Wildlife Poisoning Research UK

The Wildlife Poisoning Map of Britain. Where the bodies of poisoned birds were found! Part 1: Northern England

Citation

Blane, E.J. 2025 The Wildlife Poisoning Map of Britain. Where the bodies of poisoned birds were found! Part 1: Northern England. WPRUK report number 25(4). (report available: wildlifepoisoningresearchuk.wordpress.com)

Keywords:

Poison, pesticide, biocide, buzzard, red kite, peregrine falcon, Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme, WIIS, Northern England

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Summary

Although the placing of poisoned baits to kill wildlife has been banned since 1911, this criminal activity has continued. The UK Government made a commitment in 2017 to publish maps to show where poisoned birds had been found and to update these annually. It appears that the updating of these maps has not happened.

In response to this apparent governmental inaction, Wildlife Poisoning Research UK has collected information via Freedom of Information requests to identify where deliberately poisoned birds have been found and to publish these findings. Between 2015 to 2023, the bodies of 73 legally protected birds, mostly birds of prey, were found in Northern England which had been illegally killed by the deliberate abuse of poisons to kill wildlife, 31 being Schedule 1 Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) species, which have the highest level of protection. Due to the very small chances of poisoned birds being found, the real numbers of

birds being killed by this criminal activity is likely to be far higher. There were no convictions during this period for the illegal killing of any of these 73 protected birds. Evidently, the enforcement regime currently in place in Northern England is not preventing this ongoing criminal activity.

There were two areas in Northern England where particularly high numbers of poisoned birds were found. These were Nidderdale in North Yorkshire and the Glapwell area in Derbyshire.

It is considered that if the illegal activity of poisoning wildlife continues this will potentially have negative impacts on projects to re-introduce species such as the white tailed sea eagle to Northern England.

1. Introduction

The use of toxic chemicals, usually pesticides, biocides or veterinary products, to kill protected birds has been illegal in Britain for many years. However, this practice still continues in many areas and is regarded by some as an integral and socially acceptable part of the management of land for various sporting activities and livestock rearing. It involves the lacing of food items with poisons, often at very high doses, to kill birds of prey and other species deemed to be nuisances, an activity that was made illegal under the Protection of Animals Act 1911. It is a crime which not only kills wildlife, but also poses lethal risks to domestic pests (Crabbe, 2023) and people (Sherriff's determination into the death of Thomas Nicol, 1984). This is a wildlife crime that frequently occurs on remote and private land where the chance of detection is very low and most victims are never found. Those cases which are reported and then investigated must be considered to be a very small tip of a very large 'iceberg' of environmental offences.

In an attempt to combat this wildlife crime, in 2017 UK Government bodies (Defra, Natural England, Welsh and Scottish Governments) initiated a project to map incidents of illegal bird poisonings. This provided information to the public and other interested parties as to where these crimes were taking place and it was intended that these maps would be updated annually to "provide an invaluable intelligence tool to help fight crimes against birds of prey" (Defra, 2017).

Governments and their priorities change and it appears that these wildlife poison crime maps have not been updated. There now appears to be very little governmental action informing the public that these crimes are still occurring and where birds are being deliberately poisoned.

Wildlife Poisoning Research UK (WPRUK) works to place information about the environmental impact of pesticides, biocides and other toxic chemicals into the public domain so that people and the media have a better understanding of this situation. Data on cases of deliberate poisoning of birds has been obtained from the Government's own Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme (WIIS) by the use of Freedom of Information / Environmental Information Act requests. This has enabled the production of maps showing where these poisoned birds have been found. This is information which the Government, for whatever reason, has now apparently declined to put into the public domain.

This report presents this information for Northern England. Future reports will deal with other areas of Britain. For this report, Northern England is defined as all counties above (north of) and including Cheshire, Staffordshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire.

2. The role of the WIIS scheme and the data used in this report

The UK WIIS scheme has been running for many years and includes analysis for a range of pesticides and biocides. Further information about the WIIS scheme can be found here:

www.hse.gov.uk/pesticides/reducing-environmental-impact/wildlife/wildlife-incident-investigation-scheme.htm

When the death of birds and mammals is investigated by the WIIS in Wales and England, tissue samples are submitted to the Wildlife Incident Unit (WIU) at the Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera). In Scotland, tissues are sent to the Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture (SASA) laboratories. Analysis is carried out to determine the levels of various toxins. The analytical results are reviewed in conjunction with information from any field investigation and post mortem examination to enable the laboratories to reach a conclusion as to the cause of the incident and whether toxins have been used illegally to deliberately poison wildlife.

A distinction is made between those incidents which are caused by the unsafe use of a chemical which results in exposure to wildlife where there was no intention to kill. These cases are described as 'misuse'. An example of a misuse incident is when an individual uses rodenticide to control rats but fails to ensure that the poison is adequately protected from non-target species such as badgers, which then consume the poorly protected rat bait. This report focuses on those incidents where individuals use poisons with the deliberate and intentional aim of killing wildlife, cases which are described as 'abuse'.

This report investigated incidents in Northern England from 2015 to 2023. It total, the Fera laboratory concluded that 73 birds had been illegally deliberately poisoned during this time. For each of the 73 birds killed by poison abuse, the following data was obtained:

- Species
- Date that the bird was found
- The 4 figure Ordnance Survey (OS) 1 Km x 1 Km grid square where the bird was found.

3. Results

The data for each poisoned bird is displayed in Table 1. In total there were 37 buzzards, 22 red kites, 9 peregrine falcons, 2 gulls, 1 magpie, 1 raven and 1 kestrel. The location where each poisoned bird was found is shown in Map 1, which plots every 1 Km x 1Km OS grid square where bodies were found. At some locations several poisoned birds have been found in the same 1 Km x 1 Km grid square during this period, the maximum number being 5. These were found in grid square SK4665, which is just south of the village of Glapwell in Derbyshire. More detailed information is displayed in Map 2 (for the North Yorkshire area) and Map 3 (for the southern part of the study area – Southern Yorkshire across to Lincolnshire and Staffordshire).

In order to identify any geographical areas where there had been notable higher numbers of poisoned birds found, the location data was re-arranged to show the number of poisoned birds found per 10 Km x 10 Km OS grid square. This data is displayed in Table 2 and shows that 2 areas had significant high numbers of poisoned birds being found. These were in the combined grid squares of SE17 and SE16 in the Nidderdale area of North Yorkshire (where 12 poisoned

birds have been found) and in grid square SK46 in the area of Glapwell in Derbyshire (where 10 poisoned birds had been found).

Table 1 Data for the 73 birds illegally killed by poison abuse in Northern England in the time period 2015 to 2023.

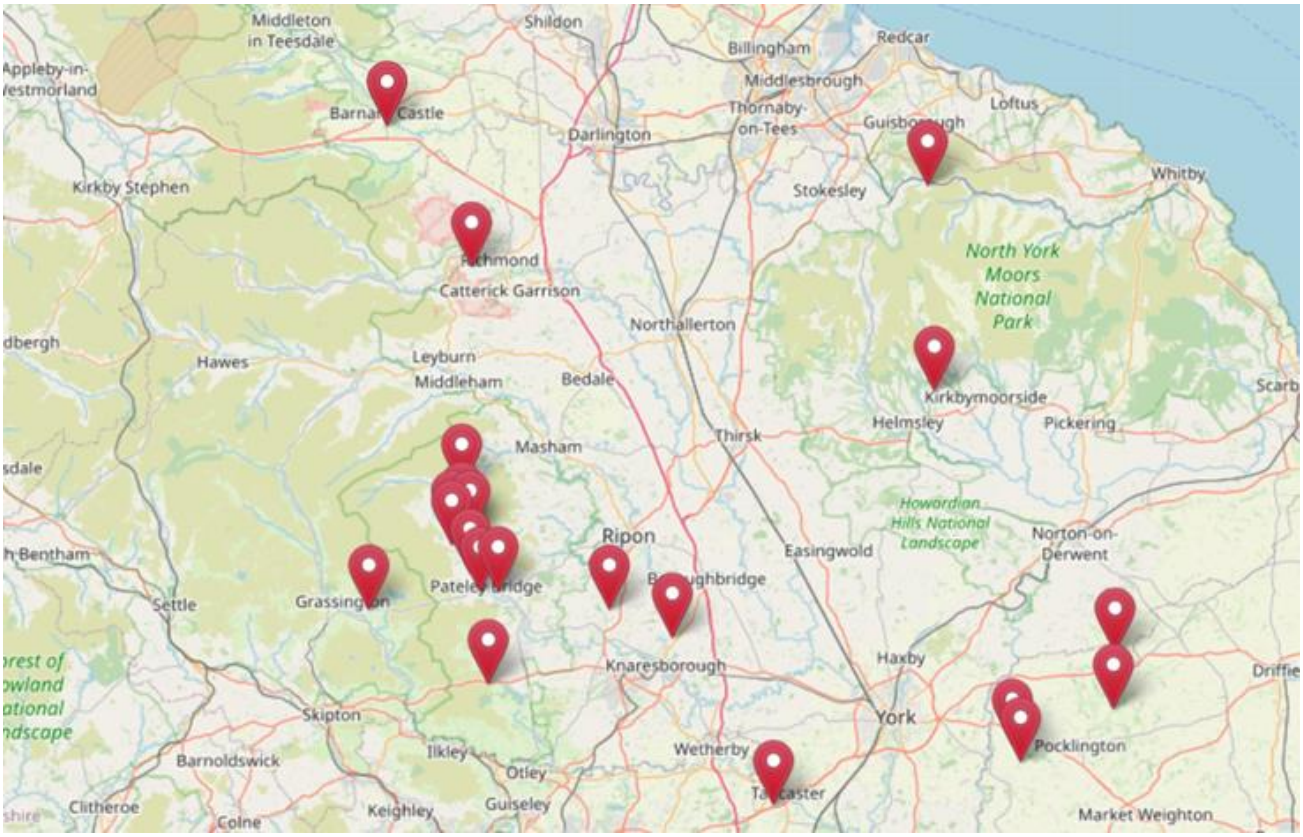
Bird reference number	Date bird was found	Species	4 figure 1 Km x 1 Km OS grid square where the bird was found
1	24 04 23	Buzzard	NZ1400
2	29 01 23	Buzzard	TF4277
3	29 04 22	Red kite	SE6487
4	10 04 22	Lesser-black backed gull	NY7243
5	08 03 22	Buzzard	SE1900
6	27 01 22	Buzzard	TF2875
7	17 11 21	Red kite	SE1376
8	06 11 21	Red kite	SE0363
9	06 06 21	Magpie	SE7349
10	21 03 21	Buzzard	SK4664
11	21 03 21	Buzzard	SK4664
12	07 03 21	Red kite	SE1471
13	05 03 21	Red kite	SE1467
14	26 02 21	Buzzard	NZ6415
15	16 02 21	Red kite	NZ0667
16	16 02 21	Red kite	NZ0150
17	18 01 21	Red kite	SE1271
18	12 01 21	Buzzard	SE1270
19	06 11 20	Red kite	SE1372
20	05 09 20	Buzzard	NZ0515
21	05 09 20	Buzzard	NZ0515
22	04 07 20	Peregrine falcon	SE3708
23	04 06 20	Peregrine falcon	SK0748
24	31 05 20	Peregrine falcon	SK1295
25	19 05 20	Peregrine falcon	SK1053
26	16 05 20	Buzzard	SK0764
27	16 05 20	Peregrine falcon	SK0764
28	09 04 20	Red kite	TF2214
29	07 04 20	Peregrine falcon	SE4742
30	07 04 20	Peregrine falcon	SE4742
31	23 03 20	Kestrel	SK4665
32	23 03 20	Buzzard	SK4665
33	20 03 20	Buzzard	NZ5101
34	12 03 20	Buzzard	TF2673
35	03 03 20	Buzzard	SE1565
36	27 01 20	Red kite	SE1372
37	26 09 19	Red kite	SE8453
38	14 04 19	Buzzard	SK0398
39	10 04 19	Red kite	SK9918
40	01 03 19	Red kite	SE1765
41	03 12 18	Red Kite	SE8459
42	03 12 18	Buzzard	SE8459

Table 1 contd. Data for the 73 birds illegally killed by poison abuse in Northern England in the time period 2015 to 2023.

43	25 10 18	Red kite	SE1467
44	31 08 18	Buzzard	SE8453
45	01 06 18	Peregrine falcon	SJ9714
46	26 03 18	Raven	SK1799
47	08 02 18	Red Kite	TF0426
48	30 01 18	Buzzard	NZ6309
49	04 12 17	Red kite	SE3660
50	15 11 17	Buzzard	SE7447
51	15 11 17	Buzzard	SE7447
52	02 05 17	Red kite	TF2571
53	18 03 17	Buzzard	TF5161
54	15 02 17	Buzzard	TF5161
55	13 09 16	Buzzard	SJ9411
56	16 05 16	Red kite	SE1271
57	22 04 16	Buzzard	SK9585
58	17 03 16	Buzzard	SK4665
59	17 03 16	Buzzard	SK4665
60	17 03 16	Buzzard	SK4665
61	12 03 16	Red kite	SE1565
62	27 02 16	Buzzard	SK4864
63	24 01 16	Buzzard	SK4351
64	29 04 15	Buzzard	TF5562
65	15 04 15	Red Kite	SE1655
66	20 03 15	Buzzard	SK5952
67	16 03 15	Buzzard	SK4765
68	16 03 15	Buzzard	SK4765
69	03 03 15	Buzzard	NY8063
70	22 02 15	Buzzard	SE2963
71	05 02 15	Peregrine falcon	NY0617
72	05 02 15	Buzzard	NY0617
73	01 02 15	Black headed gull	SK0898

Map 1 Location of 1 Km x 1 Km OS grid squares where birds illegally killed by poison abuse in Northern England in the time period 2015 to 2023 were found. Each data marker shows the central point of the grid square rather than the precise point where the bird was found. (Map produced by the Grid Reference Finder programme).

Map 2 Detail of Map 1 showing the locations in the North Yorkshire area in more detail. Each data marker shows the central point of the 1 Km x 1 Km OS grid square rather than the precise point where the bird was found. (Map produced by the Grid Reference Finder programme).

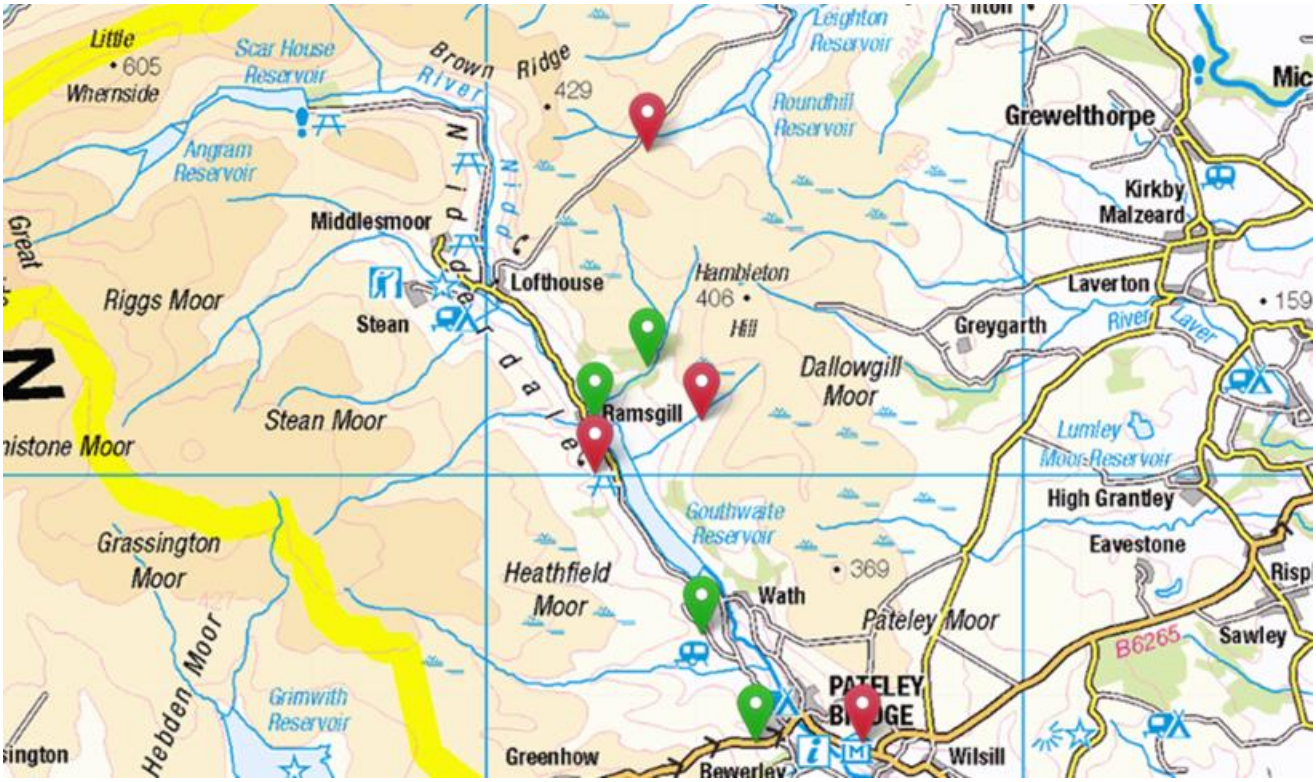


Map 3 Detail of Map 1 showing the locations in the South Yorkshire across to Lincolnshire and Staffordshire area in more detail. Each data marker shows the central point of the grid square rather than the precise point where the bird was found. (Map produced by the Grid Reference Finder programme).

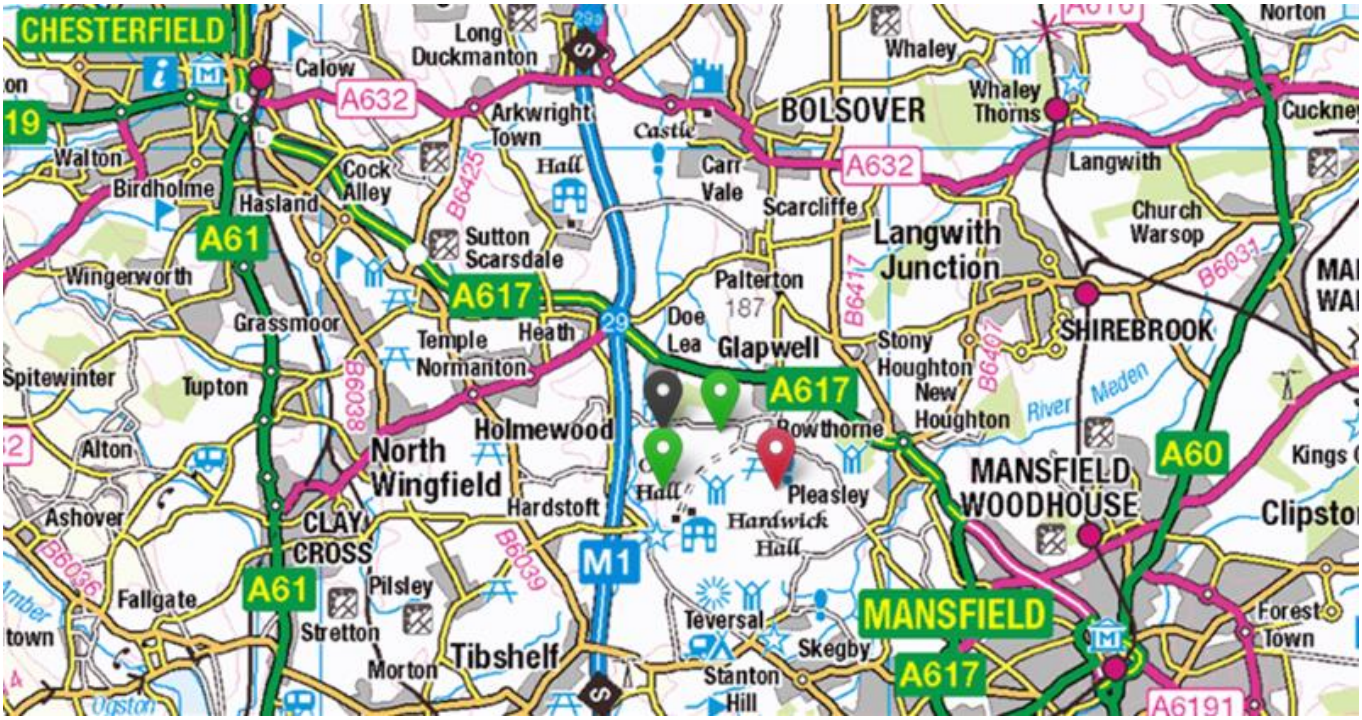
Table 2 10 Km x 10 Km OS grid squares where birds illegally killed by poison abuse were found in Northern England between 2015 and 2023.

10 x 10 km grid square	No. of birds	Area	10 x 10 km grid square	No. of birds
SK46	10	Glapwell, Derbyshire	NZ50	1
SE17	7	Nidderdale, North Yorkshire (12 birds)	NZ60	1
SE16	5		NZ61	1
TF27	3		SE06	1
SE85	4		SE10	1
SE74	3		SE15	1
TF56	3		SE26	1
NYO1	2		SE30	1
NZ01	2		SE36	1
SE44	2		SE68	1
SJ91	2		SK04	1
SK06	2		SK15	1
SK09	2		SK45	1
SK19	2		SK55	1
NY74	1		SK91	1
NY86	1		SK98	1
NZ05	1		TF02	1
NZ06	1		TF21	1
NZ10	1		TF47	1

Map 4 Locations where birds illegally killed by the abuse of poison have been found in the Nidderdale area in North Yorkshire. Each data marker shows the central point of the grid square rather than the precise point where the bird was found. Green data points indicate where 2 poisoned birds were found in that 1 Km x 1 Km grid square and red points were where 1 bird was found. (Map produced by the Grid Reference Finder programme).



Map 5 Locations where birds illegally killed by the abuse of poison have been found in the Glapwell area in Derbyshire. Each data marker shows the central point of the grid square rather than the precise point where the bird was found. The black data point indicates where 5 birds were found in that 1 Km x 1 Km grid square, green data points indicate where 2 poisoned birds were found and red points were where 1 bird was found. (Map produced by the Grid Reference Finder programme).



4. Discussion

This report provides information to the public and other interested organisations which the Government itself committed to provide. Alas, for whatever reason, whether this is due to a change in priorities or pressure from vested interests, this information appears not to have been forthcoming. Therefore, it falls to voluntary groups such as WPRUK to pick up this responsibility and provide this information.

While details of the criminal behaviour of killing protected wildlife will be of immense interest to the general public, data on this often ignored practice will also be of great assistance to conservation bodies wishing to introduce high profile, apex predator / scavenger species to this area. Such species will be particularly prone to being killed by poison baits. Currently, a project is investigating the feasibility of re-introducing the white tailed sea eagle (WTSE) in Cumbria (Carver et al, 2022). In a recent similar WTSE introduction project in Southern England, one of the released birds was killed by the illegal use of the poison Bendiocarb (Fera, 2022a). Another released eagle was lethally poisoned after being exposed to very high levels of the poison Brodifacoum (Fera, 2022b). More recently, in 2024, a third WTSE from the very small Southern England population was found dead and it was concluded that the poisons Brodifacoum and Difenacoum may have contributed to its death (HSE WIIS website).

Efforts to release WTSEs in Northern England may also be severely impacted by the rise in the level of Second Generation Anticoagulant Rodenticide (SGAR) toxins being found in apex predators and scavengers since the Government, in 2016, relaxed the regulations controlling where these poisons could be used. These toxins, used to control rats on farms and gardens, progress up the food chain when the bodies of the poisoned rodents are eaten by predators and scavengers. A review of SGAR levels in buzzards in Northern England found there had been an

857 % increase in the levels of these poisons in the liver when data from 2021 to 2023 was compared to that from 2005 to 2015, prior to the relaxing of the regulations (Blane, 2025). This review further established that in the years 2021 to 2023 over 55 % of all buzzards tested in Northern England had total SGAR levels in the liver higher than 0.1 mg/kg, this is the level of exposure at which some birds start to suffer lethal impact from SGAR exposure (Thomas et al, 2011).

The illegal use and careless misuse of poisons can therefore severely impact the chances of survival of small, fragile populations of apex predators and scavengers.

When the locations of where these deliberately poisoned birds have been found are reviewed it is noted that the vast majority are either in the central area of Northern England, along the Pennine Hills, or to the east of these hills. There were very few incidents in the western area of Northern England. Of the 73 poisoned birds, 3 were found in Cumbria (1 gull and 2 peregrine falcons) and none were found in the counties of Lancashire, Cheshire and Merseyside. This might indicate that the practice of deliberately poisoning wildlife is infrequent on land to the west of the Pennine Hills or that such poisoning incidents are rarely reported.

This study has identified two areas in Northern England where particular high numbers of illegally poisoned birds have been found. These are Nidderdale in North Yorkshire and the Glapwell area in Derbyshire. It should be noted that the landscape and land management regimes in these two areas are dissimilar. Nidderdale and surrounding land is predominantly moorland, with some areas managed for grouse shooting. On the other hand, the Glapwell area is mixed, lowland farmland in close proximity to built up urban areas. Some of the Fera reports for the birds found here note the presence of game shoots in the area. Clearly, the finding of poisoned birds is not a feature of just one type of landscape and land management.

WPRUK has established that there were no convictions during this period for the illegal killing of any of these 73 protected birds. Evidently, the enforcement regime currently in place in Northern England is not preventing this ongoing criminal activity.

5. References

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Acknowledgements

The data in this report has been compiled from WIIS chemical analysis reports produced by the Wildlife Incident Unit at Fera Science Ltd and Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture (SASA). Many individuals have helped collect this information by the submission of Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulations requests. Due to the hard work of these individuals, it has been possible to make the public aware of the issue of rodenticide exposure in wildlife.