

# Wildlife crime

The far reaching impacts of crimes against wildlife

Wildlife and  
Countryside



Cyswllt Amgylchedd  
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Environment Link





## Foreword

# Nature is a necessity and not a luxury: it's down to us to protect it

**T**he wildlife around us, our birds, mammals, seas, habitats and the ecosystems that support them are not to be taken for granted.

They are essential to our freedom, our economy, and the identity of the places we call home. When wildlife is harmed, whether through illegal killing, illegal trade, organised exploitation or the erosion of habitats, the damage is felt not just by nature but by communities, businesses, and society as a whole.

This annual report, produced in partnership with the many organisations who contribute expertise, intelligence and frontline action, demonstrates why tackling wildlife crime must remain a national and collective priority. What these pages show is not

a single agency's success but the power of collaboration from conservationists, enforcement agencies, prosecutors, policymakers, scientists and communities working together to expose criminals, protect victims and restore harm.

Wildlife crime in the UK is rarely isolated. Increasingly we see it woven into wider patterns of offending. We continue to see opportunistic offending and the emergence of polycriminality, and in too many cases, activity that supports or is driven by serious and organised crime networks. In the context of law enforcement the term polycriminality can refer to both individuals and organised crime groups who are involved in multiple types of criminal activities. Illegal wildlife trade, wildlife-related financial flows, and



the illicit supply chains that cross borders all amplify harm to species and communities who depend on nature, and on the rule of law. This intersectionality makes wildlife crime more than an environmental issue — it is a threat to public safety, livelihoods, and national resilience.

This report highlights both progress and the work that remains. We have achieved meaningful operational outcomes, improved intelligence exchange, and built stronger relationships with our partners across government, non-governmental organisations and international law enforcement. Yet emerging threats, from online marketplaces facilitating abuse, to sophisticated cross-border smuggling and the criminal use and abuse of technologies, require us to adapt at pace.

My ask of readers and partners is simple and urgent: sustain and strengthen the collective response. That means investing in specialist capacity and forensic capability, improving intelligence-sharing and prosecution

pathways, supporting community reporting and education, and deepening international cooperation to disrupt the financial infrastructure of criminals and dismantle networks. It also means recognising the societal importance of nature protection and making the prevention of harm to wildlife part of mainstream public safety and economic resilience agendas.

To everyone who contributes to this report and to the wider effort, thank you. Your work is delivering results and, crucially, building the systems we need to prevent harm before it happens or to expose the true nature of criminality. Together we will continue to push back against those who monetise suffering, exploit the natural world and threaten our shared future.

**Kevin Lacks-Kelly**

Head, UK National Wildlife Crime Unit

Chair, INTERPOL Wildlife Crime Working Group



**“wildlife crime (is) more than an environmental issue – it is a threat to public safety, livelihoods, and national resilience.”**



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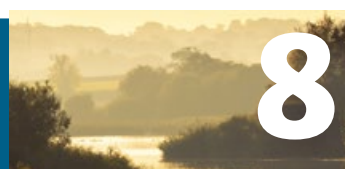
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# Introduction

## Wildlife crime



**M**any wild species and habitats are protected by legislation. Too often, criminals break the law and harm these protected species, frequently facing little to no consequences for their actions. Severe crimes and welfare harms are also committed against unprotected species, with thousands of reported incidents of suffering every year. Our 2024 data shows that wildlife crime remains widespread and serious, yet conviction rates continue to be alarmingly low.

Wildlife crime can take many forms, with some more familiar to the public than others. This report documents reports throughout 2024 of incidence, prosecutions

and convictions of seven of these criminal offences: bird of prey crime, bat, badger and marine mammal disturbance and persecution, breaches of the hunting Act, fisheries crimes and the illegal trade of species covered by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). It also includes reports of incidents of welfare and planning-related wildlife harms caused by developers who did not comply with the law.

Crimes against animals are often vicious, immensely cruel and inhumane. On the orders of criminals for 'sport' or 'entertainment', characteristic animals of the countryside like the badger or hare are torn from their home or pursued by dogs and then face a violent, agonising and needless death.

Badger baiting, fighting and digging incidents represent 13.5% of total incidents.<sup>1</sup> The dogs used in these incidents are poorly treated and owners do not seek necessary veterinary assistance when injured.

The criminal justice system is failing wildlife. Our 2023 report identified a record low level of convictions despite reports of wildlife crime incidents remaining stubbornly high.<sup>2</sup> The number of recorded wildlife crime offences is likely to be a huge underrepresentation of the true level of criminal activity across England and Wales. In part this is due to the isolated locations that they take place in and the nature of criminal activity, but a significant issue lies in the way that wildlife crimes are recorded.



In contrast to many other crimes, wildlife crimes lack a dedicated recording standard and are often filed in 'miscellaneous' or 'generic' categories by police forces. 61% of police officers reported to Naturewatch Foundation that wildlife offences are not easily searchable in their recording systems.<sup>3</sup> Without a national police record, it is up to

charities and eNGOs to record reports of the annual wildlife crime offences in their work areas and present it in this report. This data is the best indication of levels of crimes being committed in England and Wales but is not a comprehensive record.

Link gratefully acknowledges all the organisations that contributed to the collection of this data, including the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) and the many local police forces for their vital role at the wildlife crime frontline.

Tackling wildlife crime is at the heart of the commitments to improve animal welfare and to create safer streets. There is no time to delay making Britain safer for people and wildlife alike. Recent NWCU analysis has documented the strong link between offenders of wildlife crimes and other violent and serious crimes, including illegal firearm use, money laundering, and domestic violence. Despite the magnitude of these offences, and the connection to other serious offences, many criminals are getting away with committing wildlife crimes. Limited funding and training for police forces and for the Crown Prosecution Service, limited data of offences, gaps in sentencing guidelines for wildlife crimes and disparities in the legislation are all contributing factors to this.

The law must be fit for purpose to prevent and appropriately penalise wildlife crime and animal welfare offences, and police forces and the Crown Prosecution Service must be able to robustly deal with offences of this nature.



# Recommendations

**Wildlife and Countryside Link urge the Government to raise the stakes for wildlife crime offenders and:**

**1**

Make at least eleven major wildlife crimes reportable (notifiable) to the Home Office so that they are recorded in national statistics.<sup>4</sup>

**2**

Work with the Sentencing Council to develop sentencing guidelines in England and Wales for key wildlife crimes, including breaches of the Wildlife & Countryside Act, Hunting Act, Protection of Badgers Act, Habitats Regulations and Control of Trade in Endangered Species (COTES) regulations.

**3**

Increase penalties for wildlife crime offences in line with higher levels of sentencing available for companion animal welfare offences under the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021 (in similar fashion to the Scottish Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Act 2020).

**4**

Increase local authority planning inspections and enforcement of regulation to prevent illegal wildlife harm from development projects.

**5**

Increase wildlife crime and animal welfare training for police forces (online or face to face), ensuring officers, including neighbourhood police officers, are trained to detect and confidently respond to wildlife crime and animal welfare offences. 90% of police officers told Naturewatch Foundation that they would like more face-to-face training for wildlife and animal welfare offences.<sup>5</sup>

**6**

Provide longer term, index-linked funding for the National Wildlife Crime Unit so that they may continue their work on the same scale or with greater resources. Funding should also go towards developing a public awareness campaign to show the variety and magnitude of wildlife crime and how to report offences.

**7**

Meet the manifesto commitment to ban snares and tighten the Hunting Act and associated practices, to end the wildlife harm and illegal activity involved in these practices.

# 2024 data: the tip of the iceberg

**Table 1** Number of reports and convictions of wildlife crime

NUMBER OF INCIDENTS REPORTED								
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Badgers (England & Wales)	633	551	452	713	654	600	636	592
Bats (England, Wales & Scotland)	173	108	136	94	133	161	186	157
Fisheries (England & Wales from 2020)	4,169	2,681	3,095	4,163	3,337	2,972	2,916	2,820
Hunting (England & Wales)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Illegal trade CITES (UK wide)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Marine mammals (certain countries only)	169	326	193	366	450	508	1,290	1,098
Birds of prey (England & Wales)	216	280	230	321	330	263	187	152
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,360</b>	<b>3,946</b>	<b>4,106</b>	<b>5,657</b>	<b>4,904</b>	<b>4,504</b>	<b>5,215</b>	<b>4,819</b>
<i>Total (excl. fisheries)</i>	1,191	1,265	1,011	1,494	1,567	1,532	2,299	1,999

NUMBER OF CONVICTIONS REPORTED								
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Badgers (England & Wales)	–	8	14	8	6	18	6	18
Bats (England, Wales & Scotland)	4	2	2	1	5	3	2	1
Fisheries (England & Wales from 2020)	2,648	1,626	2,037	649	846	497	456	679
Hunting (England & Wales)	22	21	17	17	42	21	15	14
Illegal trade CITES (UK wide)	4	5	8	4	4	3	3	8
Marine mammals (certain countries only)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Birds of prey (England & Wales)	–	1	–	1	3	2	4	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,678</b>	<b>1,663</b>	<b>2,078</b>	<b>680</b>	<b>906</b>	<b>544</b>	<b>486</b>	<b>722</b>
<i>Total (excl. fisheries)</i>	30	37	41	31	60	47	30	43



**Figure 1** The number of reported wildlife crime incidents compared to the reported number of convictions between 2017 and 2024



### Notes on 2024 data

- Reports of marine mammal incidents from 2017 to 2022 covered Cornwall only. The 2023 figures include reported incidents from Cornwall, Devon, Yorkshire and Kent. The 2024 figures include Cornwall, Devon and Yorkshire.
- Reports of hunting incidents are not presented here as they are collected per hunting season (August to March) rather than by calendar year. The text of the report cites reports of hunting incidents for the 2024/25 hunting season.
- Badger related crime convictions have been included for the first time for England and Wales. This includes hunt related crimes where a badger sett is damaged by hunt staff.
- Numbers for badger, bat and raptor incidents reported between 2017 and 2023 will differ slightly from [previous reports](#), due to new data. The numbers in this table should be used over previous reports.

In line with past reports, the data from 2024 shows continued high levels of reporting of wildlife crime incidents of which just a fraction translate into convictions. Just over 2% of reported wildlife crime incidents in 2024 resulted in a conviction (excluding fisheries, which increases this figure to 15%).

Between 2017 and 2024, there were 38,511 reported incidents of wildlife crime, of which 9,757 resulted in a conviction (25%). When excluding fisheries from this total, the 12,358 reported wildlife crime incidents resulted in only 319 convictions - just 2.6% of all reports. This is an increase from our previous assessment from the years 2017-2023 of 2.1% as we can now account for badger crime convictions. This does not reflect the recent trends of wider policing, with the year ending September 2024 having a 4% increase in convictions from September 2023.<sup>6</sup>

Other notable trends include:

- A record low level of hunting convictions since 2017.
- A record low level of incident reports of crimes against birds of prey since 2017.

The numbers listed in this report are likely to be just the tip of the iceberg.

The only way of knowing the true scale of wildlife crimes is for the UK Government to add key wildlife crimes to the notifiable register, as recommended by the NWCUC.<sup>7</sup> This would mean that they require the police to provide a report to inform the Home Office of the occurrence of wildlife crimes for statistical purposes. 81% of police officers told Naturewatch Foundation that they believe wildlife crime should be notifiable.

Ministers have stated that wildlife crime does not need to be notifiable as “*any non-notifiable wildlife crime reported to the police can still be investigated where appropriate, as Chief Constables have operational independence to tackle the crimes that matter most to their communities.*” While this may be true in theory, this is part of a bigger picture where wildlife crime is not treated as a priority by the Home Office or the Ministry of Justice. In 2023 IFAW reported that 81% of police forces who responded to their researchers said wildlife crime is never treated as the same priority as more traditional types of crime.<sup>8</sup>

Where there is competition for resources within police forces, Chief Police Officers are less likely to dedicate appropriate resources to non-notifiable wildlife crime. Having a better understanding of the scale of crimes and the perpetrators involved is a key step to informing strategic action, reducing future crimes, and protecting wildlife and people.

## Ecosystem impacts

The impacts of wildlife crime cascade far and wide beyond the individual incident and are detrimental to wildlife conservation, which is already under growing pressure with at least 13% of species in Great Britain threatened with extinction.<sup>9</sup> Tackling wildlife crime is a key step towards meeting Government commitments to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030.

The impact on local biodiversity can be significant. There is growing evidence for the ecosystem that badgers provide for enhancing plant diversity around setts and aiding seed dispersal.<sup>10</sup> Wildlife crimes can also have population-level impacts on protected species, and can even lead to local extinctions and contribute to national extinctions. For example, illegal killing has led to hen harriers becoming a very rare bird of prey, with just 34 breeding attempts recorded in England in 2023.<sup>11</sup> They are the most persecuted bird of prey in England, yet no one has ever been convicted for targeting, injuring or killing a hen harrier.<sup>12</sup> The act of stealing bird eggs may not always be a violent one, but can harm local bird populations, alter ecosystem dynamics, and result in wild-taken birds of prey being laundered illegally into the falconry industry.<sup>13</sup>

Eight years of Wildlife and Countryside Link reports show that little progress has been made to treat wildlife crime as a priority. With both the UK Government’s Animal Welfare and National Rural Crime Network Strategies due to be published this year, the opportunity to make a sustained difference is here and needs to be grabbed.





# Wildlife crime polycriminality

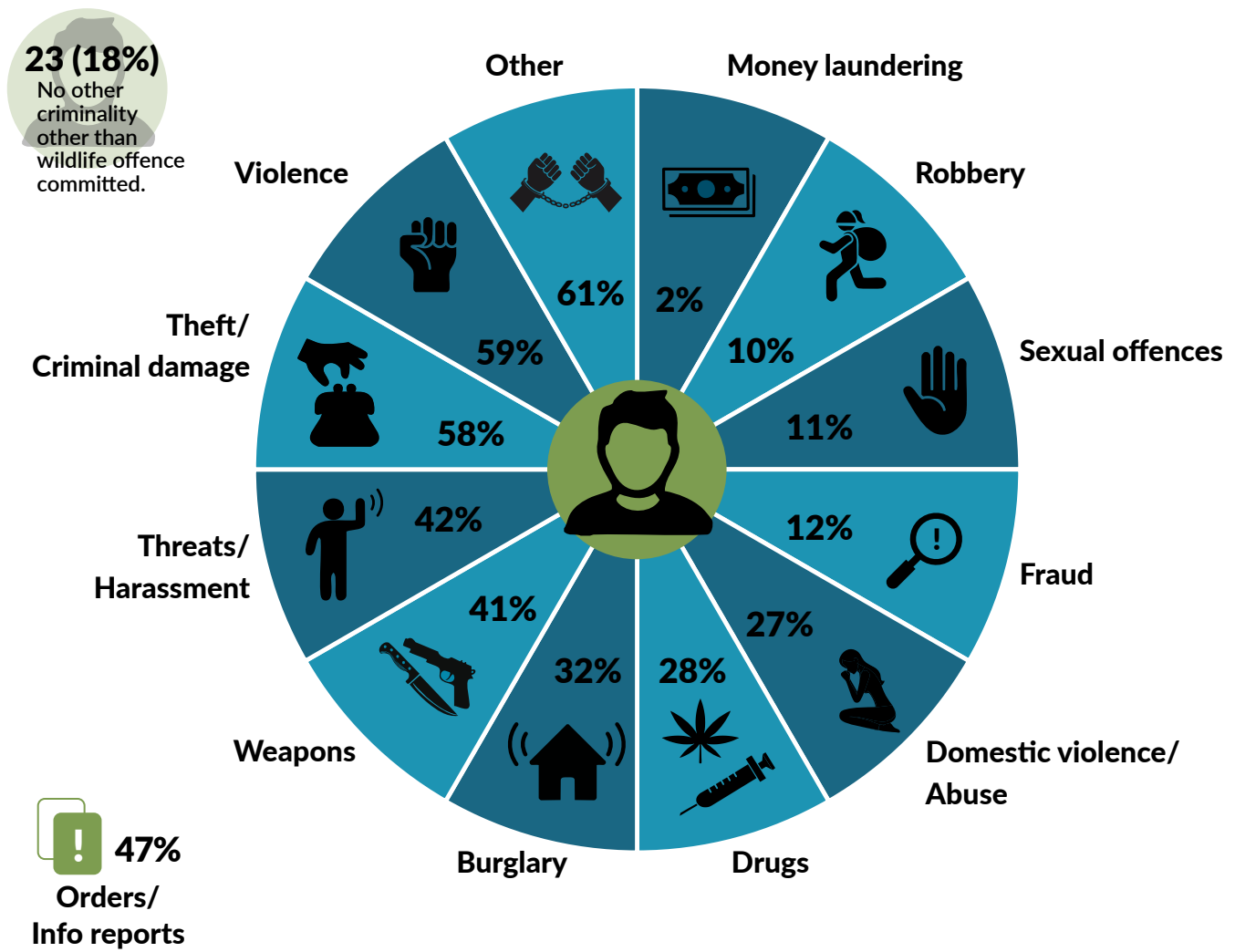
## Who are wildlife criminals?

*New polycriminality data from the NWCUC. In the context of law enforcement the term polycriminality can refer to both individuals and organised crime groups who are involved in multiple types of criminal activities.*

**I**t has been long understood that those who are violent towards animals are likely to also be violent towards people.<sup>14</sup> To demonstrate this link, the NWCUC compared the records of 128 individuals convicted of a wildlife crime in 2024, of which most offenders were male (96%), white north European ethnicity (93%) and British (92%), against the criminal record information held in the Police National Computer (PNC) database.<sup>15</sup> The analysis also split the offenders by the type of wildlife crime that they committed. 45 of these individuals were convicted of poaching and hare coursing offences and 21 individuals were convicted of badger crimes. The analysis revealed that:

- Wildlife crime offenders were most commonly associated with violent and theft/criminal damage type offences (59% and 58% respectively). This rises steeply when looking at poaching and hare coursing offenders (72% and 78%) and offenders who committed badger crime offences (67% and 62%).
- There is a link to domestic violence and abuse for 27% of all wildlife crime offenders, but this is strongest in poaching and hare coursing offenders (34%).
- The association with organised acquisitive crime is also strongest in poaching and hare coursing offenders. These are captured across various crime categories including theft/criminal damage, burglary and rogue trader related fraud.
- Drug criminality is most strongly associated with badger crime offenders (48%).
- Just 18% of all wildlife crime offenders did not have a connection to any other crime besides their conviction.

**Figure 2** Polycriminality of 128 individuals convicted of a wildlife crime offence in 2024



**Note** Graph and data courtesy of the NWCUC. The statistics highlight the percentage of wildlife crime offenders who have at least one incidence on PNC aligned to a particular crime type. The data does not indicate a direct crossover between different offence types and relates to their offending history as a whole.



This analysis is a welcome step to demonstrating why wildlife crime must be treated as a priority. Although it is just a snapshot and the statistics shown are likely to underestimate the true scale of polycriminality, this analysis shows the breadth of crimes that wildlife crime offenders are associated with.





Spotlight

# Illegal actions of developers



**N**ature recovery and sustainable development need not be at odds but unsustainable and inappropriate development, including development involving acts of wildlife crime, can have significant impacts on our natural world.

This year, with the Government's focus on economic growth and housing numbers, we shine a spotlight on wildlife crime that takes place in infrastructure development when rules to protect wildlife are not followed. To meet its housing and development targets without jeopardising nature, the Government must ensure that the laws that protect wildlife in the development process are robustly enforced and that the laws are not weakened.<sup>16</sup>

More broadly, avoidance of harms, not compensation, must be the first priority for wild animals affected by planning. Development should pay due regard to the ways that it could adversely affect the protection and welfare of sentient animals including by ensuring developments that impact wildlife are informed by robust scientific evidence and where appropriate, independent site surveys by licensed experts.<sup>17</sup> There is also a need to increase local authority planning inspections and enforcement of regulation to prevent illegal wildlife harms.

There are a number of examples where developers do not follow existing regulations and cause illegal harm to species. Some of these are detailed in the following chapters.





Spotlight

## Wild animal welfare harms

Material prepared by the RSPCA

**T**he RSPCA is involved in investigating and prosecuting wildlife crime and welfare harms in a number of forms, from weaponised attacks on individual wild animals, to large scale, serious and organised crime. As animal welfare is the Society's focus, the incidents it deals with involves species with no special legal protection, such as feral pigeons, gulls, foxes, or deer, as well as protected species including badgers and birds of prey. RSPCA Inspectors and the Special Operations Unit investigate a wide range of wildlife crimes, including animal fighting, illegal trapping, habitat disturbance, and other incidents of animal cruelty.

Over the last five years, the RSPCA has received more than 7,092 reported incidents of suspected wildlife crime. Over half (54%) of these were reports of intentional harm, including beating, mutilation, or attempted killing of wildlife. 1,075 reported wildlife crime incidents were detailed in 2024 alone and, while this was less than 2023 (-3%), the reported incidents of illegal hunting (56, +44%) and illegal trapping (188, +12%) of wild animals, have both increased. The other half of wildlife crime reports were suspected illegal activity such as hunting, fighting, trapping and habitat damage.

### Planning and animal welfare harms

When land is required for infrastructure such as roads and housing, the welfare impacts on wild animals can be severe and at scale. Whilst the majority of wildlife crimes reported to the RSPCA over the last five years involved incidents of intentional harm, almost a quarter (1,643, 23%) of reports of illegal activity involved habitat damage or interference. Habitat damage poses significant threats to the welfare





of wild animals, specifically by preventing safe movement across a landscape (loss of ecological connectivity), restricting normal behaviours such as foraging or mating, or denying animals' access to basic needs such as food, water, and shelter, with subsequent impacts including stress, injury, pain, distress, and death.<sup>18,19</sup>

Every year, the RSPCA also receives reports of welfare harms due to building work. Unplanned, poorly mitigated, or unmonitored development can negatively impact the welfare of wild animals, who can be killed or harmed during construction work, or when building work is finished due to loss of shelter, food and nesting sites, or more roads and increased traffic volume.<sup>20</sup> Over the last five years, the RSPCA has received 149 reported incidents of wildlife crime due to building work. The majority of these (105, 70%) involved the disturbance or destruction of birds or their nests. Almost a fifth (27, 18%) of reported incidents involved harms to badger setts, including setts dug up or destroyed, building rubble dumped on a sett, and bleach poured down a sett prior to being built over. In 2024, five instances of damage to badger setts and fox dens by builders were reported, including a litter of fox cubs being trapped in their den, and nine reported incidents involved damage to birds' nests by builders, including nests and young birds blocked in roofs, and nests of birds pulled from scaffolding, with young birds being left to die.

### Case study 1: Illegal trapping

In February 2024, a member of the public reported a fox who was struggling in a snare attached to a fence in Surrey. An RSPCA officer attended and found the fox was caught in a self-locking snare, illegal under Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The extent of the fox's injuries was so great that it had to be put to sleep. Illegal snares cause severe suffering and cruelty to animals, and are indiscriminate, so can trap any animal which may be passing through. The fox was near death when discovered and would have suffered a slow and painful end had it not been found.

### Case study 2: Operation Willow

In March 2024, three men from Lancaster received custodial sentences under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, for a range of wildlife offences. Footage retrieved demonstrated cruelty inflicted on deer and a badger, including repeatedly stabbing a deer's throat, the deer's neck being stood on to enable dogs to attack it, and dogs attacking a badger. The men each received a custodial sentence for 33, 12, and 17 months respectively, with the latter suspended for 12 months.



## Species spotlight Crimes against **Bats**

Material prepared by the Bat Conservation Trust

© Daniel Hargreaves

**A**cross the UK, police investigations into bat-related offences continue to face challenges. Unfortunately, there is a persistent negative rhetoric that perceives protected species—particularly bats—as delaying the delivery of new homes and infrastructure projects. Often, the real issue and cause of offences is developers failing to follow, or deliberately ignoring, planning procedures during construction and refurbishment.

### Case study 1 from 2024 (Planning/Licencing)

A male converted an old barn into a studio/gym that ecological surveys had identified as having a small number of bats within it. The owner went ahead without the correct licence to mitigate offences in place, with the intention of avoiding the associated costs. Early admissions were made, and the male accepted a conditional police caution with a £2600 reparation given to a local charity group to support ongoing renovation work to a local heritage building also considered a very important bat roost, which had suffered criminal damage.

### Case study 2, concluded in 2024. (Planning/Sentencing)

In January 2024, a building design and construction company was ordered to pay fines and costs totalling £2,605.00 for demolishing a building with a Pipistrelle bat day roost, which we referenced in 2024. A few months later in March 2024 a builder from Caerphilly received a 12-month conditional discharge and was ordered to pay costs of £111.00 for illegally removing a roof where Common, Soprano Pipistrelle and Whiskered bats were known to be roosting. In court, both men cited a breakdown in communication as the reason for the work taking place too early. While similar offences were committed, the fine and costs received were very different. In all comparable cases with differing results the courts were provided with the information needed to make their informed decisions. Instead, outcomes such as this make the case for a wildlife crime sentencing guideline to be produced by the Sentencing Council.

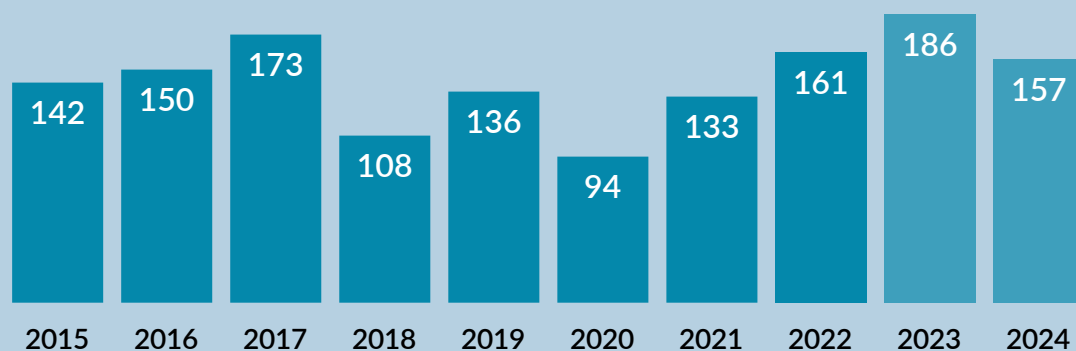


## 2024 figures on bat incident reports to police

**Table 2** Data collected of crimes against bats in 2024 and 2023

	2023	2024
Bat Conservation Trust incidents recorded	93	91
Comparative analysis, additional Police incidents	91	66
<b>Combined total for bat incidents</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>157</b>
Number of Community Resolution, 'Out of Court' disposals	11	7
Number of defendant cautions	-	2
Number of defendants convicted	2	1
Statute barred	-	1
Pending Court cases	2	1

**Figure 3** The number of reported crimes against bats between 2015 and 2024



*Note Graph courtesy of NWCUC; 2023 and 2024 bars represent combined BCT/NWCUC data.*

There were 157 incidents reported to the Police in 2024 relating to bats, a decrease of some 8% in bat incident reporting in comparison to 2023 data.

This figure is not the true extent of police incidents recorded against bats, as not all UK police services provided their numbers. Investigative outcomes for 2024 are still coming into BCT but at the time of writing there were seven Community Resolutions (out of court disposals), one Police verbal warning, one Police conditional cautions, one conviction, and one statute barred (run out of time) whilst three cases are pending CPS/Court decisions. BCT are monitoring police incident numbers carefully, for any change.

Bats are some of the rarest mammals in Britain and are a critical part of our ecosystems and indicators of wider ecological health. For example, the Barbastelle bats have very few known maternity roosts remaining. Recent population surveys across bat species in the UK show fewer significant increases and some indicators of species decline in the short term, suggesting external pressure or pressures may be presently impacting on bat populations in the UK.<sup>21</sup>



Species spotlight

# Crimes against **Badgers**

Material supplied by the Badger Trust



**D**espite their ecological significance and legal status as a protected species, badgers continue to suffer as much unjustified illegal persecution today, if not more, than when the latest legal protection was passed in 1992 as the Protection of Badgers Act. Violence towards badgers is rooted in persistent misconceptions, as some people label badgers as ‘vermin’ and see them as unworthy of legal protection.

The planning and development system poses a significant threat to badgers whenever developers fail to comply with the legal protections and licensing requirements established to safeguard these animals.

## **Examples of planning-related badger crime**

### **Case study 1**

The director of a construction company was fined £9,350 after allowing a worker to damage a badger sett at a housing development. The housing builder was sentenced at court after pleading guilty to a breach of the Protection of Badgers Act 1992. The



landowner was aware of an established badger sett and members of the public voiced their concerns to workers directly. One resident even advised the digger driver of the presence of badgers immediately before the work commenced that day. As a result of this work over two thirds of the main badger sett and the annex sett were removed, likely causing the death of badgers underground.

### Case study 2

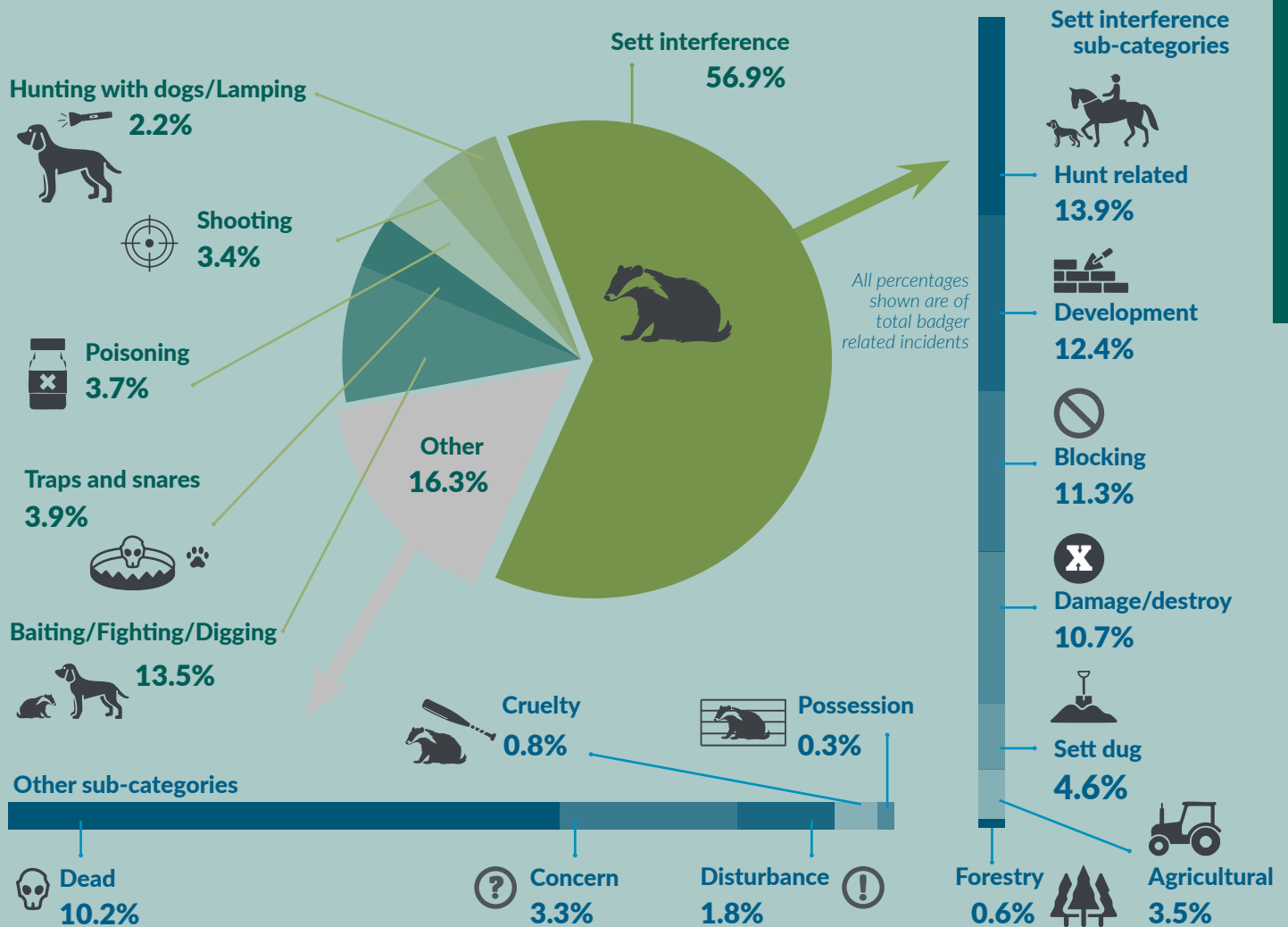
A 30-year old badger set was wiped by a local developer, but due to a lack of evidence the case was dropped by the Crown Prosecution Service. The local council and police force were made aware from a report by a concerned member of the public of a landowner using a mini digger within three yards of the badger sett. They called for a full survey to be conducted for protected species before further planning activity occurs. Within two weeks, contrasting advice to clear the site was given by a councillor, leaving no sign of a badger set. Despite a statement from a local resident dog walker, there was not enough evidence for the police and the CPS to pursue.

Criminal badger persecution has been a UK Wildlife Crime Priority since 2009, due to sheer persecution as opposed to conservation. Methods of persecution still seen today include shooting, poisoning, snaring, sett blocking and baiting, but it is recognised that the reporting of crimes against badgers is under reported and not recorded correctly. Badger baiting is a horrific crime where badgers are forcibly dug out of their sett to be killed by dogs, involving extreme cruelty to both animals, and in 2024 reports of this crime increased by 46%. Around 76% of the suspects linked to these crimes are known for other criminality and particularly violent crimes, including domestic violence.



**“Badger baiting is a horrific crime where badgers are forcibly dug out of their sett to be killed by dogs, involving extreme cruelty to both animals.”**

**Figure 4** Badger-related incident summary 2020-2024, courtesy of NWCU



**Note** Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

The badger cull has contributed to criminal activities and has resulted in the further demonisation of this species. Around 250,000 badgers have been killed under licence since 2013 and an unknown number illegally killed as a direct association with the cull.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the central report recommendation of making crimes against badgers notifiable and introducing sentencing guidelines, badger crime could be further reduced by:

- Introducing measures to crackdown on those using social media to organise and amplify badger persecution.
- Routinely seizing dogs and vehicles when badger baiting or fighting is suspected. This is an effective disruption technique to reduce future criminality and will help to improve the welfare of the dogs involved.
- Considering the role that hunt related activity has on badger crime, and the ways this could be tackled.





Species spotlight

## Birds of prey persecution in England & Wales

Material prepared by the RSPB

© Ben Andrew

**Table 3** RSPB raptor persecution data for England and Wales (2017-2024)

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Incidents reported	216	280	230	321	330	263	187	152
Confirmed incidents	62	78	54	110	93	65	57	38
Convictions	–	1	–	1	3	2	4	2

**Note** Data correct up to and including date of submission (1 August 2025).

### Case study 1

In early April 2024, a female peregrine falcon was found wounded and unable to fly on Dove Stone Nature Reserve in the Peak District National Park. X-rays revealed that she had been shot with a shotgun. Unfortunately, due to the severity of her injuries the peregrine was euthanised. Whilst peregrine populations are recovering in urban areas, large areas of the UK's uplands are devoid of these birds despite the availability of highly suitable habitat.

Though legally protected, peregrines and other bird of prey species are often targeted and illegally killed. These crimes are frequently associated with land managed for gamebird shooting where some individuals perceive birds of prey as a threat to

gamebird stocks. Despite overwhelming evidence, prosecutions remain rare due to the remote nature of these crimes and the high burden of proof required under criminal law.

A recent RSPB report (*Hen Harriers in the firing line*) revealed that record numbers of Hen Harriers are being persecuted in the UK's uplands with most taking place on or near grouse moors. From 2020 to 2024, in the UK 102 confirmed or suspected incidents of hen harrier persecution were recorded, with 89% taking place in northern England. Scientific research has shown that these crimes are directly suppressing hen harrier populations, reducing their survival, and preventing the national recovery of this red-listed species. Visit [www.rspb.org.uk/hen-harrier-report](http://www.rspb.org.uk/hen-harrier-report) to read the report in full.

### Case study 2

In July 2024, Ashley Game Farm Ltd – a gamebird rearing farm in Devon specialising in breeding red-legged partridge and pheasants to supply gamebird shoots – was fined £40,000. The company pleaded guilty to five charges relating to the illegal storage and/or use of various pesticides, including the highly toxic, banned pesticide carbofuran. The company director also received personal fines after pleading guilty to one charge. Criminal charges were brought following a police-led search of the land and property, instigated after a dead buzzard and suspected poisoned baits were found by a member of the public on the game farm in 2020. Toxicological analysis confirmed that meat found in the beak of the buzzard and on two pheasant carcasses tested positive for carbofuran. The use of poisoned meat baits to kill birds of prey is a method frequently used to persecute these species. This type of highly dangerous and indiscriminate crime, involving hazardous and often banned chemicals, poses significant risks not only to birds of prey but also to other wildlife, humans, and domestic animals.

**“These crimes are directly suppressing hen harrier populations, reducing their survival, and preventing the species’ national recovery.”**







Wildlife crime type spotlight

## Breaches of the Hunting Act 2004

Material prepared by The League Against Cruel Sports. This data covers the full hunting season from 1 August 2024 to 31 March 2025, covering the cub hunting and fox hunting seasons.

**T**raditional fox hunting has long been banned in England, Wales and Scotland. Despite this, there is overwhelming evidence that illegal hunts continue under the disguise of trail hunts, other loopholes, and exemptions in the law. The League Against Cruel Sports recorded 474 instances of suspected illegal hunting in England and Wales during the latest full hunting season. Based on eyewitness reports, the incidents included 397 cases of foxes being pursued and took place across 49 counties and involved 109 registered hunts.

There were 20 prosecutions and 14 convictions of individuals for offences under the Hunting Act in 2024.<sup>23</sup> Each conviction resulted in a fine – with no custodial sentences being available – with the average fine being only £454.<sup>24</sup>

The Government has committed to ban trail hunting and has indicated they will publish a consultation later this year. This commitment must be delivered swiftly, with the closing of all loopholes exploited by hunts, and be accompanied by further action to better enforce the Hunting Act and to provide sanctions capable of genuinely deterring offenders.



## Case study

One successful case which illustrates both the continued use of trail hunting as a smokescreen for illegal hunting and the implausibility of claims of its legitimacy was heard in Weymouth in 2024. A hunt master and whipper-in with the Portman Hunt were both convicted of illegal hunting, after an incident in Dorset in 2022 in which a live fox was chased during what was claimed to be a legal trail hunt.

The conviction was possible thanks to strong evidence recorded by members of North Dorset Hunt Saboteurs, including drone footage of a fox running into a wood closely pursued by hounds, before scrambling over a barbed wire fence - in the presence of hunt staff. During the trial, it was claimed that the pursuit of the fox was accidental and even that it was normal for a trail to be laid through barbed wire. However, magistrates concluded that it was “*inconceivable*” that the men were unaware that a fox was being chased, and that it was intentional. They were fined £900 and £400 respectively.

In the months prior to the conviction of the men in 2025, the Portman Hunt held a ‘trail hunting demonstration’ promoted by the British Hounds Sports Association, the ‘governing body’ of hunting, as an example of “*exactly how trails are laid and hunted by hounds*”.



**“Traditional fox hunting has long been banned in England, Wales and Scotland. Despite this, there is overwhelming evidence that illegal hunts continue.”**





Species spotlight

# Crimes against **Marine Mammals**

Material prepared by the British Divers Marine Life Rescue, the Yorkshire Seal Group and the Seal Research Trust for Southwest England, Cornwall and Devon (north and south coasts) on behalf of hundreds of volunteers.



**D**isturbance is a significant ongoing, long-term threat faced by the native, heritage, specialist and highly mobile grey seals in the Southwest of the UK. Seal disturbance in England and Wales is not illegal despite the JNCC recommendation in 2021 that seals should be included on Schedule 5 Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, reinforced as the top recommendation of the EFRA Committee Marine Mammal Inquiry in 2023. There are a few exceptions where seal disturbance is illegal, for example where seals are a monitored feature of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Where this legislation does exist it is an invaluable tool for statutory agencies to take action and as a deterrent to the majority of law abiding citizens.

This report includes seal disturbance incidents from Cornwall and Yorkshire.

Yorkshire Seal Group recorded 752 reports of disturbance incidents with anthropogenic causes which resulted in the seal fleeing the area, often by “*crash diving*” into the water, signifying a significant level of disturbance and stress.

## Key for Disturbance Levels

- Level 1** The seal is aware of your presence, possibly looking at you, but remains calm.
- Level 2** The seal moves in response to your presence, indicating a heightened awareness and potential stress.
- Level 3** The seal flees the area, often by “*crash diving*” into the water, signifying a significant level of disturbance and stress.

**Table 4** Number of seal disturbance incidents recorded by Yorkshire Seal Group in 2024 and the reason, excluding disturbance incidents recorded as ‘unknown reason’ or ‘natural reason’

	Disturbances (Level 2)	Stampedes (Level 3)
Walkers too close	142	84
Visitors too close	110	41
Walkers with dogs	39	40
People on cliff	44	30
Fossil Hunters	19	27
Water users (jet skis, paddle boards, vessels, kayakers)	38	14
On arrival	30	24
Noisy Visitors	23	10
Photographers	18	5
Drone	–	4
Aircraft	–	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>463</b>	<b>289</b>

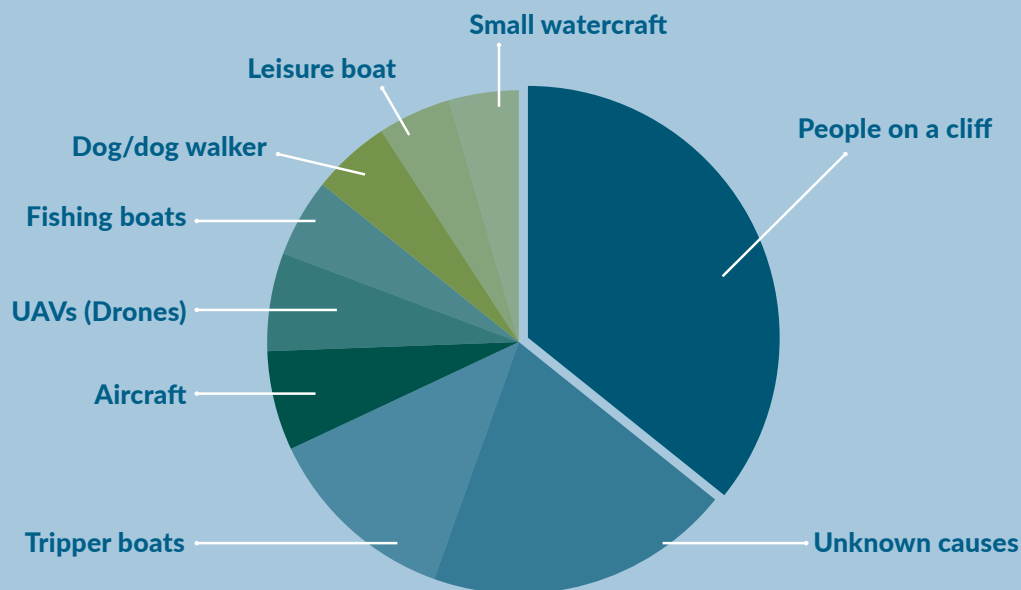
In Cornwall in 2024, 346 reports of seal disturbance incidents were recorded, impacting 2,520 seals (270 more seals than in 2023), of which 993 seals (39%) were seriously disturbed (level 3). Of these reported incidents, 97 (28%) were in a SSSI where seals are a monitored feature making this a criminal offence.

Most seals (766) were disturbed by people on the cliff (296 level 3) followed by unknown causes (422; 193 level 3); tripper boats (269; 43 level 3); aircraft 137; 87 level 3); UAVs (135; 3 level 3); fishing boats (108; 66 level 3); dog and dog walkers (108; 24 level 3); Leisure boats (101; 28 level 3) and small watercraft (96; 44 level 3).





**Figure 5** Pie chart showing the causes of reported seal disturbance incidents in Cornwall



**Note** Data collected from Seal Research Trust.

Just 4 of the 346 reported incidents in Cornwall had sufficient evidence (including the identification of individuals responsible) to be passed to the relevant enforcement agencies (Natural England and the Police). Many reported incidents could not be followed up because the cause or the person who caused the disturbance could not be identified.

### Spotlight on Cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises)

Data on wildlife crimes against cetaceans is poor, and we do not currently understand the extent of the offences carried out against these species. All cetaceans are European Protected Species, meaning that they are listed in Annex IV(a) of the EU Habitats Directive which is now part of assimilated EU law in the UK deeming it an offence to deliberately kill, capture, injure or disturb cetaceans. In addition, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act it is an offence to intentionally or recklessly disturb a whale or dolphin (though notably, not a porpoise).

However, many crimes go unreported, or if they are reported, they are often not recorded by the police. This is despite clear harms to cetaceans occurring, as demonstrated by a case on August 3rd, 2025, where shocking imagery recorded by crew on the Mevagissey to Fowey ferry showed a pod of common dolphins with severely damaged dorsal fins. Veterinary pathologists confirm the injuries are consistent with high-speed watercraft or propeller impact.

Crimes against cetaceans (and seals) should be notifiable offences and incident reports should be recorded to improve data on crimes against these species. In addition, the law protecting cetaceans should be simplified to make prosecution easier and to deter crimes. Protections for cetaceans are currently scattered in an incoherent way across multiple pieces of primary and secondary legislation making it difficult for the police to pursue cases. Offences under Section 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 should apply to all cetacean species so that the protections are in one, clear piece of national legislation.



## Wildlife crime type spotlight **Fisheries crime**

Compiled by the Institute of Fisheries Management  
with comments from the Environment Agency and  
Natural Resources Wales.

**T**here has been a steady reduction in funding for fisheries enforcement during the terms of recent governments.

Since 2010, we have seen:

- 90% reduction (£10.6 million) in the grant in aid settlement provided to the Environment Agency to protect migratory salmonid and eel stocks.
- A steady decline in rod licence income during the same period (33% when adjusted for inflation).
- New legislation and powers introduced, with no additional resources to deliver them (e.g. Eels Regulations).

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



**Table 5** Number of reports and convictions of fisheries crime

NUMBER OF INCIDENTS REPORTED									
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Rod & line	3,415	3,616	2,245	2,680	3,673	2,727	2,376	2,236	2,308
Salmon, sea trout & trout poaching	24	72	21	26	10	75	85	161	158
Eel & elver fishing or export	2	4	–	4	1	2	4	1	1
Theft act (Stealing of fish from private waters)	10	2	17	7	2	25	8	13	6
Sea fisheries – nets, boats & shellfish	364	475	398	378	477	508	499	505	347
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,815</b>	<b>4,169</b>	<b>2,681</b>	<b>3,095</b>	<b>4,163</b>	<b>3,337</b>	<b>2,972</b>	<b>2,916</b>	<b>2,820</b>

NUMBER OF CONVICTIONS REPORTED									
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Rod & line	2,184	2,569	1,521	1,934	604	805	424	381	596
Salmon, sea trout & trout poaching	7	13	6	10	0	9	34	45	21
Eel & elver fishing or export	1	2	–	2	0	1	–	–	1
Theft act (Stealing of fish from private waters)	5	2	16	5	0	1	3	4	8
Sea fisheries – nets, boats & shellfish	65	62	83	86	45	30	36	26	53
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,262</b>	<b>2,648</b>	<b>1,626</b>	<b>2,037</b>	<b>649</b>	<b>846</b>	<b>497</b>	<b>456</b>	<b>679</b>

*Note 2016–2019, England only; 2020–2024 England & Wales.*

The data series shows an interesting picture of fisheries crime over time.

- 1 For rod & line crimes, there is a steadily declining trend in incidents reported, which probably reflects the steady decline in numbers going angling.** Prosecution rates reduced by nearly 50% in 2018, and by a further 50% since Covid-19. The prosecution rate in 2016 was 64%; in 2024 it was 26%. This indicates that someone fishing without a rod licence in 2024 is much less likely to be prosecuted than in 2016.
- 2 Salmon & sea trout poaching reports have increased significantly in 2021–2024 compared to 2016–2019.** The lowest recorded prosecution rate for this crime was in 2024 (13%). There must be a greater deterrent to commit salmon and sea trout poaching.
- 3 Eels & elver fishing and exports have much reduced since Brexit.** One notable case in 2024 of illegal import of 700kg yellow eels from Ireland was detected and offenders were prosecuted by the NWCUC.
- 4 Sea fisheries incident reports were at a record low in 2024 but the rate of prosecution in 2024 is the highest since pre-Covid-19 levels.** It remains to be seen whether this trend is due to higher compliance or lower detection rates.

## Natural Resources Wales (NRW)

Illegal fishing in coastal and freshwaters continues to be a major concern for NRW and fisheries stakeholders in Wales, particularly given the current state of both salmon and sea trout stocks. Whilst there was a reduction in total incidents in 2023, the loss of any salmon (which receive mandatory catch and release protection in Wales) can have serious impacts on local stock recovery.

NRW seeks to take a proportionate, risk-based regulatory enforcement approach. We have over 400 warranted officers across Wales who cover the breadth of our regulatory and enforcement functions. For fisheries offences however we have a total of just 28 warranted officers across Wales, and it should be noted that due to resource pressures they are increasingly called upon to address non-fishery offences. We also rely on the support of seconded police officers, who are able to assist in investigating and prosecuting offences.

## Environment Agency (EA)

The Environment Agency's fisheries enforcement service is uniquely supported by fishing licence income (£22 million in 2023/24). That income is invested in protecting and enhancing fisheries and angling, through effective enforcement and the wider fisheries service the Environment Agency delivers. The Agency balances protecting that income with protecting fish populations, at risk species like eel, salmon and shad and managing threats from invasive fish species and novel parasites and diseases. The EA also leads on permitting/authorising legal forms of fish trapping and removal and the investigation and prosecution of any associated offences. The Environment Agency's fisheries enforcement strategy ensures our 100 plus authorised staff, effectively prioritise, respond to and investigate the reports we receive (2,348 reports of illegal fishing activity in 2022) – working smartly with intelligence, our partners and the public (including anglers) to get results.

National fisheries enforcement operations include LUNGFISH (ensuring everyone fishing has a fishing licence – we prosecuted 389 offenders in 2022) and partner led work like the Angling Trust Voluntary Bailiff Service' CLAMPDOWN (close season compliance on coarse fish rivers), and OP's LEVIATHON/ TRAVERSE targeting poaching and fish theft (69 combined convictions in 2022). The new National Fisheries Enforcement Team was implemented to support and protect fisheries enforcement delivery, however funding, technical resilience and wider (non-fisheries) workforce pressures are forever a threat to that service. We strive to be as effective as possible, embracing new technology and evolving methods as well as forging strong relationships.







## Wildlife crime type spotlight **CITES Illegal wildlife trade**

Material prepared by WWF UK and TRAFFIC. International trade in wildlife is regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). The UK implements CITES through the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (COTES) regulations.

**W**ildlife trafficking offences are driven by demand for wildlife products such as wild plants (including timber), traditional medicine products and ornaments made from wildlife parts such as ivory; as well as live wild animals for pets and for food (including fish). The money that can be made trading these goods drives criminality, increasingly involving organized criminal groups operating across multiple jurisdictions. Lack of awareness of the law also leads some individuals to unknowingly trade illegal goods without the correct permits.

Wildlife trafficking continues to be stimulated by a largely unregulated market online, easily accessible through social media. An array of platforms facilitate trade, often with illegal trade passing as legal and advertisements for illegal wildlife products easily found.

A lack of available data/records continues to constrain our understanding of illegal wildlife trade in the UK. This impedes the ability of the government and national agencies to effectively address international wildlife trade, measure impact and track trends. We are aware of 8 CITES prosecution cases since the last report, which is an increase, compared to 2023.

Border Force seizure records for 2024 show a 30% increase in total seizures in comparison to 2023 (from 637 to 830).

**Table 6** Border force seizure records for 2024

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Caviar & caviar extract	3	22	3	18
Live coral & derivatives	7	18	3	27
Ivory & ivory items	12	47	6	34
Live animals and birds	5	–	–	–
Live plants	3	26	21	21
Parts or derivatives of animals and birds	40	–	–	–
Parts or derivatives of plants	3	7	90	7
Timber or wood products	3	7	8	8
TCM (parts or derivatives of endangered species)	14	10	8	32
<b>Quarterly total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>274</b>
<b>Total seizures</b>	<b>830</b>			

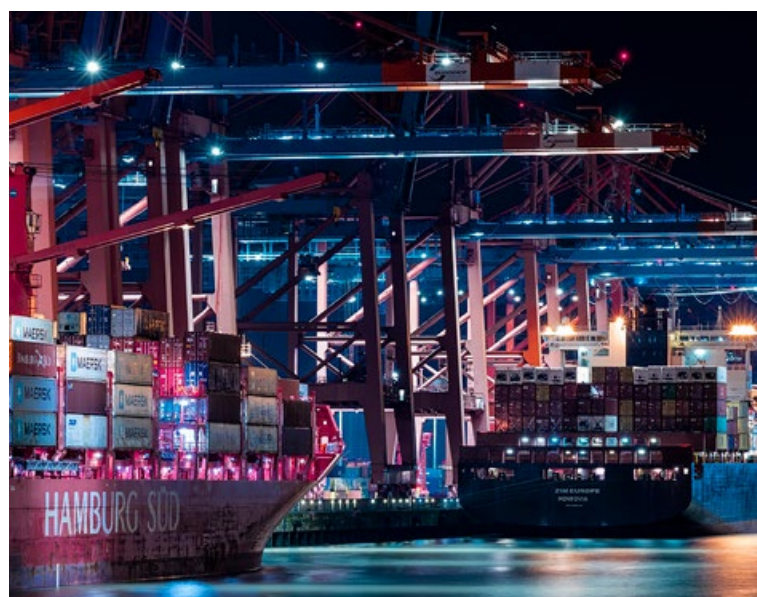
### Case study

2024 saw the successful prosecution of a father (age 48), and his son (age 23), for the illegal laundering of wild peregrines stolen from sites across southern Scotland. They admitted charges relating to 22 peregrine falcons, including the illegal sale of this protected species.

Police Scotland launched the investigation in 2021 searching a property in Berwick-upon-Tweed, in which seven chicks were discovered as well as a number of other birds of prey. While it is legal to sell captive-bred peregrines, possessing or selling wild birds is not. DNA testing definitively established that the chicks had not been bred in captivity, linking some of them to wild peregrine falcons from the south of Scotland.

The investigation spanned two and a half years and Police traced the sale of peregrines to UK establishments trading in birds and confirmed some had been exported overseas. A range of partners provided invaluable contributions to the investigation including the Scottish SPCA, the UK NWCU, the Scottish Raptor Study Group, Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture (SASA) and COPFS.

In sentencing at Jedburgh Sheriff Court, the father was given 220 hours, and the son was given 150 hours community service orders. Both were banned from keeping birds of prey for 5 years and action under the Proceeds of Crime Act initiated. In October following a hearing at Selkirk Sheriff Court, the son accepted that he benefitted from “*general criminal conduct*” by £110,000 and the court ordered he repay £27,182 (based on an amount the court deemed was available).







# Wildlife crime

## Conclusion

**C**onsistent with past assessments, the new data from 2024 shows continued high levels of reporting of wildlife crime incidents of which just a fraction resulted in successful convictions – a rate of just over 2% (excluding fisheries). This low ratio of convictions to reports is not because reports are wrong or exaggerated. The low level is the result of low-prioritisation by enforcement authorities, limited resources and a lack of sentencing guidelines. Wildlife is failed by this continuing pattern and the issues around high wildlife crime rates and low prosecutions and convictions are inconsistent with Government targets to halt and reverse species decline.

A recent polycriminality report by the National Wildlife Crime Unit shows that investigating wildlife crime can highlight links to other criminality. Convicting wildlife crime offenders not only protects wildlife and the environment, but it could also protect and safeguard the people who are otherwise impacted by their violent and threatening crimes. Tackling wildlife crime will work in harmony with and contribute to the Government's mission to make safer streets and halve violence against women and girls.

Our series of Wildlife Crime reports demonstrates over many years that the current approach to enforcement is not working. Lack of reporting, low-resources

and under-prioritisation of wildlife crime means that incidents remain unacceptably frequent and enforcement remains ineffective.

By better recording wildlife crimes and understanding the scale of offences by making wildlife crime notifiable, police forces will be able to better target offenders of priority issues such as violence, including violence against women and girls, and organised crime.

The government must show their commitment to improving animal welfare by meeting the manifesto commitments to ban snares and trail hunting, and by continuing to invest in police force training for wildlife crime and animal welfare offences. Sentencing guidelines should be developed for wildlife crime offences and penalties raised in line with higher levels of sentencing available for companion animal welfare offences. Planning inspections must be increased and the enforcement of regulations strengthened to better protect species from illegal harm by developers.

Wildlife crime remains a threat to animal welfare, a risk for species survival, and a rotten blight on the communities and corporations where it has been allowed to continue far too long. This Government should take action and ensure there is no place for wildlife crime in the UK.



Wildlife and Countryside Link is the largest environmental coalition in England, bringing together 90 organisations to campaign for the protection of the natural world.



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



## This report is supported by





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