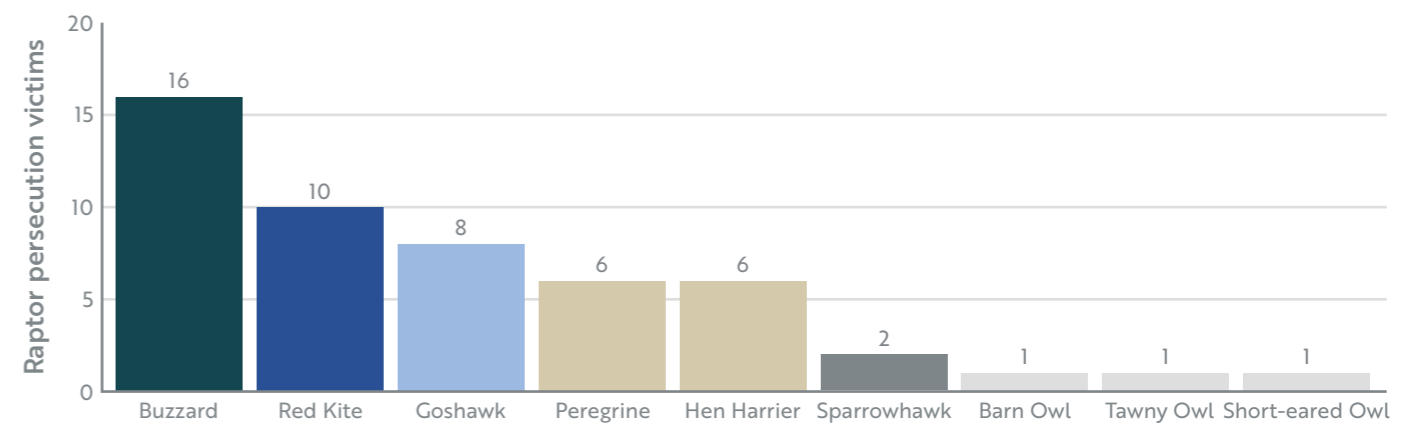
In 2022 there were 61 confirmed incidents of raptor persecution in the UK



Land use breakdown



Victims of raptor persecution



Worst county for confirmed incidents of raptor persecution

1. North Yorkshire (12)
2. Norfolk (6)
3. Suffolk (5)

2 individuals were convicted for raptor persecution-related offences in 2022, both of them gamekeepers

Case studies

Many incidents of raptor persecution go undetected and unpunished, but the RSPB Investigations Team work tirelessly to secure evidence to support enforcement agencies in bringing perpetrators to justice. The following case studies highlight incidents of raptor persecution and convictions in 2022 and 2023.

Four Hen Harrier chicks stamped to death in the Yorkshire Dales National Park

In June 2022, on a grouse moor near Whernside, in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, a hidden Hen Harrier nest contained four healthy chicks. The female parent bird, called Susie, had been satellite-tagged as a chick in a nest in Cumbria in 2020 by Natural England. This was Susie's second brood, having successfully bred for the first time in 2021, in the Forest of Bowland, in Northern England with an RSPB satellite-tagged Hen Harrier called Heath. The area where she nested in 2022 was managed as a driven grouse moor, surrounded by land managed by other grouse moor estates.

Natural England set up a motion-activated camera to monitor the nest and track the chicks' progress. On 10 June all four chicks were estimated to be eight to 12 days old. Satellite-tag data from Susie shows her regularly attending the nest until 20 June, when the transmission showed she had unexpectedly moved some 35 kilometres away, apparently abandoning the nest and her chicks.

On 21 June, Natural England visited the nest site and were distraught to find the bodies of three chicks, lying lifeless around the nest. Camera footage showed that on the night of 15 June at 9.54pm, Susie was settled in the nest with all four chicks. At 9.59pm the camera was triggered again, but the footage showed a sudden bright flash of light, described as a 'white-out', which prevented the nest from being viewed. The following morning, footage showed

Susie attempting to feed the lifeless bodies of her dead chicks. Later, she is seen in the video footage removing the bodies from the nest. This instinctive behaviour often happens when chicks die in the nest, as the parent bird tries to prevent the spread of parasites or disease to other chicks in the nest or as a means of avoiding attracting predators which could threaten the survival of remaining chicks. In this case Susie's instinctive behaviour was futile. There were no chicks left alive to safeguard. Susie remained in the area for five days before abandoning the nest and chicks.



The police were informed, and the footage shared with them. Natural England staff retrieved the bodies of three of the chicks but were unable to locate the fourth despite a thorough search. All three chicks were sent off for a post-mortem examination. The camera was tested and found to be in full working order, confirming that the 'white-out' was not due to any technical fault. A ground search of the area found an undefinable footmark near the nest site, believed not to have been made by Natural England staff. Quadbike tracks were also found near the nest.

The post-mortem results tell a very brutal and shocking story, discounting predation. These 2-3 week old chicks suffered extensive and violent physical injuries, including multiple fractures and broken bones. One chick's skull had been crushed. Based on the post-mortem evidence, footage and the condition of the chicks, North Yorkshire Police concluded that someone had approached the nest after dark to deliberately kill the chicks and that the 'white-out' was likely to have been caused by a bright lamp or object being placed in front of the camera.

Almost exactly six months after the incident, North Yorkshire Police made a [public appeal](#) for information. This horrendous incident was the focus of a three-part Guardian podcast, '[Killing the Skydancers](#)', which highlighted the ongoing issue of Hen Harrier persecution in the UK.

Although not directly involved in this case, the RSPB were shocked to learn of the brutality of this incident. This deliberate act of stamping on chicks in the nest demonstrates the utter contempt some people have for the lives of these birds and their determination to remove Hen Harriers from some areas of driven grouse moors. Whernside, like many areas across the UK, is an area where a repeated pattern of bird of prey persecution is seen. In 2018, a gamekeeper employed by Whernside Estate was convicted of the [killing of two Short-eared Owls](#) - an incident witnessed by the RSPB Investigations Team in 2017.

Although fully protected, whilst there are people who perceive Hen Harriers as a threat to grouse populations, this species will never be truly safe, be it an adult bird gently gliding above the heather or a two-week-old, down-covered chick.



The RSPB would like to thank Natural England for supplying us with the images and details to accompany this case study.

Five young Goshawks found dead in a Suffolk car park

In January 2023, Suffolk Constabulary received a report that five dead birds of prey had been found in the public car park of a popular woodland near Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk.

All five birds were Goshawks in juvenile plumage, believed to have been killed in 2022. X-rays showed that they contained multiple pieces of shot. In response to the magnitude of the case – finding five rare, Schedule 1 species discarded in a public place – the RSPB instigated a [public appeal](#) for information and offered a reward of £5,000 for information leading to a conviction. This is the highest amount ever offered by the RSPB. This amount was matched by [Wild Justice](#) and a crowd-funder was also launched by [Rare Bird Alert](#) increasing the reward offered to over £15,000.

In addition to a full post-mortem carried out under the financial support of the [Forensic Analysis Fund \(FAF\)](#), Suffolk Constabulary initiated DNA analysis. Remarkably, human DNA was found on one of the birds, which matched an individual on the police database. This is the first case where human DNA has been recovered from a persecuted bird of prey in the UK. This result was crucial in the case.

The human DNA matched that of Mr Frances Addison, a 72-year-old part-time gamekeeper. Suffolk Constabulary supported by Norfolk Constabulary, RSPB and NWCUC searched Addison's property and found additional multiple breaches relating to firearms and the use of wild bird traps. In June 2023, Frances Addison pleaded guilty to five counts of possession of a dead Goshawk and multiple charges relating to firearm offences, the killing of a Woodpigeon and the unapproved use of a spring trap. Addison pleaded guilty to nineteen charges but denied killing the Goshawks, saying he found them.

Remarkably, in court it was stated that Addison had said to the police: "All gamekeepers are killing birds of prey."

He was given a 12-week suspended prison sentence and ordered to pay a total of £1,300 in compensation, costs and victim surcharges. His firearm and shotgun certificates were revoked.

This case is incredibly important in highlighting how investigative work is constantly evolving and emphasises the value of forensic analysis in wildlife crime investigations. The Forensic

Analysis Fund (FAF) was established to enable the use of forensic techniques to help solve wildlife crimes, facilitated through the [Partnership for Action against Wildlife Crime \(PAW\)](#). It offers financial support to all UK national and regional law enforcement agencies seeking to carry out forensic analysis during a wildlife crime investigation.

This case is a prime example of how raptor persecution incidents can achieve a successful

outcome by effective partnership working, using the skills that each agency can bring. By having these positive partnerships, we stand a better chance of getting the successful outcomes needed. The RSPB Investigations Team are extremely grateful for the thorough investigative work carried out by [Suffolk Constabulary](#), Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) and to the Forensic Analysis Fund for the crucial role it played in this case.



Gamekeeper prosecuted for shooting a Sparrowhawk on notorious gamebird estate in Scotland

On 16 September 2021, a RSPB Investigations Officer filmed the [illegal killing of a Sparrowhawk](#) on Moy Estate in Inverness-shire, Scotland, an estate managed for gamebird shooting, which has a long back catalogue of previous persecution incidents.

Footage shows a man placing a plastic decoy Eagle Owl on a post, before hiding with a shotgun in some scrub nearby. The use of plastic decoy birds or tethered live birds to attract raptors is a common technique used to illegally lure wild birds of prey within range, to be shot. In this case the target was a Sparrowhawk and the person with the gun: a gamekeeper working on the estate.

A Sparrowhawk is seen circling overhead, clearly interested in the decoy Eagle Owl. As it soars above the hidden gamekeeper, a shot rings out across the valley and the Sparrowhawk suddenly falls from the sky into the heather, injured but not dead. Moments later the 22-year-old gamekeeper approaches the wounded hawk, as it hopelessly attempts to fly away. The gamekeeper quickly pins the distressed bird with his foot and kills it with his hands.

All evidence was passed onto Police Scotland and a full investigation took place, including a search of the estate on 19 September 2021. On 31 March 2023, gamekeeper Rory Parker pleaded guilty to the shooting of the Sparrowhawk on Moy Estate.

He became the 56th gamekeeper to be convicted of raptor persecution offences in Scotland since 1990 and was fined £1,500 for the crime.

Moy Estate in Scotland is a notorious hotspot linked to raptor persecution crimes. A poisoned Red Kite found there in 2020, alongside evidence collected by Police Scotland linked to trapping offences, instigated a three-year [suspension](#)

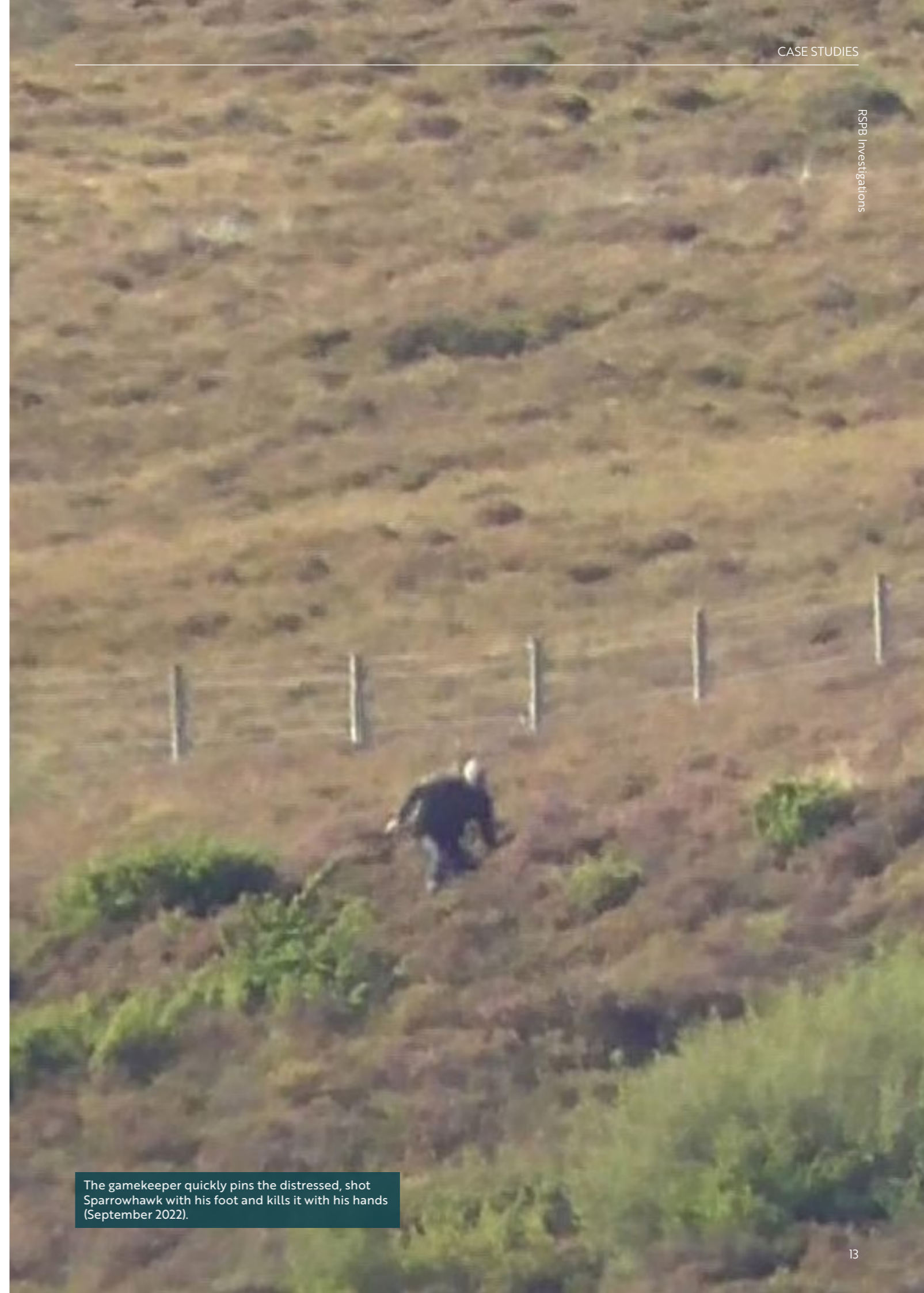
[of the use of General Licences](#) by NatureScot (2022-2025). This restriction prevents the estate from using methods to legally target wild birds such as crows and magpies to protect crops or livestock. The shooting of the Sparrowhawk is the latest in a multitude of shocking raptor persecution incidents linked to this area over the past 13 years, where an array of raptor species – including Hen Harriers, Goshawks, Red Kites and Golden Eagles - have been poisoned, trapped, shot or disappeared.

The RSPB is pleased that the [footage](#) helped lead to a conviction, but this incident highlights how detection of these crimes is often a result of chance and that ultimately the criminal activities uncovered in the field are likely to be a small proportion of the overall illegal killing taking place. If a RSPB Investigations Officer had not been stood on a hillside in Inverness-shire on that very day in September 2021, this incident would have gone unknown, unreported, and unpunished.



Sparrowhawk

Jack Ashton-Booth (RSPB)



The gamekeeper quickly pins the distressed, shot Sparrowhawk with his foot and kills it with his hands (September 2022).

Satellite-tagged Hen Harrier brutally killed in the Yorkshire Dales National Park

On 12 April 2022, the satellite tag of a two-year-old male Hen Harrier called Free showed him to be located away from his regular roost site late at night near a driven grouse moor in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

Natural England had tagged Free as a chick in Cumbria in 2020 and had monitored his movements since. The unusual stop in the satellite tag data led Natural England to visit the location of the last transmission to investigate. Free's body was recovered in an area of moorland, on the Yorkshire-Cumbria border. The extent of Free's injuries were shocking: his head and one leg had been removed from his body.

A post-mortem examination showed that Free had died because his head and leg had been pulled from his body whilst he was alive. It concluded that these injuries could only have been carried out by a person, therefore discounting predation. Free had not been shot.

Despite recently published data from Natural England showing an increase in breeding numbers and fledging success in England, Hen Harriers are struggling to survive because of illegal persecution.

A peer-reviewed paper published by the RSPB Centre for Conservation Science this year ([Ewing et al., 2023](#)), stated that the annual survival of Hen Harriers in the UK is unusually low, with illegal killing accounting for 27-43% of birds under one year of age, and 75% of Hen Harriers aged between one and two years old. The paper also highlighted that mortality – due to illegal persecution – was found to be higher in areas managed for Red Grouse shooting. This builds on an earlier study ([Murgatroyd et al., 2019](#)) which revealed that Hen Harriers are ten times more likely to die or disappear within areas predominantly covered by grouse moor compared to those that were not managed for Red Grouse. It also concluded that at least 72% of the tagged Hen

Harriers in the study were either confirmed to have been illegally killed or disappeared suddenly with no evidence of a satellite tag malfunction.

North Yorkshire Police and the National Wildlife Crime Unit conducted a joint investigation, but no one was identified as a suspect in relation to this crime. You can find out more about this case in [Natural England's blog](#).

Between January 2022 and October 2023 the RSPB and Natural England lost a total of 39 satellite-tagged and untagged Hen Harriers across the UK. This number is increasing. As studies and previous reports highlight, this is only the tip of the iceberg, as these birds represent a small proportion of the wild UK Hen Harrier population.

Although 'sudden stop' satellite-tagged Hen Harriers strongly indicate that these raptors were the victims of persecution, they cannot be recorded as confirmed persecution incidents unless a body is retrieved. Therefore, we believe that the total number of raptors which have died as a result of persecution is far greater than our data suggests



Post-mortem photo of Free's mutilated body.



Free's mutilated body was recovered on moorland in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

The RSPB would like to thank Natural England for supplying us with the images and details to accompany this case study.



An image of a shot Common Buzzard found on Stroud's mobile phone.

Gamekeeper admits to poisoning and shooting multiple birds of prey

In August 2021, the RSPB's Investigations Team discovered a probable poisoned pheasant bait at Fengate Farm in Weeting, an area of lowland farmland used for pheasant shooting within the Breckland Special Protection Area (SPA) in Norfolk. The laying of poisoned baits is a method frequently used to kill raptors and is often associated with land managed for gamebird shooting. Analysis confirmed that the carcass had been laced with the banned toxic chemical Strychnine.

A subsequent land search led by Norfolk Constabulary with the NWCU, Natural England and RSPB Investigations uncovered more poisoned baits, illegal poisons stored inappropriately and multiple dead birds, including three shot Common Buzzard at two release pens and a poisoned Common Buzzard in a wooded area.

The police seized the accused's phone which later revealed images of a dead Goshawk and five dead Common Buzzards. Gamekeeper Matthew Stroud later confessed to the police that all the photos were of birds that he had killed.

On 5 October 2022 at Norwich Magistrates Court, Matthew Stroud pleaded guilty to the

use of lethal poisoned baits, the killing of seven raptors, the illegal possession of poisons – including the banned chemical Strychnine – and the unauthorised release of over 3,000 gamebirds on a SPA.

Stroud received a 200-hour community order and was ordered to pay more than £1,200 in fines, costs and compensation. The court also ordered the forfeiture and destruction of all Stroud's firearms, mobile phones and any chemicals. Many thought that Stroud would be jailed for the scale and nature of his offending, so it was difficult not to be disappointed with the outcome, despite a fantastic joint investigation

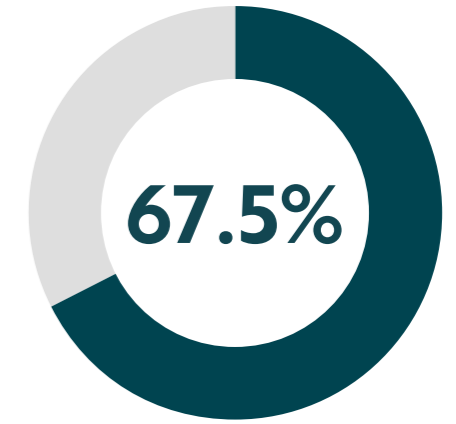


A pheasant bait, found to be laced with the banned, toxic chemical Strychnine, August 2021.

led by Norfolk Constabulary. This case is yet another example of raptor persecution in lowland areas impacting rare birds like Goshawk and demonstrates the scale of the problem in connection to the pheasant shooting industry.

Stroud's motivations – 'to protect pheasants' – typify that of many other convicted gamekeepers which have been involved in raptor persecution cases. Their drive is to maximise gamebird numbers by removing any potential natural predators which can threaten the unnaturally high levels of gamebirds reared on their land for gamebird shooting.

It is clear from decades of investigative fieldwork that a significant percentage of all raptor persecution cases involve gamekeepers.



Of the 191 individuals convicted of bird of prey persecution-related offences from 1990 to 2022, 67.5% have been gamekeepers



A dead Goshawk, killed by gamekeeper Matthew Stroud on a pheasant estate in Norfolk.



The body of Dagda, found on Knarsdale Moor.

Dagda: A satellite-tagged Hen Harrier found shot dead on Knarsdale Moor

Dagda was a male Hen Harrier, satellite-tagged by RSPB in a nest in the Forest of Bowland in 2022. After fledging, he moved widely, visiting Angus in Scotland, returning to Bowland, touring the Yorkshire Dales National Park and the Lake District National Park before entering the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) – all protected landscapes and in theory safe places for a young Hen Harrier.

In April 2023, we were delighted when he settled down on the RSPB's own nature reserve at Geltsdale in Cumbria, where staff monitored him by both visual sightings and the regular data transmitted from his tag. He quickly found a mate and began nest building and copulating. Worryingly, on 8 April he was noted as having significant tail damage, suggestive of having been shot at. This didn't dissuade him, and he was confirmed as the first ever satellite-tagged Hen Harrier to have nested on Geltsdale. This was highly significant as many breeding males before him have vanished when hunting away from the reserve, which is surrounded by driven grouse moors – land types known nationally to be linked with raptor persecution.

By the 21 April his female was sitting tight incubating eggs in their nest. Dagda remained highly faithful to the female, hunting exclusively

nearby on the RSPB nature reserve until 8 May when his satellite data indicated he had ventured east, over the reserve boundary and onto the neighbouring moor at Knarsdale. Sometime between 9 and 10 May he was shot dead. The RSPB located his body which was recovered from Knarsdale Moor by Northumbria Police and the NWCUC on 12 May. An expert post-mortem confirmed that Dagda's body contained recent shot (from a shotgun), confirmed to be the cause of death. The post-mortem also indicated that the bird had recovered from an earlier, unknown shooting incident. It also identified damage to his tail, consistent with damage caused by a shotgun. This damage to his tail had been observed by RSPB staff a month earlier. All these injuries prove that Dagda has been shot on at least two separate occasions. The last was fatal.

Ironically, at the time of Dagda's killing, the RSPB had just conducted media interviews at Geltsdale with [Channel 4 News](#) and [BBC Springwatch](#), discussing vanishing Hen Harriers in previous years.

The forensic data from his satellite-tag left no doubt at all where and when he was shot, but sadly not who did it.*

More than six months have passed, and to our knowledge no action has been taken by Northumbria Police. It would be difficult to find a more clear-cut case of raptor persecution requiring enforcement.

With little or no deterrent for killing birds of prey, it's not surprising that the RSPB has lost several satellite-tagged Hen Harrier in suspicious circumstances since the killing of Dagda. Dagda is one of 39 other Hen Harriers which

has been killed illegally or died in suspicious circumstances since January 2022. See the heatmap on page 26 for more details.

Since 2020 alone, six Hen Harriers nests have failed at Geltsdale nature reserve, caused directly by the sudden and suspicious disappearance of male birds during this crucial time. This includes two untagged males which vanished shortly before Dagda was killed.

*There is no evidence as to who may have been responsible for the death. For the avoidance of doubt, there is no suggestion that the landowner, his agent or any of his employees was involved in any way.



Dagda as a young bird in the nest, after he was fitted with a satellite tag (June 2022).



39 Hen Harriers have been confirmed to have been persecuted or have suspiciously disappeared in the UK since January 2022.

Hen Harriers: facing relentless persecution

Hen Harriers are one of the UK's rarest breeding birds of prey. Despite being fully protected by law, and a UK Red Listed species, they are being illegally persecuted on a relentless scale. This is due largely to the ongoing conflict raptors face when on land managed for gamebird shooting, particularly driven grouse moors in the uplands. In fact, several recent peer-reviewed studies into the survival of satellite-tagged Hen Harriers across the UK have highlighted the clear and ongoing links between persecution of this rare species and land managed for driven grouse shooting.

If a satellite-tagged Hen Harrier's transmission suddenly stops without any evidence of a tag malfunction, and the tag or bird is not recovered, it is recorded as a 'suspicious disappearance'. This evidence strongly indicates that these raptors were the victims of persecution, but they cannot be recorded as confirmed persecution incidents unless irrefutable evidence is found. Therefore, we believe that the total number of raptors to have died as a result of shooting, trapping or poisoning is far greater than our data suggests.

In May 2023, the RSPB and Natural England documented that a total of 21 satellite-tagged birds monitored by both organisations had 'suspiciously disappeared' or were confirmed as having been illegally killed in England, since April 2022. This number has continued to rise with a staggering total of 39 Hen Harriers now suspected or proven to have been persecuted across the UK between January 2022 and October 2023 (see the Hen Harrier persecution heat map on page 26). This total is likely to rise further as a number of known incidents cannot be disclosed at this time as they are part of on-going investigations.

In recent years, there have been some horrific and brazen acts of Hen Harrier persecution. In 2021, a satellite-tagged Natural England bird called Asta disappeared from a Durham driven grouse moor with the tag later found attached to a dead Carrion Crow. As there is no way to detach the harness intact from a live bird without severe injury, it is highly likely that Asta was killed in order to remove the satellite-tag and harness. It was then fitted to the Carrion Crow, perhaps as a macabre gesture to the authorities.

Satellite-tagging of this species is highly valuable in monitoring movements and sadly highlighting the losses taking place. The information also helps to uncover suspected persecution hotspots. Recent data has shown that an area dominated by driven grouse moors near Birkdale in North Yorkshire currently has the highest level of suspected persecution in the UK. Shockingly, eight satellite-tagged Hen Harriers have been confirmed as having been illegally killed or have suspiciously disappeared in this one area since January 2022, with most of these birds, including a number of Natural England brood managed Hen Harriers, sending their final data at this location before inexplicably vanishing.

In this area in May 2022 the body of a male satellite-tagged Hen Harrier, called Free, was recovered by Natural England staff. The post-mortem examination confirmed that he had been illegally killed. His head had been pulled off whilst still alive (See page 14 for a full account of the incident). North Yorkshire Police initiated an investigation but despite identifying a person of interest, the case yielded insufficient evidence to bring any charges. The investigation has since closed. Suspected Hen Harrier persecution has continued in the area.

The chronic persecution of Hen Harriers in England will continue to hamper the recovery of the species unless significant regulation is introduced. The immediate licensing of driven grouse shooting is essential. By creating greater public accountability for these crimes,

the police can tackle the persecution of Hen Harriers on a more established footing, enforcing legal standards and ensuring estates operate within legislative boundaries. An insightful [article](#) published by National Geographic in 2021 highlights Hen Harrier persecution and enforcement issues in greater detail.

Defra's [Joint Hen Harrier Action Plan](#) (HHAP) was launched in January 2016, with one of the six actions being to conduct a trial of brood management. This technique involves removing eggs or chicks from some Hen Harrier nests on grouse moors, rearing the chicks in captivity and then releasing the fledged young back into the wild. The principle is that by reducing the density of nesting Hen Harriers, predation pressure on grouse will decrease and lead to a change in attitudes, with grouse moor owners and managers becoming more welcoming and tolerant of this magnificent bird of prey. The RSPB has made its objections to brood management on scientific and ethical grounds very clear for many years. We are unequivocal that the first step in Hen Harrier recovery should be the end of illegal persecution.

Brood management commenced in 2018 as a five-year trial, and earlier this year it was announced that the trial would have a [two-year extension](#) to cover the 2023 and 2024 breeding seasons. Since 2019, the trial has seen the removal of 15 broods, with 58 chicks subsequently returned back into the wild. Whilst brood managed young are afforded protection during the captive rearing stage, this is not the case once they are



A male Hen Harrier in the uplands of northern England.

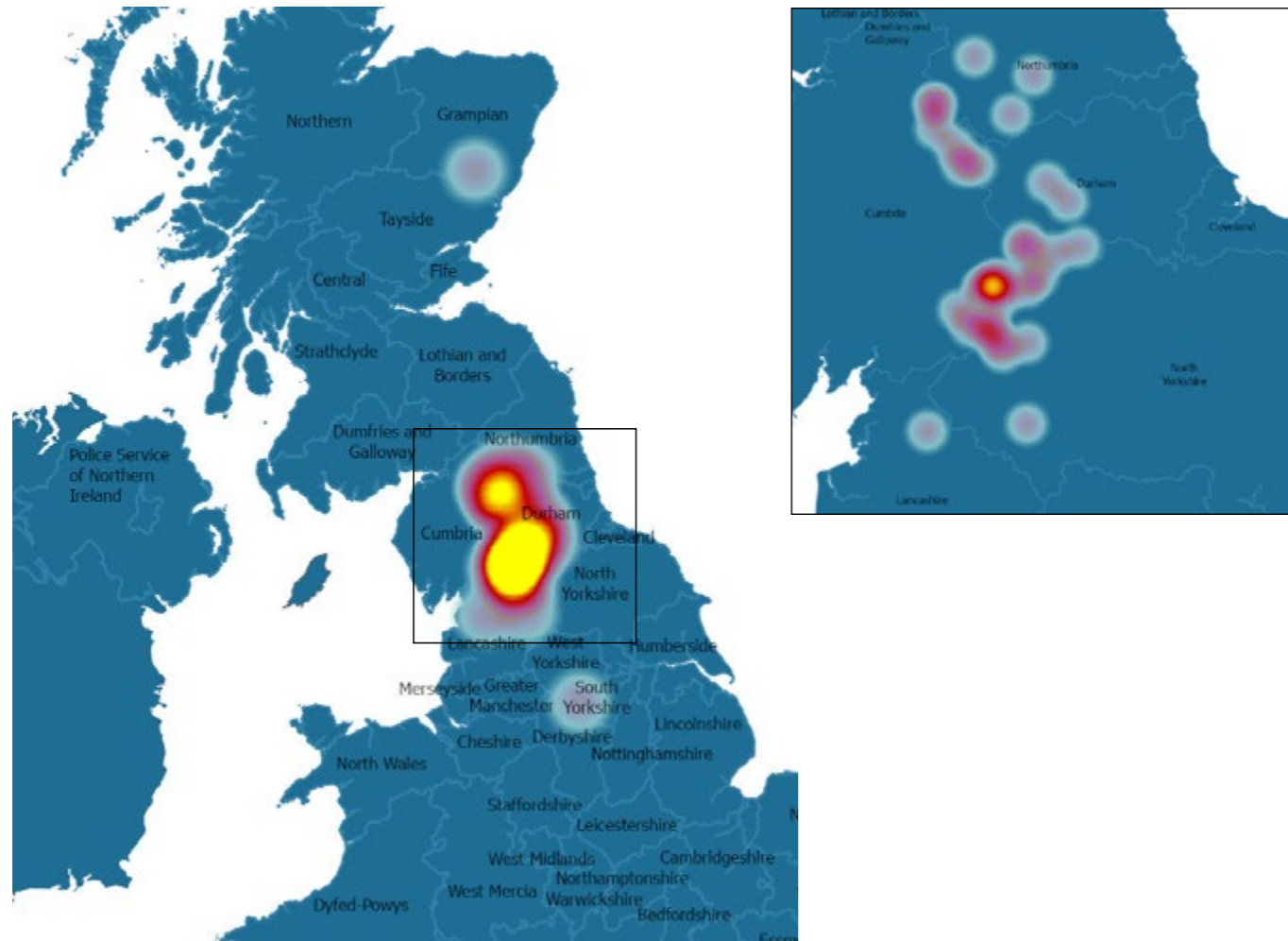
released. Despite being fitted with satellite-tags an increasing number of these birds are going missing or have been proven to have been persecuted in the last two years.

Following the final breeding season under the trial in 2024 Defra will need to decide on the next steps, and we understand that Natural England will be leading an evaluation of the trial on behalf of the Brood Management Partnership. The RSPB maintains our objection to brood management, and we believe that after seven years it is time to call a halt to the scheme. Despite this, we also believe that a robust and independent evaluation is essential to understand and assess how the trial has delivered against the aims of changing attitudes and reducing illegal persecution.

This evaluation must also consider brood management relative to the other measures in

the HHAP, with a particular focus on comparing brood management in relation to diversionary feeding. This technique provides breeding pairs with an alternative (human provided) food source during chick rearing to minimise predation of grouse and offers a scientifically proven and cost-effective method of successfully reducing grouse predation during the chick rearing phase.

Whilst we have welcomed Natural England's [reporting](#) of 54 Hen Harrier breeding attempts in 2023, their population remain far below the 323-340 pairs that an [independent report](#) found should be present in the English uplands. It is clear that Hen Harriers continue to suffer relentless persecution. Despite their high levels of protection, and several years of the trialling of brood management, this illegal killing continues unabated. See [Ewing et al. 2023](#).



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.

“If Hen Harriers are to recover to their rightful breeding numbers in England, and the rest of the UK, we need to see more action on tackling illegal persecution.”

Mike Shurmer, RSPB’s Head of Species, England



One of the RSPB’s satellite-tagged Hen Harriers.



The first reintroduced White-tailed Eagle to have died as a result of illegal raptor persecution in England – a tragic situation.

White-tailed Eagles – a pattern of poisoning

On 18 October 2021, a member of a shoot was picking up shot birds on an estate in West Sussex. He entered a pheasant pen with his Labrador dog, Duke, who picked up a partially eaten pheasant carcass from the corner of the pen, close to a dead Red Kite.

Moments later, Duke started convulsing and foaming at the mouth. Forty minutes later, the dog was dead. Duke was buried the next day and at this point it became apparent that the dog's bed contained dead flies. Quickly, the dog's owner submitted the bedding for private laboratory testing. Results suggested that Duke had died from Bendiocarb poisoning.

Bendiocarb is a highly toxic insecticide. Its acute toxicity has resulted in it being banned for sale as the product Ficam W since June 2020 and only approved now as the less toxic variant Ficam D. Based on HSE data, Bendiocarb has been the most commonly abused pesticide in recent raptor poisoning cases.

Duke's owner informed the shoot manager about the confirmed poisoning of his dog and was subsequently paid several thousand pounds by the estate. He also reported the poisoning to the RSPB and police.

On 15 October 2021, just three days before Duke was poisoned, G408, a satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagle from the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation and Forestry England reintroduction project, sent back data which suggested it was no longer moving and presumed dead – on the same shooting estate. Sussex Police based at Midhurst were notified and the RSPB assisted with a land search on the estate. G408's body was eventually found wedged in a tree, very close to where Duke had been poisoned. The eagle was finally sent for toxicology testing by the police two months later, which confirmed it had also died as a result of ingesting Bendiocarb. It is believed the bird carried a bait laced with Bendiocarb into a tree to feed. Once the poison was in its system, it quickly died and was caught in the branches of the tree.

...the first confirmed case of the illegal persecution of a White-tailed Eagle in England since these impressive birds were persecuted to extinction in the late 1700s

The police investigation was tediously slow and only after a significant intervention by the NWCUC was the dog exhumed many months later, when evidentially sound toxicological samples were taken. Testing through WIIS confirmed the presence of Bendiocarb in the dog's body.

The laying of any poisoned bait in the open is illegal and indiscriminate, and is a method commonly used by those who wish to deliberately kill birds of prey. The intended target species often depends on the associated

land use or activity. On land associated with gamebird releasing and management the most frequent victims are Red Kites and Common Buzzards.

Although White-tailed Eagles are unlikely to be the intended target of these crimes these opportunistic scavengers are as at risk as any other bird of prey, especially in their first year when satellite-tagging data has shown they wander far and wide. This has serious conservation and financial implications for such high-profile reintroduction projects.

Although Sussex Police led a formal investigation into the poisoning of the dog and White-tailed Eagle, two years on, no charges have been brought. It is a bitterly disappointing outcome all round.

Sadly, the killing of G408 is a historically significant statistic as it is the first confirmed case of the illegal persecution of a White-tailed Eagle in England since these impressive birds were persecuted to extinction in the late 1700s. In addition, G408 is also the first reintroduced White-tailed Eagle to have died as a result of illegal raptor persecution in England – a tragic situation.

Unfortunately, G408 is not the last but rather the first of a pattern of recent White-tailed Eagle poisoning cases. As reported extensively in Birdcrime 2021 and the national press, a [White-tailed Eagle died in Dorset](#) in January 2022 after ingesting seven times the lethal dose of the rodenticide Brodifacoum. Like the case in West Sussex, which occurred three months previously, police investigations failed to bring any charges, with Dorset Police choosing not to search the estate where the dead eagle was found, despite representation from the NWCUC and the RSPB.

A month after the Dorset case, another satellite-tagged [White-tailed Eagle \(G393\)](#) died on the Isle of Wight in February 2022.



Duke, the Labrador Retriever, was poisoned just three days after a White-tailed Eagle on the same pheasant estate.

In this case, Hampshire Police responded admirably, recovering the bird and transporting it to a specialist laboratory for testing. Avian Influenza was detected which would normally mean no further testing would be possible, but HSE agreed to a restricted post-mortem being conducted as a special case. The results confirmed that Avian Influenza hadn't caused the eagle's death and although the restricted analysis couldn't definitively establish the cause of death, it did confirm that the bird had been exposed to the rodenticides Brodifacoum and Difenacoum. For more information, read the featured case study on page 21.

Finally, on 15 May 2023, in a shocking case in Northern Ireland, [two young White-tailed Eagles were found dead](#), side by side on Northern Ireland's only grouse moor at Glenwherry,

County Antrim. As in the Sussex case, both birds tested positive for the insecticide Bendiocarb. This is possibly the most significant case of raptor persecution in Northern Ireland to date. One of the birds was a satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagle, which had been released in August 2022 in Ireland as part of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) re-introduction programme. The second bird was an immature untagged individual, likely to have originated from Scotland or Ireland.

It is believed that the birds were foraging together when they ingested the illegally placed poison. Again, despite attempts by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the RSPB offering a £5,000 reward for any information leading to a conviction, there has been no development in this case.



The body of G408, found poisoned on a pheasant estate in West Sussex.

RSPB Investigations



Five White-tailed Eagles have been persecuted in the UK since 2021.

Katie Nethercoat (rspb-images.com)

Bird Flu: how has this virus affected birdcrime statistics?

The current strain of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) has had a devastating impact on the UK's wild birds since April 2021, particularly breeding seabirds. It is estimated that tens of thousands of birds have died across the UK, with over 70 bird species testing positive at the end of 2022.

Unfortunately, the disease has also taken a toll on birds of prey, with many contracting and dying from the virus. At least 224 individual raptors and owls tested positive for HPAI in 2022, with Common Buzzards, Sparrowhawks and Peregrine Falcons the most affected. There have also been positive tests in White-tailed Eagles, Golden Eagles and Hen Harriers.

Additionally, the on-going HPAI outbreak is impacting the ability for agencies to detect and fully investigate raptor persecution.

The virus is covered by the Specified Animal Pathogens Order meaning only licenced labs can carry out post-mortems of birds testing positive and such investigations focuses on disease rather than signs of wildlife crime. In the majority of cases if a bird tests positive for HPAI no further diagnostic post-mortem is undertaken. Biosecurity also prevents negative testing birds from being moved to other labs. The high profile of Avian Influenza means far more dead birds of prey will be reported directly to Defra and be collected by contractors rather than being reported to the police or the RSPB.

The Government run Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme (WIIS) is responsible for investigating potential poisoning of wildlife and

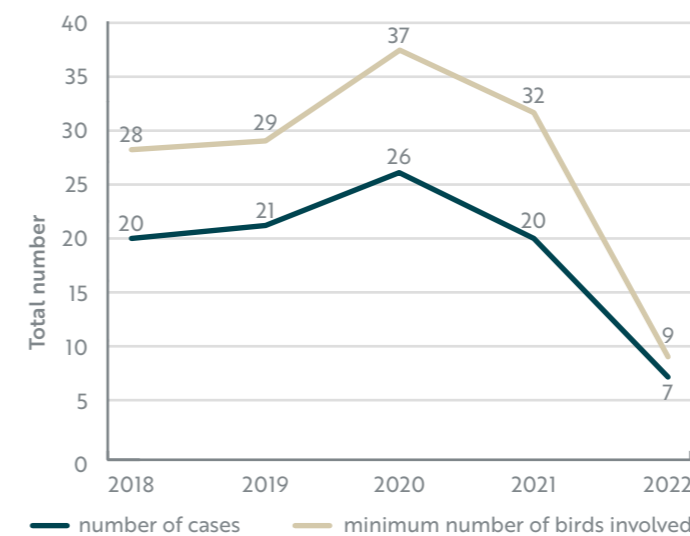
other animals across the UK. In 2022, the WIIS scheme data showed an unexpected decrease in the total number of cases submitted involving birds of prey. In 2021, 244 incidents involving birds of prey were examined under the scheme, which included a minimum of 297 individual birds of prey. But in 2022, this dropped by 46%, with only 132 incidents submitted, involving a minimum of 155 individual birds of prey.

Under the WIIS scheme, incidents where a pesticide has been deliberately used in an illegal manner to intentionally poison an animal are categorised as 'abuse'. Many of these incidents are investigated by the police, alongside other enforcement partners and the RSPB Investigations Team, with some resulting in successful prosecutions.

The number of confirmed 'abuse' incidents – where analysis concluded that birds of prey died after being deliberately poisoned – showed a significant drop in numbers in 2022, with only seven confirmed incidents of 'abuse'. In previous years (2018-2021) the number of confirmed incidents average 21 (see Graph 1).

This decrease in numbers in 2022 is further emphasised when looking at the total minimum number of individual birds of prey involved in these cases, with a minimum of nine individual birds being recorded as being deliberately poisoned in 2022. In comparison, in previous years (2018-2021) the average number of individual birds categorised as 'abuse' has been 31.5 (see Graph 1).

Confirmed total number of 'abuse' cases and total number of birds involved in 'abuse' cases 2018-2022



Graph 1: Numbers of 'abuse' incidents recorded under the WIIS scheme involving birds of prey, where poisoning was confirmed as the cause of death, and total minimum number of birds of prey which were confirmed to have died because of intentional poisoning. (Source: Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme)

Birds testing positive for HPAI

WIIS data for 2022 shows 36 cases where birds of prey tested positive for HPAI in Great Britain, where no further analysis took place. Birds that test positive for HPAI undergo no other testing and are incinerated. Without x-rays, post-mortems, and toxicology analyses, it is impossible to ascertain if the bird died from HPAI or whether it was carrying HPAI at the time of death and died of other causes. If a bird died from ingesting poison, was shot, or killed as a result of physical trauma, these crimes would not be confirmed if HPAI was present.

Case Study: Satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagle, carrying HPAI, tests positive for rodenticides

In February 2022, a satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagle was found dead on the Isle of Wight. The eagle, tagged G393, had been transmitting data which showed typical behaviour on the days and morning leading up to its death. At around 2pm on 24 February 2022, the transmitted data showed that the bird landed in a field and remained there for five minutes before flying off. Half an hour

later the tag data indicated the bird was dead. The eagle tested positive for HPAI and therefore a post-mortem was not carried out. Significantly the examination revealed that the bird did not die from HPAI. The Health and Safety Executive later agreed to a restricted post-mortem being conducted as a special case. Significantly, the test established that HPAI was not the cause of the bird's death and tissue samples sent for toxicology testing confirmed residues of the rodenticides Brodifacoum and Difenacoum.

Unfortunately, because the tissue samples had been stored in Formalin (a requirement for storing HPAI positive samples) it was impossible to determine the original concentration of the poison. Because of this, the cause of death of the White-tailed Eagle was recorded as 'uncertain'. Although the outcome was not conclusive, it was only further tested because it was an eagle. Had this been a more common bird of prey no further post-mortem would have been undertaken.

Birds testing negative for HPAI

In response to an Environmental Information Regulations request, APHA state that birds which test negative for the virus undergo a 'diagnostic post-mortem'. However, this is only carried out on birds which have recently died and is focused on disease. Few birds have toxicology samples taken. No birds are x-rayed or passed to another lab or agency with wildlife crime expertise before being incinerated. In 2022, in England and Wales, of the 204 birds of prey (across 192 separate incidents) 94 did not have a diagnosis or cause of death.

Birds associated with HPAI

There is also evidence that birds of prey found near HPAI positive birds do not undergo further testing, as only a sample of birds will be tested. In the case of birds of prey this threshold is a single bird. This association with HPAI means even in cases where evidence suggests these birds have been illegally killed, if a single bird tests positive for HPAI the cause of death of the others cannot be investigated.

Case Study: two dead Sparrowhawks found lying next to suspected poisoned bait

In March 2022, two dead Sparrowhawks were found at a property in West Yorkshire, one lying next to a dead white dove and the other on top of a second dead white dove. The doves had a blue substance on them. The police identified a pigeon racer in the area and found substances at his property which appeared identical to those found on the dove carcasses. These substances, along with the four dead birds were sent to WIIS for analysis.

One of the Sparrowhawks and both doves tested positive for HPAI and were not examined further. The second Sparrowhawk, which appeared to have been a healthy bird, tested negative, but was not sent for further analysis because of its association with the other birds.

Testing of the substances found at the property confirmed that they were poisons - Bromadiolone (a rat poison) and Bendiocarb (a highly toxic insecticide). The evidence suggests that this was a typical case of a person intentionally using poisoned baits to kill raptors. Unfortunately, because neither Sparrowhawk underwent a postmortem examination or toxicology testing due to the presence of HPAI, their cause of death remains unconfirmed and the police investigation was closed.

What needs to happen

HPAI is likely to be with us for years to come and we cannot afford to allow its impact on wildlife crime detection and investigation to continue. In addition, if the inaccurate trend in confirmed poisonings continues this could end up justifying a reduction in funding for wildlife crime investigations going forward.

In response to this, we are calling for urgent action on the following:

- A safe way to take and store samples from birds that are HPAI positive to ensure wildlife crimes don't fall through the gaps.
- A clear process for carcasses to move between labs and undergo full investigation for cause of death where wildlife crime is suspected.
- Protocols for the use of swab testing kits in the field to rule out HPAI quickly so that carcasses can be frozen for further post-mortem by the relevant lab or agency, as currently happens in Scotland.
- Training for HPAI helpline staff and contractors collecting carcasses for testing to ensure further information is collected at point of recovery where wildlife crime is suspected.
- The reinstatement of the Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme (PBMS), which monitors concentrations of contaminants like rodenticides in bird carcasses and eggs (PBMS was suspended in March 2023 due to concerns over the risk of exposure to avian influenza).

[Click here to find out more information on avian influenza.](#)

Claire Smith, RSPB's Senior Policy Officer – Avian Influenza: “It is imperative that the right steps are taken to prevent HPAI from having an additional and lasting impact on how wildlife crimes are detected and investigated. This virus is already devastating our wild bird populations. Some simple steps and joined up thinking could vastly improve detection of wildlife crime during the ongoing avian influenza outbreak.”



One of the two dead Sparrowhawks found lying next to white doves believed to have been laced with poison. Due to the presence of HPAI, their deaths could not be investigated.

Country focus

England

Number of confirmed incidents: 46

In 2022 there were two successful convictions in England related to raptor persecution. Significantly, both related to gamekeepers working on land managed for pheasant shooting, one in Norfolk (see the case study on page 10) and the other in Wiltshire, involving a gamekeeper placing dead birds of prey into a well, [see Birdcrime 2021](#). Although the RSPB applaud each and every successful case, often sentences are inadequate in proportion to the crime and therefore fail to act as the much-needed deterrent to others who commit these crimes. Suspended sentences or fines tend to be the standard penalty issued, rather than custodial sentences – which have never been handed out in England for any raptor persecution case.

In recent years, the most successful cases have all hinged on multi-agency warrants and land searches led by the Police under Section 19 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. These have uncovered vital evidence, resulting in guilty pleas at court.

It is concerning that there are still inconsistencies in enforcement action across England, with some police forces failing to

investigate cases of raptor persecution properly, either by not working to best practice standards or failing to seek expert support from the NWCU and RSPB. In many cases, effective enforcement can depend on the police force and often the specific officers directly involved in the case. Until these fundamental failings are addressed, the positive impact that enforcement action can bring to tackle raptor persecution will remain a major issue and potential cases will go un-investigated and unresolved. To this end, we really welcome the recent addition of dedicated detective capabilities within the NWCU.

Another area of concern in England is the outdated legislative framework relating to raptor persecution. Due to the lack of culpability for employers and shoot managers, there is a significant legislative black hole in responsibility and accountability for these crimes with pressures falling on some gamekeepers on shooting estates to kill birds of prey from higher up the managerial chain. Only through legislative and regulatory improvements including the introduction of licensing of driven grouse moors and vicarious liability can positive long-term change happen. Both of these were recommended in the [United Nations Report \(2021\)](#) which the Government is yet to implement.



At least 72% of raptor persecution incidents in England are linked to areas managed for gamebird shoots.

Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)



In 2022 in Wales, five Common Buzzards died after ingesting the pesticide Bendiocarb.

Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

Wales

Number of confirmed incidents: 8

2022 marked the third and final year in which the Welsh Government provided financial support for the role of a RSPB Raptor Officer for Wales. The RSPB is truly grateful for their support in tackling the issue of raptor persecution in Wales, which has led to significant cases being investigated, and has enabled us to gain a greater understanding of the extent of raptor persecution in Wales and nationally. In light of the findings of the 3-year project, early in 2023 the RSPB created a permanent Investigation Officer role in Wales, dedicated to tackling raptor persecution.

In 2021, a shot Buzzard, a poisoned Red Kite, poisoned baits, and banned pesticides were found on a North Wales Police led search on the McAlpine estate, Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog, North Wales. David Matthews, a gamekeeper who worked in the gamebird industry for almost 50 years was subsequently charged with the possession and illegal storage of a significant quantity of approved and banned substances. [This case](#) was the worst instance of illegal pesticide storage the RSPB Investigations Team had ever seen. On 6 June 2022, Matthews pleaded guilty to the offences at Wrexham Magistrates and received a paltry total fine of £219.

There have been several raptor persecution investigations in Wales in 2022, involving poisoning, shooting, and illegal trapping.

Some of these cases are ongoing, which we hope will lead to successful prosecutions.

In 2022, five Common Buzzards died after ingesting the illegally used pesticide Bendiocarb, with a sixth successfully rehabilitated for release. In addition to these, two separate cases involving two Goshawks were submitted into the Wildlife Incident Investigations Scheme (WIIS), operated by the Welsh Government. Both tested positive for anti-coagulant rodenticides at levels usually associated with deliberate poisoning.

Despite some cases reaching court proceedings, the approach to enforcement and appropriate follow-up action by the police remains disappointingly inconsistent in Wales. Past successful prosecution cases have shown that coordinated and organised multi-agency engagement often result in successful investigations and convictions. The RSPB Investigations team remains committed to supporting police investigations across the country to ensure incidents of raptor persecution are effectively investigated in Wales, and across the UK.

In July 2022 Natural Resources Wales (NRW) introduced changes to the General Licences. These amendments, including the introduction of diced meats as bait and the prohibition of two-compartment 'hawk' traps, will reduce the risk of trapping non-target species in authorised traps, directly benefiting raptors in Wales.



This satellite-tagged Golden Eagle was suspected to have been caught in a spring trap, before being driven to another location, and dumped near a lay-by in Aberdeenshire, where it died (2012).

Scotland

Number of confirmed incidents: 4

Since devolution in the late 1990s, successive Scottish Governments have introduced a variety of measures in a bid to tackle the illegal killing of birds of prey and the significant impact it has on the conservation status of Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier, Red Kite and Peregrine Falcons. These steps have included making the possession of certain pesticides illegal, introducing ‘Vicarious Liability’ legislation (whereby a person can be held liable for the actions of another), a pesticide disposal scheme and facilitating NatureScot’s ability to suspend a landholding’s right to use General Licences.

In August 2016, the Scottish Government commissioned an [independent review](#) in response to increasing concerns about the regular and suspicious disappearance of young satellite-tagged Golden Eagles, as they travelled around Scotland’s uplands. This independently peer-reviewed study was underpinned by data from satellite tags that researchers from RSPB and several other organisations and agencies had fitted to Scottish Golden Eagles, and provided key evidence that highlighted the problem of raptor persecution on Scotland’s grouse moors.

The [review’s results](#) showed almost a third of young, satellite-tagged Golden Eagles “disappeared under suspicious circumstances” and that “areas managed as grouse moors were strongly associated with the disappearance of

many of the tagged eagles”. The review also showed that the persecution of young Golden Eagles on Scottish grouse moors was suppressing population numbers in the central and eastern Highlands.

...almost a third of young, satellite-tagged Golden Eagles “disappeared under suspicious circumstances”

The same day the review was published, the Scottish Government announced the introduction of an independent expert group to examine the environmental impact of grouse moor management and their regulation, including the introduction of licensing for grouse shoots.

This latter suggestion was subsequently included as a recommendation of the “[Werritty Review](#)” of grouse moor management, published in November 2019. Legislation to license the shooting of grouse and muirburn and to regulate trap use, under the provisions of the [Wildlife Management and Muirburn \(Scotland\) Bill](#), is currently being considered by the Scottish Parliament. Given the RSPB has been campaigning on this issue for more than a decade, this is very welcome.

Evidence provided by the Scottish Government’s Wildlife Management Unit during its scrutiny of the Bill showed that between 2012-21, at least

50% of crimes against birds of prey in Scotland were connected with land managed for grouse shooting. Given that grouse moors cover a small fraction of Scotland’s land area (7-15%), this finding highlights the concentration of offences associated with this industry.

Recorded crimes do not represent the full picture. As Professor Ian Newton from the Grouse Moor Management Group noted in his verbal evidence to the Committee on 21st June 2023, the number of incidents discovered is largely by chance and “represent the tip of an iceberg”. As the results of the Golden Eagle satellite-tagging review showed, only a small number of birds that were recorded as illegally killed were recovered. Of the 131 tagged Golden Eagles analysed, there were ten natural deaths and five birds confirmed to have been illegally killed. Of these 131 tagged Golden Eagles, the satellite-tag data of 41 birds (29%) showed a sudden stop with no malfunction. These eagles which ‘suspiciously disappeared’ were assumed to have been killed.

Interestingly, the tags that had been fitted to two of these latter ‘disappeared’ birds were subsequently discovered, purely by chance, years later. One had been wrapped in tin foil, tied to a rock, and thrown in a loch. The other had had its antenna cut off, and was wrapped in lead sheeting and thrown in a river.

Shot, poisoned, and trapped raptors that are discovered are recorded as confirmed incidents in this and previous Birdcrime reports. Also, if linked to poisoning, these cases are reported in raptor crime statistics published by the Scottish Government as ‘abuse’ under the WIIS scheme. However, those birds whose tags display the symptomatic ‘stop no malfunction’ are not recorded as confirmed incidents of raptor persecution. Therefore, there is a significant black hole in terms of probable raptor persecution data. If these birds had died naturally the tags

would still transmit data and their bodies would potentially be recoverable. Yet in these cases the birds and their tags ‘disappear’.

Since the independent review was published in 2017, there has been a continued trend of satellite-tagged birds disappearing or found illegally killed on Scotland’s grouse moors with no suggestion of tag malfunction, in identical fashion to those 41 Golden Eagles. Between January 2017 and the end of 2022, a further 8 Golden Eagles, 21 Hen Harriers, 5 White-tailed Eagles and a Red Kite were recorded as ‘stopped no malfunction’ tagged birds on Scottish grouse moors.

When a satellite-tagged bird ‘disappears’, information is supplied to Police Scotland and the NWCU to allow them to make an independent assessment of what had likely transpired. In none of the cases of disappeared birds outlined above, was a tagged bird found. Most of these 35 ‘disappeared’ birds last transmitted in the same “hotspots” well known for previous confirmed raptor persecution incidents.

Despite a substantial and consistent body of evidence, there are some in Scotland who repeatedly claim that crimes against raptors are at a “historic low”. The reality, however, is that the satellite-tagged raptors continue to regularly ‘disappear’ almost exclusively in areas managed intensively for driven grouse shooting. The fact that the birds and tags are often unrecovered, highlights the lengths to which the perpetrators of the crimes are going to, to hide the evidence. In addition to this, the sustained long-term absence of successfully breeding raptors across the uplands of south and east Scotland, shows that the “historic low” claim is untrue.

It remains clear that only the enactment of the grouse moor licensing legislation currently being considered by the Scottish Parliament is likely to impact on those criminals who continue to operate on Scotland’s grouse moors.



Two juvenile White-tailed Eagles, found poisoned by Bendiocarb on Glenwherry grouse moor in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland

Number of confirmed incidents: 3

Poisoning continues to be the prevailing method of targeting raptors in Northern Ireland, with four Peregrine Falcons, a Red Kite and (in 2023) two White-tailed Eagles dying as a result of ingesting suspected poisoned baits.

In autumn 2022 a Red Kite tested positive for Alphachloralose poisoning in County Down - the latest in a long list of persecution cases in Northern Ireland involving Red Kites, which have occurred since these birds were reintroduced to Northern Ireland in 2008.

Since 2009, 15 Red Kites have been persecuted in Northern Ireland. Of these, 13 died as a result of ingesting poison. It is likely that the use of poisoned baits is a significant contributory factor as to why this species is struggling to thrive in Northern Ireland. With limited public access to much of the Northern Irish countryside, these recorded incidents are suspected to be a small proportion of the true number of persecuted Red Kites in Northern Ireland.

These cases of Red Kite poisonings, alongside the devastating news of two poisoned White-tailed Eagles in May 2023, which died as a result of ingesting the highly toxic pesticide Bendiocarb on a grouse moor at Glenwherry (see page 30), further highlights that the poisoning of raptors is an ongoing and increasingly serious issue in Northern Ireland. Since 2009 there have been 58 poisoning incidents confirmed as raptor persecution in Northern Ireland. This unlawful and indiscriminate method of persecution not only threatens the survival of raptors in Northern Ireland but threatens the safety of all wildlife and people.

There is an urgent need for revised legislation surrounding the use of banned pesticides to successfully tackle this problem. After the poisoning of the two White-tailed Eagles in May 2023, the Northern Irish Raptor Study

Group initiated an [online petition](#) asking for the introduction of new legislation making it an offence to be 'in possession' of certain banned substances. This law was introduced in Scotland in 2005 (Possession of Pesticides (Scotland) Order 2005) and has led to many successful prosecution cases, connected to raptor persecution. We hope that Northern Ireland will follow suit, and the online petition will successfully instigate legislative change.

If implemented in Northern Ireland this legislation may lead to the successful prosecution of individuals who are found to be in possession of these named banned substances, resulting in poisons being confiscated and destroyed, potentially saving the lives of raptors and other wildlife.

The Partnership for Action against Wildlife Crime Northern Ireland (PAWNI) raptor sub-group will publish their latest Bird of Prey Persecution and Poisoning Report for Northern Ireland in late 2023.



Peregrine Falcon poisoned after ingesting the pesticide Carbofuran.

Image credit: RSPB



Members of the National Wildlife Crime Unit, Natural England, Norfolk Police and the RSPB Investigations Team, after carrying out a land search during a raptor persecution investigation, resulting in a conviction. For more information about this case, see page 16.

Working together

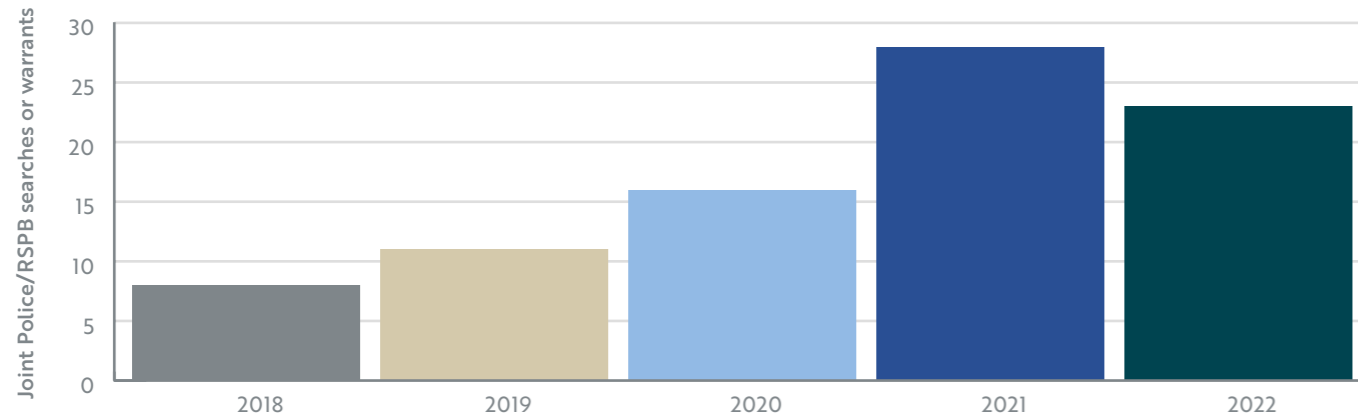
Successful partnership working

The RSPB has instigated and supported the majority of raptor persecution investigations across the UK over the last 30 years, working closely with police forces, raptor study groups, veterinary laboratories and prosecuting agencies. However, cases remain stubbornly difficult to investigate and bring to court. It is encouraging that in the past three years there has been a noticeable increase in resources

aimed at investigating raptor persecution cases, from the NWCU and individual police forces. This effective enforcement resulted in four successful convictions in 2021 and two in 2022, showing the efficacy of partnership working.

Looking forward, we particularly welcome the NWCU now having a dedicated detective resource, which is essential when dealing with serious cases.

Multi-agency land searches or warrants relating to bird of prey persecution with RSPB involvement



From 2018 to 2022, the RSPB Investigations team have attended a total of 78 bird of prey related multi-agency searches. These investigations all involved search warrants of suspects addresses or land searches of estates, vehicles and out-buildings, with police inviting the RSPB to attend as expert partners. Partnership working is essential to tackling raptor persecution and the Investigations team is always willing to assist police forces in looking for and assessing valuable evidence with the aim of securing convictions.

Image credit: RSPB



A shot Short-eared Owl, recovered from Broomhead Moor within the Peak District National Park, by South Yorkshire Police and the RSPB Investigations Team (June 2022). [Click here](#) to find out more.



10 Red Kites were confirmed victims of raptor persecution in 2022.

Stronger than ever

The RSPB now has a fully-functioning four-country Investigations Team, receiving intelligence, carrying out dedicated fieldwork and working closely with enforcement partners and the police.

For over 30 years the RSPB have been investigating wildlife crimes, assisting with police investigations and incidents reported by the public. As cases of raptor persecution continue, the Investigations Team has had a recent fieldwork restructure to confront the issue of raptor persecution in a more strategic and resourceful way, tackling incidents and detecting crimes which may otherwise have been overlooked.

This has resulted in the creation of two additional Investigation Officer posts in Wales and Northern Ireland. The RSPB Investigations Team now has a national presence with officers working in all four countries across the UK. These new roles have already proved to be essential, creating valuable links with enforcement partners and exposing a variety of raptor persecution incidents, many of which are on-going investigations which we hope will lead to successful prosecutions.

Despite our best efforts, illegal raptor persecution remains a significant and constant issue across the UK, destabilising populations of raptors in particular regions and suppressing the natural recovery of rare and threatened species. In 2020 the RSPB's Birdcrime Report revealed a record high of 137 incidents which since publication has risen to 146 incidents. Although data shows a fall in incident numbers in 2022 (probably linked to birds of prey being sent for Avian Influenza testing as opposed to persecution testing) - individual raptor persecution cases in 2022 exposed a new level of brutality, particularly in cases involving Hen Harriers on driven grouse moors.

"As long as the killing of raptors continues, the RSPB will do everything possible to expose these crimes and prevent the illegal persecution of the UK's birds of prey."

The challenges faced by the Investigations Team in tackling the issue of illegal raptor persecution are constantly growing and evolving and can be difficult to tackle on a personal and emotional level. Many birds which are the victim of these crimes are well known to members of the team, whether it is a Hen Harrier that has been observed through the breeding season or a satellite-tagged Golden Eagle monitored from the start of its life. Through observations and satellite-tag data it is possible to gain a real insight into their lives. Their successes and failures become personal highs and lows to the officers involved, and it's that connection which makes their death or 'suspicious disappearance' all the harder to bear.

Jack Ashton-Booth, RSPB Investigations Officer: "Once the tags are fitted and we leave the chicks to settle and await the return of the parent bird, it's with mixed emotions. We hope these birds

will thrive, but the reality of the situation sits at the back of our minds. Many of these birds won't make it, and that's not due to natural causes, predation, or health, but because a person may go to great lengths to kill it. Whatever the pressures, motives or reasons that an individual might have to justify their act, for us it's simple: a protected, vulnerable and rare wild bird, which has to tackle all the stresses that nature throws at it to survive, is targeted ultimately because it is a bird of prey."

It is this level of compassion, commitment and drive which makes the RSPB Investigations Team so effective, filling a void between the police and the public. They respond to reports, assists with police investigations, and works tirelessly in the field to gather evidence which can often be crucial to a conviction. The necessity of their work and commitment to the role is what gives the Investigations Team the determination to tackle these crimes.



A member of the RSPB Investigations Team carrying out vital fieldwork.

The solution

The RSPB is calling on UK governments to take urgent action to tackle the problem of illegal raptor persecution. Only through improved legislation and enforcement of regulation can we ensure the future of these birds in the UK.

In the UK all wild birds of prey are protected by law, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, yet these iconic species continue to be targeted and killed – shot, poisoned and trapped – often in connection with land managed for gamebird shooting. This relentless killing is having a devastating effect on some species on a local and national level, threatening the future of birds like the Hen Harrier. This persecution cannot go on.

In December 2021, the UN published a [report](#) on UK wildlife crime – as requested by Defra. It contained several recommendations on raptor persecution including a call for stronger regulation of the shooting industry. Since its publication, the RSPB has called on the Westminster Government to take these UK recommendations forward, following Scotland's example of initiating the process of introducing licensing for grouse shooting as part of the [Wildlife and Muirburn Bill](#). Almost two years on, no official response has been forthcoming from Defra. In the current nature and climate emergency, we once again urgently ask UK governments to take these UN recommendations forward.

We recommend: 1. Introduction of licenses for grouse shooting

Legislation, including the licensing of grouse moors is currently being considered by the Scottish Government following significant evidence of raptor persecution linked to the grouse shooting industry. The RSPB believes that licensing of driven grouse shoots is needed across the entire UK, to ensure these estates operate to legal standards and that there is greater public accountability when illegal persecution occurs. Detected raptor persecution

should then result in sanctions including license withdrawal for a defined period as a meaningful deterrent to wildlife crime.

2. Introduction of additional regulation for pheasant and partridge shooting

The RSPB believes that further regulation and better enforcement of existing rules are essential to deliver the changes necessary. The RSPB is calling for governments across the UK to license the release of non-native gamebirds and Mallards, underpinned by a statutory code of practice, with mandatory reporting of movements and releases. We believe statutory licensing is the only way to achieve these changes. We recognise that there can be habitat benefits for wildlife from gamebird management, but high numbers and densities of releases can impact biodiversity and voluntary approaches show no sign of reducing the risks. Additionally, we are calling for mandatory reporting of all birds released to the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) in order to be able to accurately monitor numbers released.

3. Appropriate sentencing

Although more cases of illegal raptor persecution are reaching the courts, the penalties given are often not harsh enough to act as deterrents to others. [In 2015, a Scottish gamekeeper](#) was convicted of killing or injuring a Goshawk and illegally taking another two birds of prey. He was sentenced to four months in prison. This is the only time a person has been given a custodial sentence in connection with the illegal killing of birds of prey. In contrast, in 2022, a gamekeeper, Matthew Stroud, pleaded guilty to shooting and poisoning multiple birds of prey. He only

received a 200-hour community order and total fine of £1,200 (see page 16 for more details). Without sufficient penalties those who are willing to commit these crimes will continue to do so. We call on Magistrates to ensure more appropriate sentencing outcomes, based on impact statements.

4. Improvements to testing procedures associated with Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) is a notifiable disease. Birds that test positive for HPAI can only undergo a post-mortem at labs with a Specified Animal Pathogens Order (SAPO) licence. These investigations focus on disease rather than signs of wildlife crime. Procedures which help to establish cases of raptor persecution, like x-rays, are not undertaken. Biosecurity also prevents birds which test negative from being moved to other labs. These requirements are

preventing the detection of raptor persecution. The RSPB is calling for improvements to each stage of investigation where birds of prey are collected for avian influenza testing to ensure that sufficient information is recorded to determine whether a wildlife crime has been committed.



Conclusion

As the recently published 2023 [State of Nature Report](#) revealed, the UK's wildlife is continuing to decline, with 43% of bird species assessed at risk of extinction. As one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, and while we face the serious and concerning impacts of climate change, we need to ensure that those species which are being illegally persecuted can be protected and conserved.

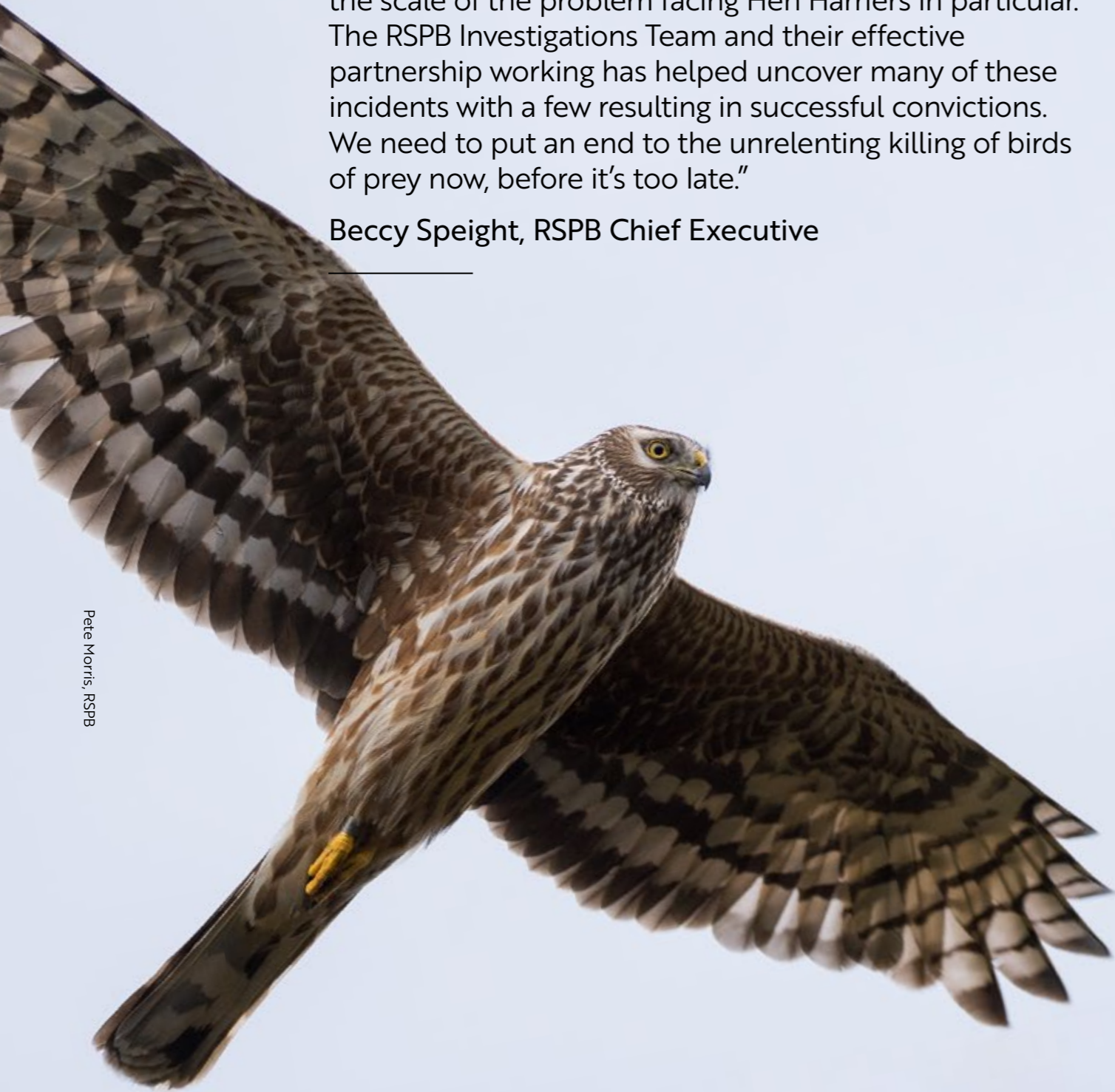
As already highlighted in this report, the illegal killing of birds of prey continues to be a considerable problem in the UK. Hen Harriers continually 'disappear' over, or near to, driven grouse moorland, multiple species of poisoned raptors are confirmed by the WIIS scheme, and cases where birds are intentionally shot or trapped on upland and lowland gamebird estates stubbornly persist.

The relentless targeting of birds of prey is having a serious conservation impact on their survival, leaving some species populations at an unstable level in some areas, and in the case of the Hen Harrier nationally suppressing their viable natural breeding numbers. Since 2013, the RSPB have recorded over one thousand cases of confirmed raptor persecution across the UK. We need drastic and meaningful action now, to stop this trend of raptor persecution.

We call on the UK's governments to implement the recommendations as set out in the [UN report](#) and introduce the necessary legislative changes and improvements to ensure the illegal killing of birds of prey can be effectively prevented. Through the introduction of regulation, improvements in enforcement and accountability we can ensure that these birds have a future in the UK.

“There’s nothing more thrilling than watching a bird of prey soaring overhead but in some areas of the UK, because of illegal persecution, these encounters are sadly rare. This year’s Birdcrime report emphasises the brutality and seriousness of the issue of raptor persecution and the scale of the problem facing Hen Harriers in particular. The RSPB Investigations Team and their effective partnership working has helped uncover many of these incidents with a few resulting in successful convictions. We need to put an end to the unrelenting killing of birds of prey now, before it’s too late.”

Beccy Speight, RSPB Chief Executive



Pete Morris, RSPB

The satellite tagging of Hen Harriers is essential for us to monitor their survival.

How you can help

The illegal killing of protected birds of prey is rarely out of the news. It’s reassuring to know that we have huge public support to try to prevent and stop these horrific crimes. The RSPB Investigations Team relies heavily on the goodwill and support of the public in helping us investigate raptor persecution in the field and would like to thank those individuals who provide crucial intelligence and support which enables us to pursue suspected illegal persecution incidents and prevent similar crimes from being committed.

In addition to reporting crimes, the public plays a significant role in highlighting legislative and policy issues. By putting pressure on UK governments to amend the current statutory landscape we aim to tackle the wider legal issues relating to raptor persecution, bringing the injustices of the illegal killing of raptors to the forefront of the political sphere. The welfare and survival of these species and their habitats continues to be

threatened across the UK and it is only through legislative changes that we have any hope of ending the horrific incidents documented in this report.

We also depend heavily on the generosity of the public to support the work of the Investigations Team through donations. These gifts have helped fund several satellite-tags which have enabled us to monitor and track individual birds and, in some cases sadly, confirm when a bird has died or ‘suspiciously disappeared’. Without this, we would not have the strong evidence that proves these horrendous crimes are happening and allows us to pin point hotspots of raptor persecution.

If you’d like to find out more about ways to donate to the RSPB, you can discover more [here](#).

There is also a fundraising appeal raising money for the RSPB to fund more satellite tags to help monitor Hen Harriers. You can find out more [here](#).

Report a crime

If you see suspicious activity, find evidence of illegal traps or find a dead or injured bird of prey in suspicious circumstances, please:



Call the police on **101**, or **999** if a crime is in progress



Report it to the RSPB by filling in [this online form](#)



Email the RSPB Investigations Team at: crime@rspb.org.uk



Call the RSPB’s confidential Raptor Crime Hotline on **0300 999 0101**

How you can support the RSPB Investigations Team

You can help the RSPB Investigations Team fight for the future of birds of prey by financially supporting our work. This will help us continue monitoring problem areas, installing remote cameras and gathering evidence of crimes.

If you’re interested in supporting the team and would like to learn more, contact Mark Thomas, the RSPB’s Head of Investigations: mark.thomas@rspb.org.uk.



Protecting habitats, saving species
and helping to end the nature and
climate emergency.

**Nature is in crisis.
Together we can save it.**

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