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# Patterns of persecution

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A species-based study of the illegal killing  
of birds of prey in the UK (2015–2024)

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Birds of prey are routinely being illegally shot, trapped or poisoned in the UK. Between 2015 and 2024, 921 confirmed incidents have been recorded, with at least 55% occurring on or near land managed for gamebird shooting. As many incidents go unseen and unreported, these figures represent only the tip of the iceberg.

Drawing on 10 years of data, this report gives an overview of how persecution is impacting birds of prey in the UK, and sets out the case for urgent legislative change and better protection for these threatened species. The RSPB believes that the introduction of of licensing for all gamebird shooting across the UK is essential to addressing this catalogue of criminality against our birds of prey.



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Disclaimer: The data in this report were accurate as of 1 December 2025, but are constantly being updated and may be subject to change. Additional incidents or details may be added retrospectively, pending the release of information from statutory agencies or other sources.

# Bird of prey persecution in the UK

The illegal killing of birds of prey in the UK is relentless despite all species having full legal protection and these crimes being a police national wildlife crime priority.

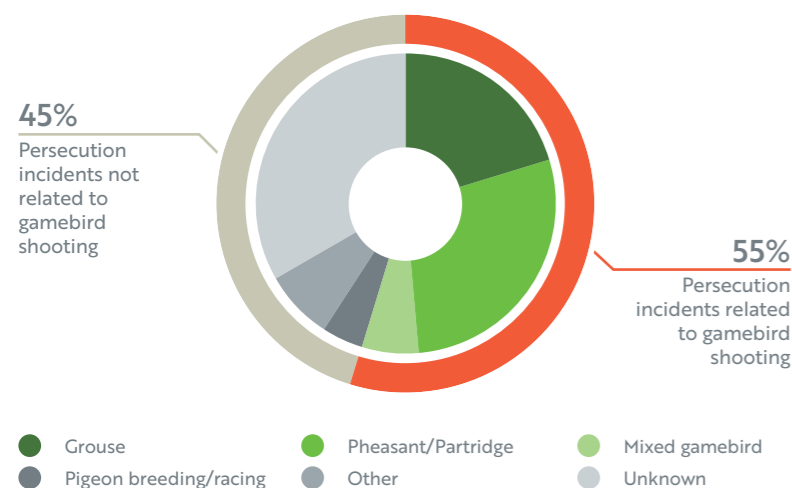
Over **50%** of the UK's bird of prey species are of conservation concern

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, several bird of prey species were persecuted to the brink of extinction and beyond. However, thanks to successful reintroduction programmes and significant conservation efforts in recent decades, many have returned to our skies. Golden Eagles, White-tailed Eagles, and Red Kites are now making a comeback and recolonising large parts of their former ranges, but other species have declined in recent years. Currently, more than half of the UK's bird of prey species are still of conservation concern.

Although most birds of prey have been protected in the UK for over 70 years – making it an offence to kill, injure, or take them, or to destroy their nests or eggs – illegal killing continues. These crimes affect species from the rarest to the most common, including those recently reintroduced.

**Between 2015 and 2024, 921 bird of prey persecution incidents, involving 19 species, have been confirmed in the UK. Of these incidents, 55% happened on or near land managed for gamebird shooting.**

Confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents categorised by likely persecution groups (2015–2024)



## Who is responsible?

Although it is difficult to build a complete picture, decades of evidence – including police investigations, convictions, intelligence reports and eye-witness accounts – have revealed that a significant proportion of these crimes are committed by individuals who work on gamebird shooting estates. Of the 24 individuals convicted of bird of prey persecution-related offences between 2015 and 2024, two thirds were associated with the gamebird industry, and more than half were gamekeepers.

Both cultural and economic factors play a major role in these crimes, with many shooting clients willing to pay large sums to shoot gamebirds. Driven by these financial incentives, some shooting estates seek to maximise the number of gamebirds available to be shot. Intelligence reports and confirmed incidents show that on some estates, birds of prey are routinely illegally killed to remove any perceived risk of predation or disturbance to gamebirds. In some cases, these crimes are fuelled by long-standing attitudes and prejudice against predatory species, which are sometimes characterised as 'vermin'.

Since landowners and managers currently face little accountability for bird of prey persecution on their land – and offenders face neither effective deterrents nor meaningful penalties – these crimes will continue. However, the RSPB believes that these crimes could be effectively challenged with the introduction of licensing for all gamebird shooting.

The methods used to kill birds of prey today – shooting, trapping, poisoning, and destroying nests and eggs – are often identical to those used by gamekeepers in the 1800s. The key difference is that these acts are now illegal.

Evidence from post-mortems, covert footage and eye-witness accounts, reveals that some offenders inflict brutal violence with callous detachment, causing their victim prolonged suffering. These crimes are usually premeditated and may involve multiple victims, especially in poisoning cases.



Satellite tagging birds of prey, like this Hen Harrier chick, is helping to uncover the impacts of persecution.

## The tip of the iceberg

Though the number of confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents in the UK is alarming, evidence from satellite tagging, population analyses and intelligence reports suggest that the true number of birds being killed far exceeds official figures.

These crimes usually take place in remote and inaccessible parts of the UK countryside. As a result, a significant number are likely to go undiscovered and unrecorded. As several recent incidents have revealed, offenders are also using increasingly extreme measures to conceal their illegal activities. The police and RSPB Investigations team have discovered that criminals will often hide or destroy evidence, obscure their identity, and operate under the cover of darkness, assisted by technology like thermal imaging, to avoid detection.

### Suspicious disappearances

Satellite tags transmit near real-time data, and over the past 15 years they have become vital tools for understanding bird of prey survival, movements and habitat use – as well as uncovering the impacts of persecution. Although only a tiny proportion of birds of prey are satellite tagged, the patterns of mortality observed are alarming and reflect concerning trends in Hen Harrier mortality.

Since tagging projects began in the UK, many satellite-tagged birds have vanished under suspicious circumstances. These tags are highly reliable and usually continue to transmit location data even after a bird's death, allowing the bird's body to be recovered and analysed. This can include an X-ray examination, expert post-mortem, forensic testing and toxicological analysis to determine the exact cause of death.

If the tag suddenly stops transmitting, without any indication of a malfunction, and the tag and bird cannot be found, it is highly likely that the tag has been tampered with. Evidence from recent cases indicates that tags are often destroyed and birds killed – most likely by shooting.

### 'Unconfirmed' victims

Obtaining irrefutable evidence confirming that the bird has been illegally killed is incredibly difficult, so the majority of these incidents remain officially 'unconfirmed'.

In addition to the 921 confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents recorded between 2015 and 2024, 134 satellite-tagged birds disappeared in suspicious circumstances – all suspected to have been illegally killed. In every case the bird's tag and body were never found.

Of the 134 satellite-tagged birds that disappeared in suspicious circumstances, 87% vanished on or near land managed for gamebird shooting. These include:

- 89 Hen Harriers
- 17 Golden Eagles
- 6 White-tailed Eagles
- 4 Red Kites
- 1 Montagu's Harrier

Evidence gathered from scientific analysis of the fates of satellite-tagged birds, population studies and intelligence reports have shown that the true scale of bird of prey persecution is likely to be far greater than confirmed incidents suggest. Over the last decade, 921 confirmed incidents of bird of prey persecution have been recorded – but this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Of the **134** satellite-tagged birds that disappeared in suspicious circumstances between 2015–2024

**87%** vanished on or near land managed for gamebird shooting

# The link between gamebird shooting and bird of prey persecution

The persecution of birds of prey remains deeply entwined with gamebird shooting in the UK, with 507 confirmed incidents linked to pheasant, partridge and grouse shooting between 2015 and 2024.

Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, it is an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take a bird of prey, or to destroy its eggs or nest. Yet despite these legal protections some individuals on gamebird shooting estates illegally kill birds of prey in an effort to remove any threat of predation and maximise the number of gamebirds available to shoot.

## Grouse shooting

Driven Red Grouse shooting was first developed in the 19th Century, transforming land management practices across the UK's uplands. Since the 1990s, many estates have intensified these practices to boost the number of this native gamebird available to be shot. This includes a rise in prescribed burning of heather, to encourage the growth of young heather shoots for Red Grouse to feed on, and the use of medicated grit to prevent disease in grouse.

Legal predator control is permitted under government General Licences for certain species (eg Carrion Crows) to conserve wild birds of conservation concern, or to prevent significant damage to crops or livestock, but cannot be directly used to increase the number of gamebirds for shooting. However, evidence shows that some grouse shooting estates will go beyond the limits of the law in an effort to remove any and all potential threats of predation to grouse by illegally killing birds of prey.

Between 2015 and 2024, at least 190 confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents were directly linked to land used for grouse shooting, representing 21% of all confirmed incidents in the UK. Of these 190 incidents, 46% involved shooting, 17% involved trapping and 12% involved poisoning.

In total, 15 bird of prey species were the victims of these crimes, with Buzzards, Hen Harriers, Red Kites, Short-eared Owls, Peregrine Falcons and Goshawks the most heavily persecuted.

Bird of prey persecution associated with grouse shooting has been recorded across many areas of the UK uplands with the counties of North Yorkshire, Angus and County Durham having the highest number of confirmed persecution incidents in the last decade.

As many grouse moors are remote, inaccessible and isolated, detecting and investigating these types of crimes is extremely challenging. As a result, very few confirmed incidents result in the perpetrator being identified and charged.

Between 2015 and 2024, although 190 bird of prey persecution incidents were associated with this land type, only four people connected to the grouse shooting industry have been convicted for bird of prey persecution-related offences.

## Pheasant and partridge shooting

Pheasant and partridge shooting mainly takes place in lowland areas of the UK, but in recent years it has expanded into some parts of the uplands. Common Pheasants and Red-legged Partridges – both non-native species – are bred and reared to maturity in captivity, before being released into the countryside to be shot.

Often, large numbers of pheasant and partridge chicks and eggs are commercially imported, or transported across the UK, to shooting estates or game-rearing facilities. Each year, before the shooting season begins, these non-native birds are released from rearing pens in vast numbers. The scale of these releases is immense, with more than 40 million gamebirds released into the UK countryside annually.

## 507

confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents related to gamebird shooting have been recorded in the UK (2015–2024)

Between 2015 and 2024, at least 260 confirmed persecution incidents have been recorded on or near land managed for pheasant or partridge shooting, of which 31% involved poisoning, 30% involved shooting, and 25% involved trapping.

These crimes involved 14 bird of prey species, with Buzzards, Red Kites, Goshawks and Tawny Owls the most frequently persecuted. Other persecuted species include Marsh Harriers, Barn Owls, Little Owls and White-tailed Eagles.

A total of 213 of these crimes (82%) took place in England, with most incidents in North Yorkshire (28), Norfolk (25) and Wiltshire (22).

Alongside its connection with bird of prey persecution, the rearing and releasing of gamebirds also raises significant concerns in connection to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). As both pheasants and partridges are highly susceptible to the disease, the large-scale transportation and release of these species could increase the likelihood of introducing and spreading HPAI among wild birds and domestic flocks, including poultry.

## Mixed gamebird shooting

Some areas of land are managed for a range of gamebird shooting (including grouse, and partridge or pheasant shooting). These areas are also linked to bird of prey persecution, with 57 confirmed incidents recorded on or near land managed for mixed gamebird shooting between 2015 and 2024.

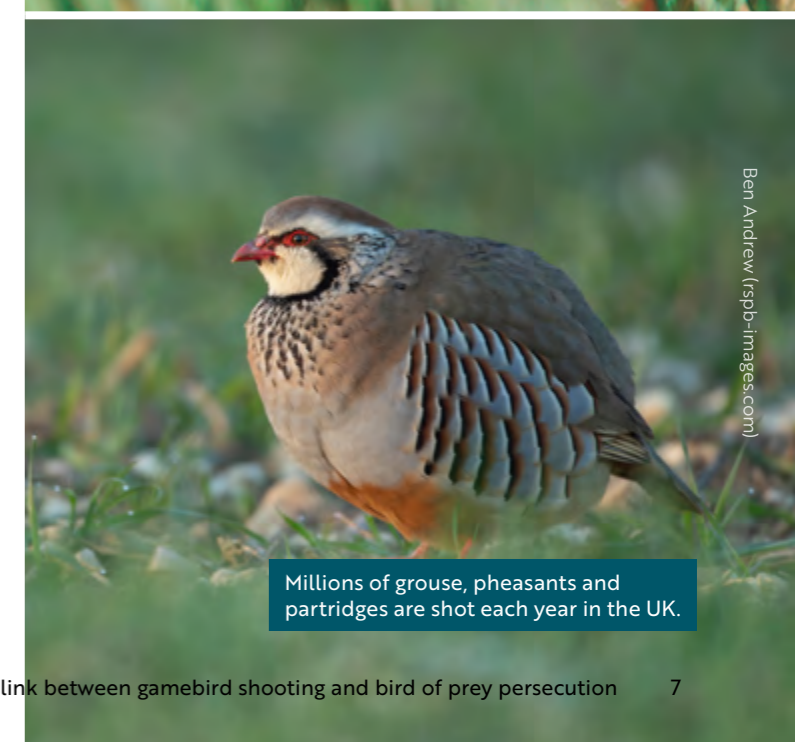
These incidents involved nine bird of prey species, with Buzzards and Red Kites the most often persecuted, followed by Goshawks, Peregrine Falcons and Hen Harriers. 44% of these incidents involved poisoning, 39% shooting and 14% trapping. Between 2015 and 2024, more than a third of all confirmed persecution incidents associated with mixed gamebird shooting took place in North Yorkshire.



Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

Millions of grouse, pheasants and partridges are shot each year in the UK.

# How birds of prey are being illegally killed

Bird of prey persecution is a serious crime. Despite laws designed to protect them, these birds are routinely shot, trapped and poisoned.

## Shooting

Shooting is the most frequently recorded method of killing birds of prey in England and Scotland.

Between 2015 and 2024, there have been 443 confirmed incidents in the UK involving the shooting or attempted shooting of birds of prey, with Buzzards, Red Kites, and Peregrine Falcons the most frequently targeted.

These incidents are confirmed by evidence, such as post-mortem examinations and X-ray analysis, which often reveal the presence of wounds and shotgun fragments. As shotgun pellets cannot be easily traced to an individual gun, identifying the perpetrator is extremely difficult. Only when investigators obtain eye-witness accounts or admissible video evidence can these cases successfully make it to court.

Between 2015 and 2024, shooting accounted for 55% of all persecution incidents in England, and 34% in Scotland.

## Poisoning

In Wales and Northern Ireland, poisoning is the most common way that birds of prey are illegally killed.

Although laying poisoned baits in the open has been unlawful in the UK for over a century, this practice persists. Carcasses of pheasants, partridges, rabbits and other animals, are laced with toxic chemicals and deliberately left in open areas of the countryside to attract scavenging birds of prey. They are also sometimes laid near or within active bird of prey nests.

Most of these incidents involve the use of legal pesticides in breach of their safety conditions or illegal pesticide products which have been banned in the UK,

with many being outlawed for decades. As multiple post-mortem and toxicological analyses have revealed, exposure to these poisons will cause instant death or prolonged trauma.

Between 2015 and 2024, there were 236 confirmed poisoning incidents in the UK. Like shooting, the species most associated with this type of persecution were Buzzards, Red Kites and Peregrine Falcons.

This indiscriminate method of killing not only poses serious risks to birds of prey and other wildlife, but also puts the safety and health of the public and domestic animals at risk. In recent years, several dogs have died after ingesting poisoned baits laid out in the open countryside.

## Trapping

Although fewer trapping incidents are detected than shooting and poisoning, the illegal trapping of birds of prey is a serious issue in the UK. Between 2015 and 2024, 130 trapping incidents were recorded, with Buzzards, Tawny Owls and Goshawks being the most frequently recorded victims.

These crimes involve the use of illegal traps, including hawk or pole traps, or the unlawful operation of licensed, legal traps, used to deliberately catch birds of prey.

In recent years, a number of trapping incidents have been detected using covert footage. In these cases, individuals have been seen beating birds of prey to death inside cage traps or removing live birds from traps in sacks – likely to kill them elsewhere and avoid detection from potential surveillance cameras.



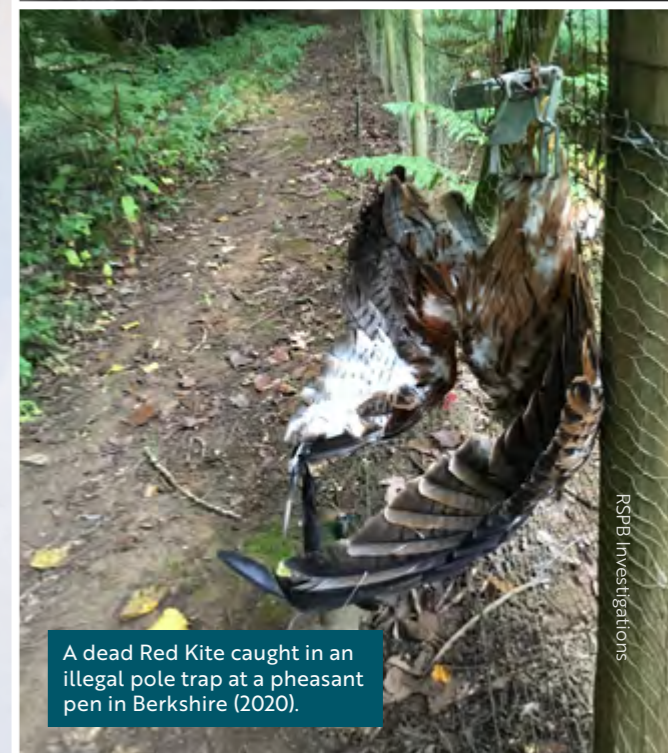
A buzzard found poisoned in North Yorkshire in 2020 by a mixture of pesticides commonly called the 'Nidderdale cocktail'.

RSPB Investigations



An X-ray of a shot Red Kite found in Bedfordshire in 2017, containing at least 10 pieces of shot.

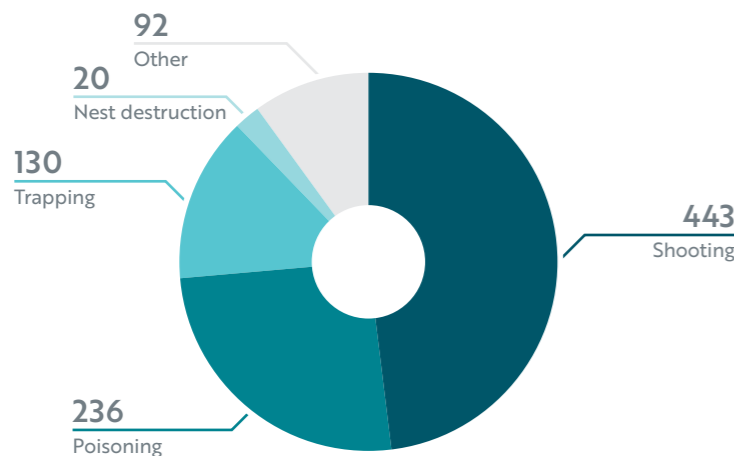
RSPB Investigations



A dead Red Kite caught in an illegal pole trap at a pheasant pen in Berkshire (2020).

RSPB Investigations

Confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents by offence type (2015–2024)



In these cases, the action of taking a wild bird is an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, and a breach of the licence conditions of legal traps, which states that non-target species should be released at the point of capture, without delay.

Spring traps can be legally used under certain circumstances to catch target mammal species, but are often used unlawfully to illegally trap birds of prey. In a number of cases, set spring traps have been found beside bait in open areas, and in or near the nests of bird of prey.

These types of traps have also been found fitted to the tops of posts, to create a pole trap. When triggered by the weight of the bird landing on the trap's pressure plate, the metal frames of the trap will clamp around one or both of the bird's legs.

As these traps are fixed to the post or ground the bird has little or no chance of escape. These types of traps inflict severe injuries with birds often suffering a slow and painful death.

48%

of all confirmed persecution incidents recorded between 2015 and 2024 were shooting offences

# The UK's most persecuted birds of prey

The impacts of persecution on birds of prey vary from species to species, as well as regionally throughout the UK. Vulnerable species, such as the Hen Harrier, are among the hardest hit, with illegal killing recognised as the main factor limiting their population levels in England and Scotland.

For other birds of prey, including Buzzards, Peregrine Falcons and Red Kites, these crimes are having significant localised impacts. In some areas where these birds should be thriving, they are completely absent.

This report takes an in-depth look at nine of the UK's most targeted birds of prey to better understand how these species are being impacted by persecution.

**Note:** In some cases, more than one species has been linked to a single confirmed incident. The figures in this report show the total number of incidents associated with each individual species.



“For decades, the RSPB Investigations team has been shining a light on these crimes but we are barely scraping the surface when it comes to the true scale of this issue. Without significant legislative change these protected species will continue to be shot, trapped or poisoned. We need bold, decisive action now to effectively protect our magnificent birds of prey.”

**Mark Thomas**  
Head of Investigations UK

# Buzzard

The Buzzard has recovered well from historic declines and is now the UK's most common bird of prey – but it is also the most persecuted.

Buzzards make up **41%** of bird of prey persecution victims

In the 1800s, Buzzards became the targets of persecution as gamebird shooting grew in popularity. By the mid-19th century, they had disappeared from large areas of eastern and southern Scotland and England, with small, scattered populations surviving mainly in western Scotland, Wales, Devon, and Cornwall.

Persecution eased during the two World Wars, possibly because gamekeeping activity declined, allowing populations to recover. However, Buzzard numbers fell sharply again in the 1950s due to the spread of myxomatosis. This viral disease decimated rabbit populations across the UK, reducing a key food source for Buzzards.

At around the same time, organochlorine pesticides (including DDT) were introduced, which caused significant reproductive failure, resulting in further population declines. With the banning of organochlorine pesticides and the recovery of rabbit populations in the 1960s and 1970s, Buzzard numbers began to steadily rise.

Today, they are the UK's most abundant and widespread bird of prey species and can be found across farmland, woodland, moorland, and even some urban areas.

## Persecution persists

Despite this success, Buzzards are still being persecuted throughout the UK. Over the last decade, 319 confirmed incidents of Buzzard persecution have been recorded, with around 60% linked to land managed for gamebird shooting.



In October 2022, a gamekeeper in Norfolk was convicted of illegally shooting and poisoning six Buzzards and a Goshawk.

Almost three-quarters of these crimes occurred in England, with North Yorkshire alone accounting for 54 incidents – the highest of any county in the UK.

The most common method of persecution is by shooting, representing 57.4% of all incidents, followed by poisoning (26.0%) and trapping (9.7%). While shooting is the dominant crime type in England and Scotland, poisoning is more common in Northern Ireland. In Wales both methods were recorded in equal numbers.

Buzzards are opportunistic predators, with carrion forming a large part of their diet. This scavenging behaviour makes them especially vulnerable to poisoned baits and baited traps, particularly during the winter months when food is scarce.

## Recent investigations and convictions

Several incidents reported by members of the public or detected by the RSPB Investigations team have led to successful convictions in recent years.

In October 2020, a member of the public found a dead Buzzard lying on a pheasant carcass in Devon. The Buzzard tested positive for carbofuran – a pesticide banned in the UK since 2001 – leading to a police search of Ashley Game Farm, one of the UK's largest pheasant and partridge suppliers. A police-led search resulted in traces of carbofuran being discovered in two company vehicles. In July 2024, the company and its director pleaded guilty to multiple related offences. They were ordered to pay over £42,000 in fines and costs.

In 2021, after receiving a report by a member of the public, the RSPB Investigations team used remote cameras to monitor a crow cage trap on a pheasant estate in Nottinghamshire. Footage showed a gamekeeper beating two Buzzards to death inside the trap. The gamekeeper pleaded guilty and received a suspended sentence and a fine. The following year, a gamekeeper in Norfolk was convicted of illegally shooting and poisoning six Buzzards and a Goshawk.

In a similar incident in 2024, covert RSPB filming showed a gamekeeper brutally beating a Buzzard to death. It had been caught in a crow cage trap set on a pheasant estate in woodland near Hovingham, North Yorkshire. The gamekeeper was convicted for this crime in January 2026.

# Buzzard persecution at a glance

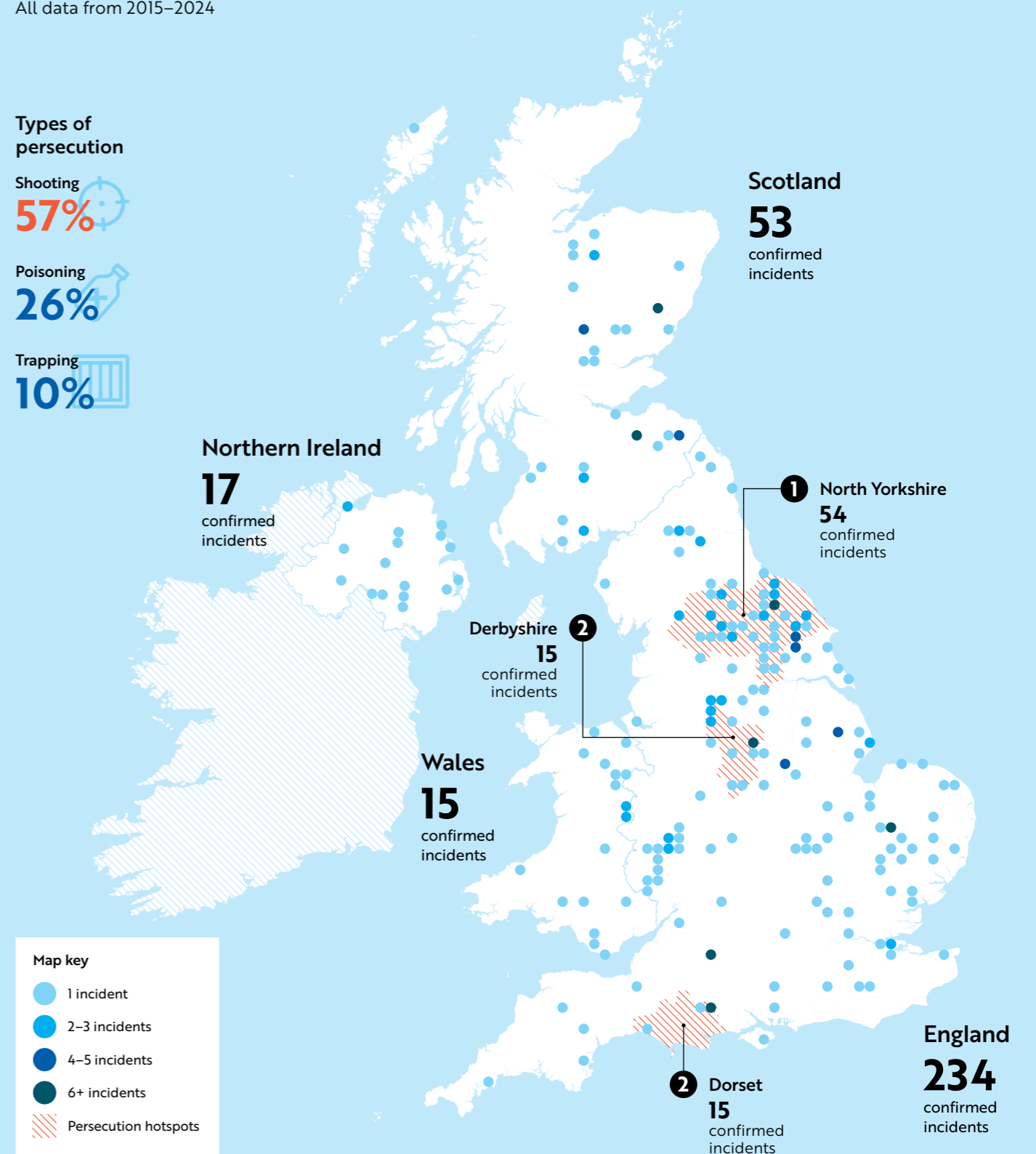
All data from 2015–2024

## Types of persecution

Shooting **57%**

Poisoning **26%**

Trapping **10%**



**319** confirmed Buzzard persecution incidents

**331** Buzzards fell victim to these crimes

**60%** of all confirmed incidents were related to gamebird shooting

**12** people were convicted for Buzzard-related offences



More than half of confirmed Red Kite persecution incidents were associated with land managed for gamebird shooting.

## Red Kite

The reintroduction and recovery of Red Kites is one of the UK's greatest conservation success stories – yet persecution still remains the most significant threat to this species.

As with many birds of prey in the UK, Red Kites were intensely persecuted in the 1800s as gamebird shooting grew in popularity. The relentless extermination of these birds resulted in catastrophic population declines and by the late 19th century, Red Kites were extinct in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. Only a small population survived in part of rural Wales.

In the 1980s, conservation efforts got underway in England and Scotland to help Red Kites recover. From 1989 onwards, Red Kites from Spain, Sweden and Germany were translocated under licence and released at carefully selected sites in England and Scotland. These efforts sparked a steady population increase in many areas as they recolonised their former range. Following the success of reintroduction programmes in England and Scotland, Red Kites were reintroduced to Northern Ireland in 2008 – after more than 200 years of national extinction.

Today, Red Kites can be seen across most parts of the UK, with recent estimates suggesting that there are now over 6,000 breeding pairs in the UK – a remarkable turnaround from the brink of extinction. However, in Scotland, recent data has revealed that Red Kites are still largely absent as breeding birds on land managed for grouse shooting, most likely due to persecution.

### A success story overshadowed by continued persecution

Although the recovery of this species is a testament to dedicated conservation efforts, persecution continues to impact Red Kite populations in some areas. In the last 10 years there have been 157 confirmed persecution incidents recorded across the UK, with 49.0% linked to poisoning and 45.2% to shooting. More than half (52.9%) of these crimes were associated with land managed for gamebird shooting, with the majority taking place on or near land managed for pheasant or partridge shooting.

Red Kites are generalist feeders and will scavenge carrion and other food sources, making them highly susceptible to persecution by deliberate poisoning.

### Recent investigations and convictions

In 2018, a pair of Red Kites was found poisoned in County Down, Northern Ireland. The dead body of the female was found lying on top of her three eggs in the nest. No one was charged in relation to these crimes.

Covert footage gathered in 2020 by the RSPB Investigations team showed an individual hiding multiple dead birds of prey down a well on a pheasant shooting estate in Wiltshire. This evidence led to the conviction of a gamekeeper for possession of three Red Kites, five Buzzards and a gull, as it wasn't proven how they had died.

In 2022, a member of the public found a dead Red Kite hanging in a tree close to a grouse moor in County Durham – a persecution hotspot in the North Pennines National Landscape. X-ray analysis revealed that the bird's body contained pieces of shot. However, further toxicological testing established that the bird had remarkably survived these wounds and died after ingesting a toxic cocktail of highly dangerous, banned pesticides.



In 2018, a poisoned female Red Kite was found lying on top of her three eggs in a nest in Northern Ireland.

## Red Kite persecution at a glance

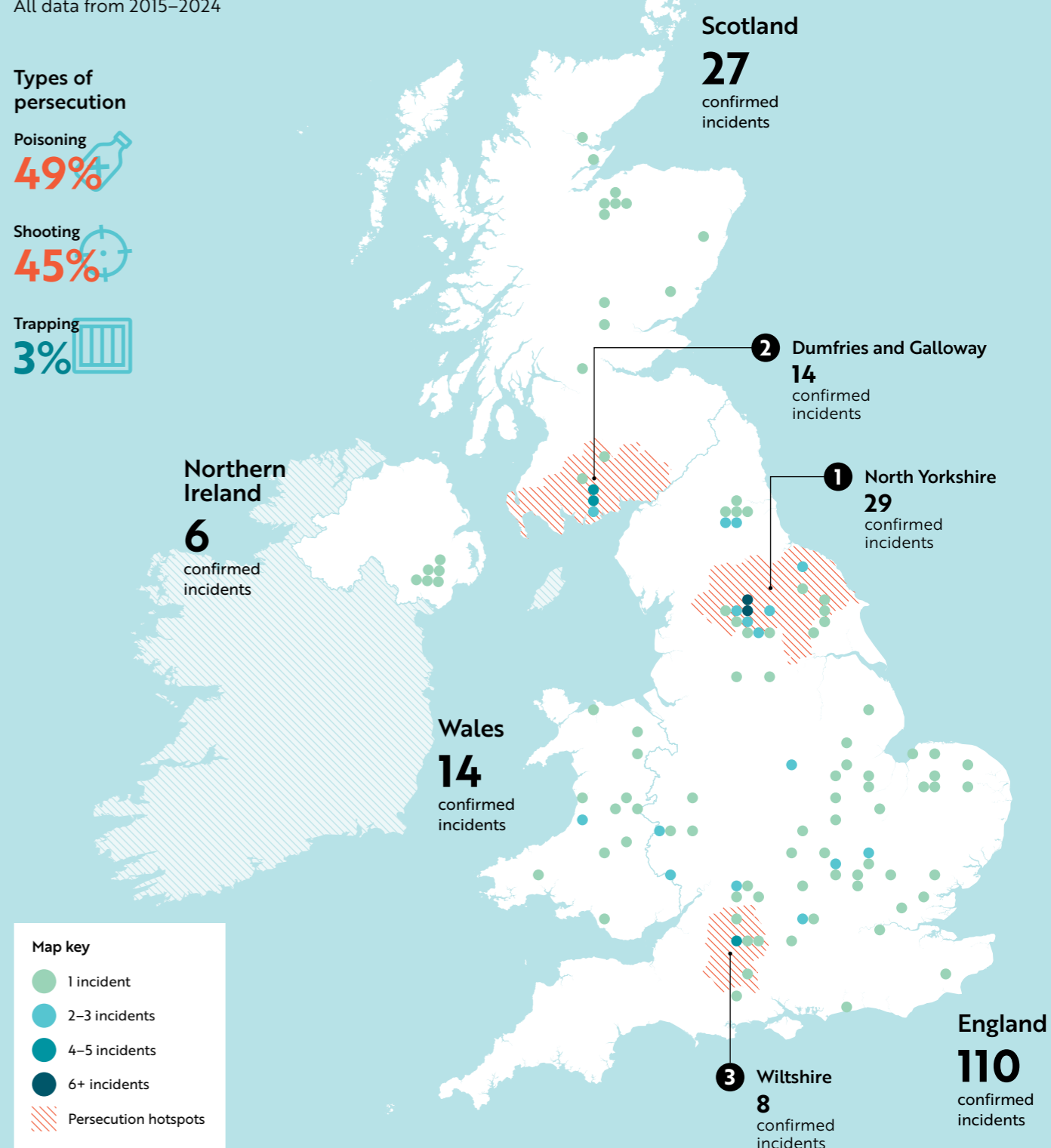
All data from 2015–2024

### Types of persecution

Poisoning  
49%

Shooting  
45%

Trapping  
3%



**157**  
confirmed Red Kite persecution incidents

**6,000+**  
breeding pairs in the UK

**53%**  
of all confirmed incidents were related to gamebird shooting

**2**  
people were convicted for Red Kite-related offences

# Peregrine Falcon

Although Peregrines are becoming an increasingly familiar sight in some regions, persecution is still an issue, with most incidents linked to grouse shooting and pigeon racing.



65% of all confirmed persecution incidents took place in England

In the 1800s, widespread persecution linked to grouse shooting led to the disappearance of Peregrines from many upland areas. Their decline continued into the mid-20th century when, like Buzzards, they were severely affected by the introduction of organochlorine pesticides. These highly toxic chemicals caused widespread reproductive failure, triggering catastrophic population declines, particularly across lowland Britain. Following the ban on these pesticides, Peregrines began a steady recovery and gradually expanded their range. Although Peregrines are becoming a common feature in some lowland areas, nationally this species is still struggling, with the BTO's Breeding Bird Survey 2023 revealing a 48% decline in the UK between 1995 and 2023.

## Persecution continues to limit recovery

Persecution linked to grouse shooting continues to limit their recovery in many upland regions where they should be thriving. A [2012 study](#) in northern England found that the breeding success of Peregrines on grouse moors was 50% lower than for pairs on non-grouse moor habitat. Only one third of pairs nesting on grouse moors successfully produced young. [Persecution of Peregrines in the Peak District National Park](#) has also been well documented, with persecution associated with grouse moor management identified as a key factor limiting their breeding success.



A poisoned Peregrine found in 2016 in Glenwherry, Co. Antrim, in Northern Ireland.

## Recent investigations

Between 2015 and 2024, 97 Peregrine persecution incidents were recorded, of which 22.7% were linked to gamebird shooting. Evidence shows that offenders will go to great lengths to eradicate Peregrines from some areas.

In one case in 2016, footage recorded by the RSPB Investigations team showed someone setting a spring trap at a Peregrine nest on an area of land managed for grouse shooting in Lancashire. The footage then showed a male Peregrine being caught in the trap, where it remained for more than 12 hours. Later, under the cover of darkness, a person visited the nest, removed the Peregrine from the trap and seemed to put it into a bag – most likely to be killed elsewhere. The female of the pair is thought to have been shot shortly before the trap was installed.

Other Peregrine persecution incidents involve birds being shot. For instance, in April 2024, an injured Peregrine was found at Dove Stone nature reserve, a Special Protection Area (SPA) in the Peak District National Park which is surrounded by land managed for grouse shooting. Sadly, the Peregrine's injuries were so severe that it had to be euthanised. In a similar case in December 2023, a shot Peregrine was found alive in the grounds of a primary school in Doncaster. Fortunately, in this case the bird was successfully nursed back to health by Ryedale Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre and released.

## Crimes linked to pigeon racing

Peregrine persecution is also linked to the recreational breeding and racing of domestic pigeons, with most incidents involving the use of poisoned baits. These crimes are particularly prevalent in Northern Ireland, where seven of the nine confirmed Peregrine poisoning incidents between 2015 and 2024 were linked to pigeon racing.

In July 2025, following a petition from the Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group, backed by the RSPB and Ulster Wildlife, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pledged to strengthen enforcement of pesticide laws to tackle the illegal killing of birds of prey. We welcome this commitment and will continue to support progress to help bring an end to the illegal poisoning of birds of prey in Northern Ireland.

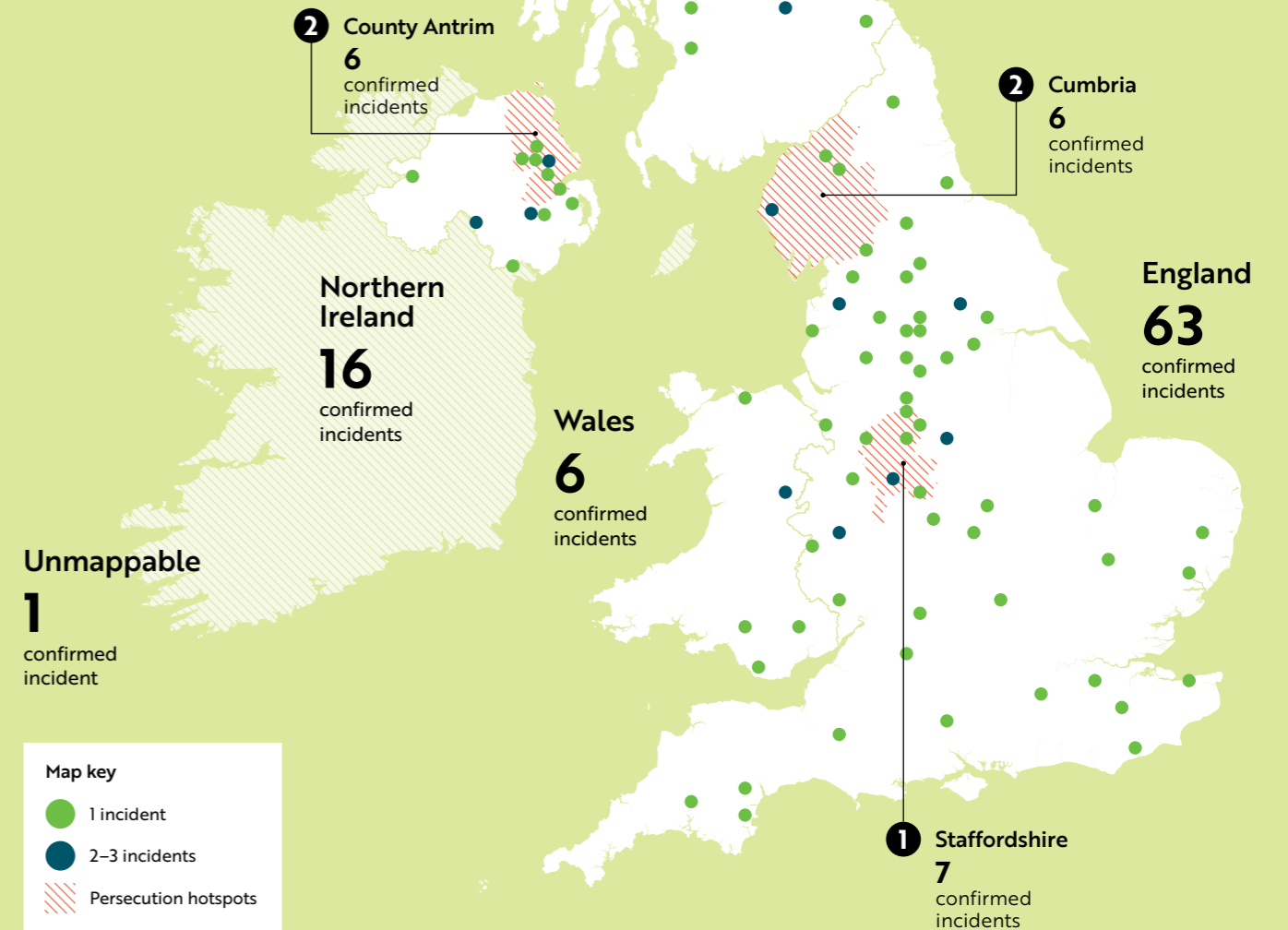
## Illegal wildlife trade poses another threat

In addition to persecution, Peregrines are also targeted for the illegal wildlife trade. Eggs and chicks are stolen from wild nests and reared in captivity, to be fraudulently sold as captive-bred birds for significant sums of money. Illegally laundered into the falconry trade, these birds are often destined for the Middle East.

# Peregrine Falcon persecution at a glance

All data from 2015–2024

## Types of persecution



Despite being relatively scarce in the UK, Goshawks still fall victim to persecution.

## Goshawk

Goshawks are making a comeback across the UK, but their recovery is overshadowed by intense regional persecution. More than a third of these crimes were linked to land managed for pheasant or partridge shooting.

Goshawks were driven to extinction in the UK by the late 19th century due to intense persecution associated with gamebird shooting, and widespread deforestation. Through deliberate and accidental releases of captive birds by falconers in the 1960s and 1970s Goshawk populations began to recover in Wales, northern England and parts of Scotland – and later in Northern Ireland in the 1990s. Today, Goshawks are still relatively scarce in the UK, with an estimated total of over 620 breeding pairs.

Despite their recovery and recolonisation, Goshawks continue to be persecuted. Between 2015 and 2024, 49 confirmed Goshawk persecution incidents were recorded in the UK, with 59.2% involving shooting, 20.4% trapping and 6.1% nest destruction.

About two-thirds of these crimes were linked to land managed for gamebird shooting: 34.7% were associated with pheasant or partridge shooting, 20.4% with grouse shooting and 12.2% with mixed gamebird shooting. Incidents were recorded in England, Scotland and Wales, with most recorded in the Scottish Borders, Aberdeenshire, and Suffolk. No Goshawk persecution incidents were recorded in Northern Ireland between 2015 and 2024.

### Recent investigations and convictions

Between 2015 and 2024 there have been five successful convictions relating to Goshawk persecution – all involving individuals associated with the gamebird shooting industry.

The most high-profile Goshawk case in recent years took place in early 2023 when the bodies of five Goshawks were discovered in a rural car park in Suffolk. Post-mortem examinations confirmed that all five birds had been shot. Forensic analysis found human DNA on one of the bird's bodies, which matched that of a local gamekeeper. Though evidence could not prove that he had killed the Goshawks, the gamekeeper pleaded guilty to possessing the birds. This was the UK's first raptor persecution conviction where human DNA found on a bird led to a suspect being identified and convicted.

In 2022, an illegal hawk trap was discovered in an area of woodland where Goshawks had been seen, close to Ruabon Moor, a grouse moor in Wales. Although evidence led to charges being brought by North Wales Police, the case was dropped by the Crown Prosecution Service, who thought the case was not of public interest, prompting criticism from the RSPB, North Wales Police and the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU).

A similar outcome happened in Wales in 2023, in relation to the suspected killing of a Goshawk on a pheasant rearing farm. Although evidence led to charges being brought, the case was discontinued due to procedural issues.

In the Cairngorms National Park in June 2024, a Goshawk nest was found abandoned. Police Scotland found shotgun cartridges below the nest and discovered a shotgun wad in the base of the nest. X-rays of the nest and surrounding branches revealed that they were riddled with shotgun pellets, confirming the nest had been deliberately targeted.



Suffolk Police

An X-ray of one of five shot Goshawks found in Suffolk in 2023. A gamekeeper was convicted for possession of the five birds.

## Goshawk persecution at a glance

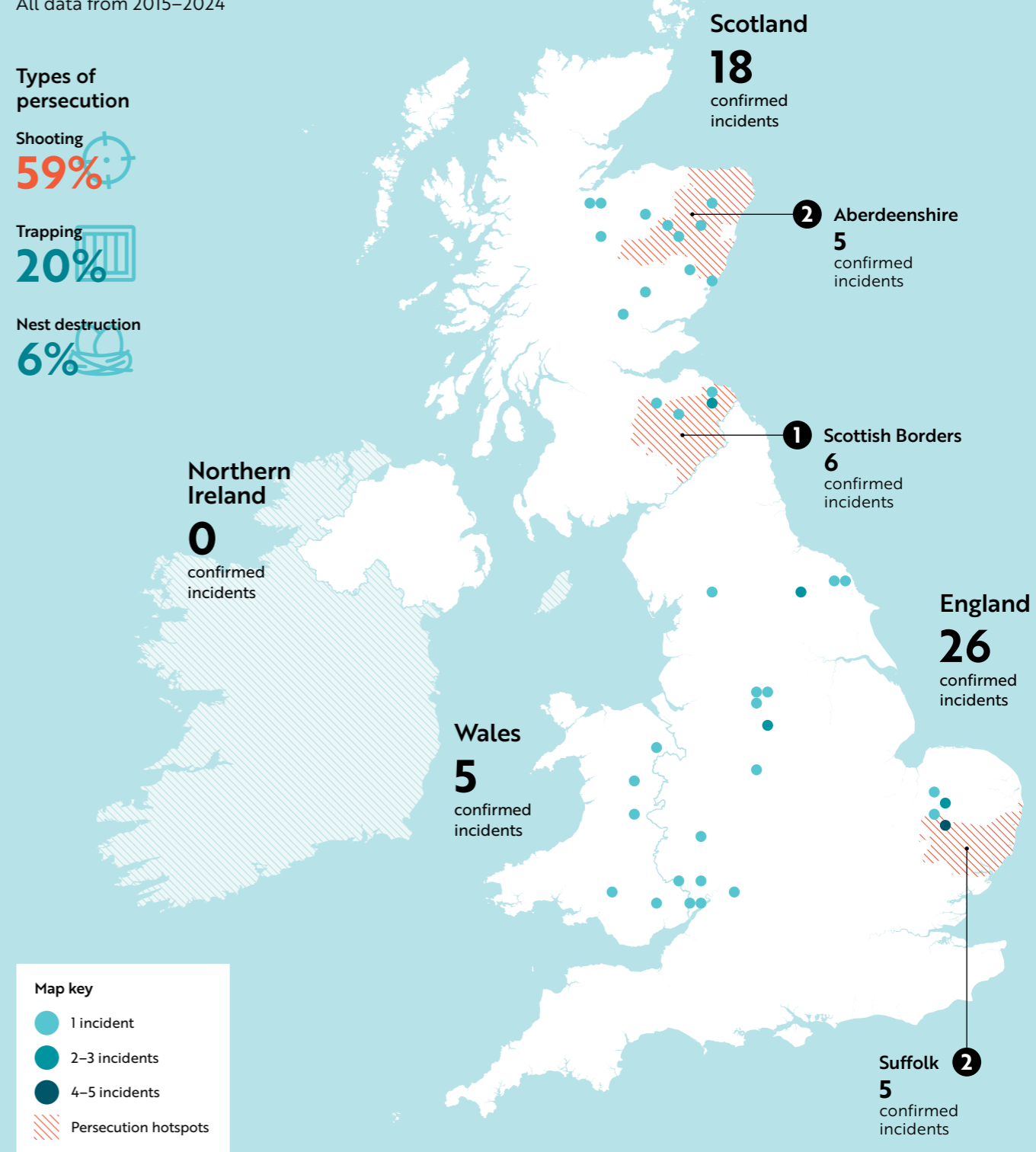
All data from 2015–2024

Types of persecution

Shooting **59%**

Trapping **20%**

Nest destruction **6%**



**49**  
confirmed  
Goshawk  
persecution incidents

**67%**  
of all confirmed  
incidents were related  
to gamebird shooting

**5**  
people were convicted  
for Goshawk-related  
offences

**100%**  
of convictions were  
associated with  
gamebird shooting

# Sparrowhawk

Sparrowhawks are declining in the UK and also face persecution, with many of these incidents associated with gamebird shooting or domestic pigeon breeding and racing.

**26%**

of all persecution incidents were recorded in Yorkshire

Sparrowhawks were heavily persecuted in the 19th century, with gamekeepers shooting and trapping birds, and destroying their nests, to maximise gamebird stocks. Their numbers rebounded after the two World Wars, but the introduction of organochlorine pesticides (including DDT) in the 1940s and 1950s caused catastrophic breeding failure and significant population declines.

Following the ban on these chemicals in the early 1960s to 1980s, Sparrowhawks staged a strong recovery – their range expanded, and their population had stabilised by the 1990s.

However, recent data indicate that this positive trend has taken a worrying turn, with national population numbers now in decline. Between 1995 and 2023, the Sparrowhawk population declined by 25%, and in 2021 the species was added to the [UK Amber List of Birds of Conservation Concern](#).

Recent Sparrowhawk declines are thought to be the result of a combination of pressures rather than a single cause. As specialist hunters of small to medium-sized birds, Sparrowhawks have been affected by sharp declines in farmland songbirds such as House Sparrows and Starlings, largely linked to agricultural intensification and habitat change.

Disease, particularly trichomonosis, contracted through infected prey, has also contributed to mortality, while secondary poisoning from rodenticides presents another threat.

Although populations have fallen nationally since the mid-1990s, numbers appear to be stabilising in some areas with urban populations faring better in some places than those in the managed countryside.

## Recent investigations and convictions

In the last decade, 38 confirmed Sparrowhawk persecution incidents have been recorded in the UK, with 26% linked to gamebird shooting and 18% to domestic pigeon breeding and racing. Most incidents occurred in North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire.

A recent incident, witnessed in 2021 by a member of the RSPB Investigations team, highlights the brutality of these crimes. A gamekeeper was seen on a grouse shooting estate in the Scottish Highlands using a plastic owl decoy to lure a Sparrowhawk to within range of his gun. Once close enough, he shot the Sparrowhawk dead. A swift response from Police Scotland resulted in the gamekeeper being charged with the crime. In 2023, he pleaded guilty and was fined £1,500.

In Hampshire in 2019, CCTV footage showed a man killing a Sparrowhawk with a catapult in his neighbour's garden after it had caught one of his racing pigeons. A post-mortem showed a ball bearing lodged in the bird's skull. The individual was convicted and fined £653 for the offence. Earlier that month a man also pleaded guilty to killing a Sparrowhawk with an air rifle near Stirling after it attacked one of his pigeons. He was fined £450.

In March 2022, two dead Sparrowhawks were found at a West Yorkshire property. The birds lay side-by-side, one on top of a dead white dove with another dead white dove nearby. A blue substance was visible on both doves. Similar substances were found at a local pigeon racer's property, which toxicological analysis revealed were bromadiolone (a rat poison) and bendiocarb (a highly toxic insecticide). The substances on the doves were not analysed and there was no post-mortem conducted on any of the birds, as one of the Sparrowhawks and both doves tested positive for avian flu. The police investigation was subsequently closed.



One of the two dead Sparrowhawks found lying next to two white doves, which are believed to have been laced with poison.

# Sparrowhawk persecution at a glance

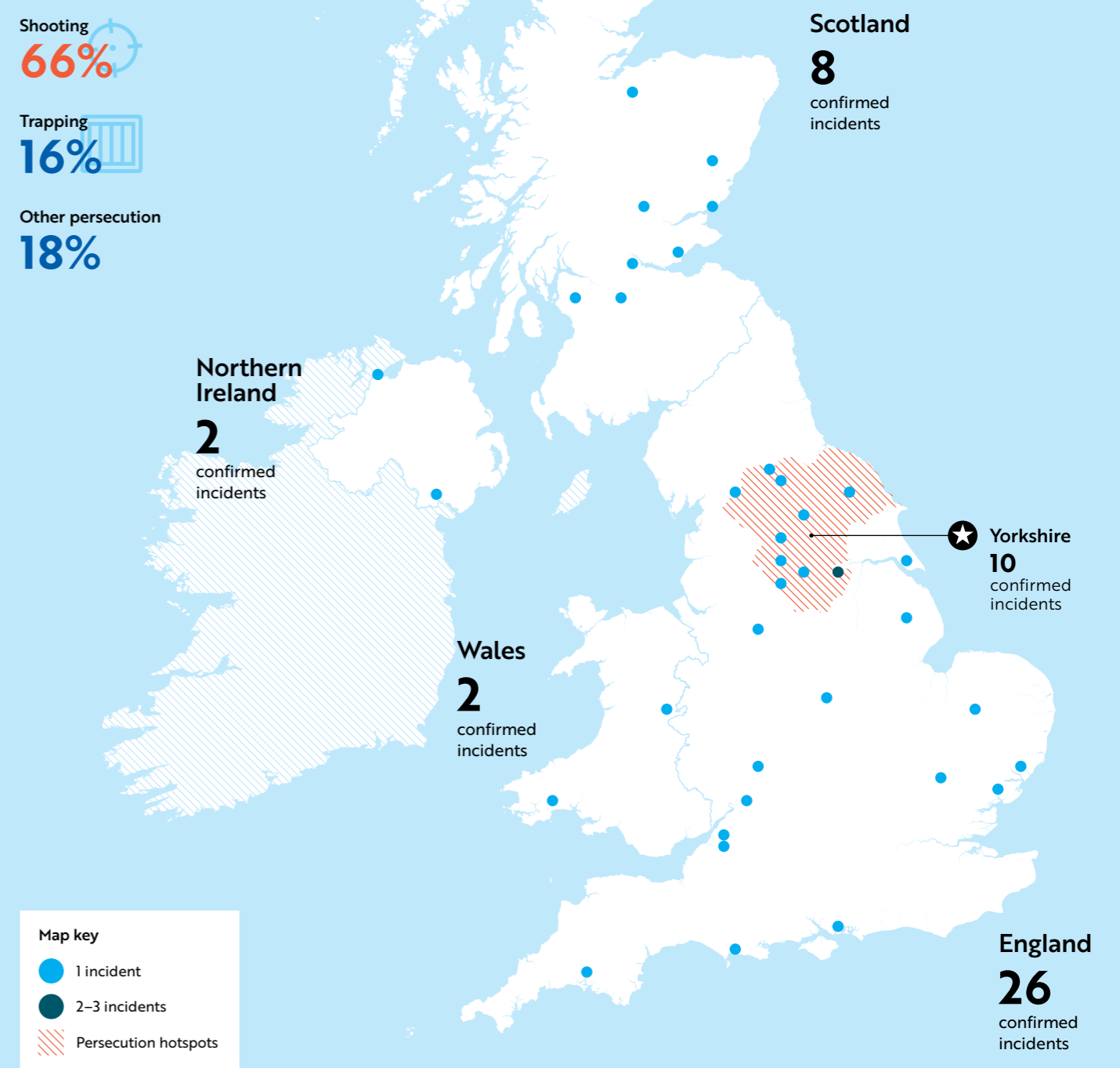
All data from 2015–2024

## Types of persecution

Shooting **66%**

Trapping **16%**

Other persecution **18%**



**38**  
confirmed Sparrowhawk persecution incidents

**26%**  
of all confirmed incidents were related to gamebird shooting

**18%**  
of all confirmed incidents were related to pigeon racing and breeding

**6**  
people were convicted for Sparrowhawk-related offences

# Hen Harrier

The Hen Harrier remains one of the UK's most persecuted birds of prey, with illegal killing having a catastrophic impact on its populations in England and Scotland. In the last decade, 73% of confirmed persecution incidents were linked to land managed for grouse shooting.

Hen Harriers were driven to extinction across England, Wales, and mainland Scotland by the late 19th century due to relentless persecution. The surviving population was confined to Orkney and the Outer Hebrides until the late 1930s.

Although Hen Harrier numbers rebounded during the Second World War, their recovery faltered in the late 20th century as grouse moor management intensified. Since the 1980s, persecution has had a significant impact on Hen Harrier numbers, and as a result of their vulnerable status, Hen Harriers now feature on the [Red List of species of the highest conservation concern](#).

## Persecution still limiting numbers

As highlighted in a recent RSPB report, [Hen Harriers in the firing line](#), relentless persecution is still suppressing the breeding populations of Hen Harriers across many upland areas of the UK where land is managed for grouse shooting. National surveys and annual reports published by Natural England have shown that these crimes have left Hen Harrier numbers in Scotland and England far below their potential.

In England, only 34 breeding pairs of Hen Harriers were recorded in 2024, and 39 pairs in 2025. This is down from the 50 pairs recorded in 2023, as part of the national Hen Harrier Survey. These figures represent approximately one tenth of the country's potential population of 323 to 340 pairs, as set out in a report published by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee in 2011.

Only five of the 39 Hen Harrier nesting attempts in 2025 were on private driven grouse moors, with just two located in the Yorkshire Dales and Nidderdale area – a significant decrease from the 15 nests recorded there during the 2023 national survey.

A similar downward trend over the same period occurred in the North Pennines. In total, 11 nests were recorded in this area in 2023, but only four in 2024 and two in 2025. Both nests recorded in the North Pennines in 2025 were located on the RSPB's Geltsdale nature reserve, where Hen Harriers have tried to breed for a number of years. To ensure Hen Harrier nests on the reserve are safe from persecution attempts, staff and volunteers provide round-the-clock nest site protection every year during the breeding season.

In Scotland, the 2023 Hen Harrier survey recorded a total of 529 territorial pairs, with few recorded on land managed for grouse shooting. Although this number is significantly higher than in England, it is still far below the estimated potential of 1,467 to 1,790 breeding pairs – a concerning shortfall of between 939 and 1,261 breeding pairs.

## Impacts on survival

Studies show that persecution is the main limiting factor for Hen Harriers in England and Scotland. A [study](#) in 2023 revealed that the average life expectancy of a Hen Harrier post-fledging is just four months, with persecution cited as the cause for this low survival rate (Ewing *et al.* 2023). The study also showed that illegal killing accounted for 27 to 43% of mortality in Hen Harriers in their first year, and 75% of mortality in Hen Harriers aged one to two years.

Another [study](#), which used the satellite tag data of Hen Harriers tracked by Natural England, showed that the likelihood of Hen Harriers dying, or disappearing, is 10 times higher on land managed for grouse shooting (Murgatroyd *et al.* 2019).

Illegal killing accounted for



of mortality in Hen Harriers aged one to two years

The paper revealed that 72% of satellite-tagged Hen Harriers in the study were either confirmed or considered to have been illegally killed.

## Satellite tagging – exposing persecution

Satellite tagging has transformed our understanding of Hen Harrier ecology and survival – and revealed the shocking scale of illegal killing faced by this Red-listed species.

These lightweight, highly reliable devices transmit location data, allowing conservation teams to track birds' movements. In most cases, if a bird dies its tag will continue to transmit data, allowing the body to be located and the cause of death determined. When a tag suddenly stops transmitting, and neither the tag nor the bird is found, it strongly suggests that the bird has been killed and its tag damaged or destroyed.

Between 2015 and 2024, 100 satellite-tagged Hen Harriers disappeared in suspicious circumstances, with 79% sending their last transmission on or near land managed for grouse shooting. In most cases, searches failed to recover either the tag or the bird's remains – pointing to persecution as the likely cause of their disappearance. Most of these incidents occur in early spring, when adult birds are establishing breeding territories, and in late summer and early autumn, as fledged birds and adult birds disperse after the breeding season.

## Just the tip of the iceberg

Since only a small number of the UK's Hen Harriers are fitted with satellite tags, these incidents represent just a fraction of the true scale of the problem. It is highly likely that the number of Hen Harriers falling victim to these crimes is significantly higher.

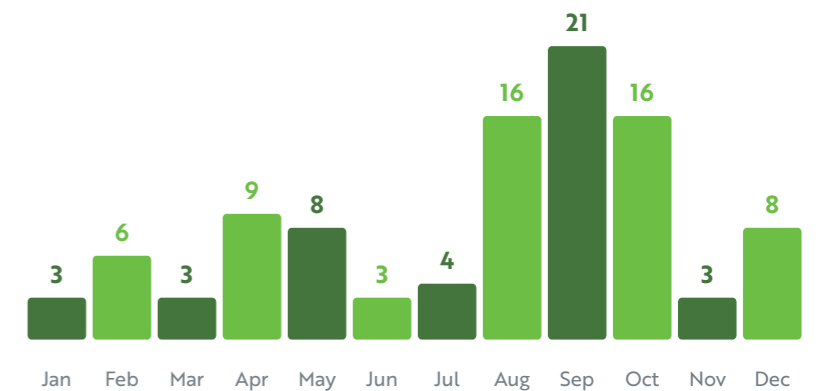
As the latest RSPB *Birdcrime* report reveals, the highest number of confirmed and suspected Hen Harrier persecution incidents in the UK occurred in 2023, with the majority of these crimes happening in northern England.

In that year alone, 31 Hen Harriers, including 28 satellite-tagged birds, were confirmed or suspected to have been persecuted, with most incidents recorded on or near land managed for grouse shooting. These disappearances cost conservation projects dearly, with tags worth thousands of pounds lost alongside the birds they were meant to protect.

In response to rising Hen Harrier persecution in northern England, the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) launched the Hen Harrier Taskforce in June 2024. Using innovative technology, strategic partnerships and community engagement, this team aims to reduce Hen Harrier persecution in hotspot areas.

The disappearance of several satellite-tagged birds in 2024 and particularly in 2025 shows that Hen Harriers are still being severely impacted by persecution, highlighting the fragile conservation status of this species with much work still to be done.

Total number of satellite-tagged Hen Harriers that have disappeared in suspicious circumstances (2015–2024)



Monthly totals of all 100 satellite-tagged Hen Harriers that have disappeared in suspicious circumstance in the UK between 2015 and 2024, showing peaks in these suspected persecution incidents during the breeding season and post-breeding season as birds disperse.

In a study by Natural England, Hen harriers were

**10x**

more likely to die or disappear on land managed for grouse shooting



Hen Harriers are one of the UK's most persecuted birds of prey, with illegal killing limiting population recovery.

### Recent investigations

Between 2015 and 2024, there have been 49 confirmed incidents of Hen Harrier persecution in the UK. This has included a significant number of brutal and alarming incidents which have all taken place on or near land managed for grouse shooting.

One of the most high-profile cases took place in 2022 in northern England. The mutilated body of a satellite-tagged male Hen Harrier, known as Free, was discovered a significant distance from where he had been roosting on a moorland around Birkdale, near the border of North Yorkshire and Cumbria. Free's leg and head had been pulled off while he was still alive. A post-mortem concluded that this could only have been done by human hands.

In another shocking incident the same year, four Hen Harrier chicks were stamped to death in their nest in North Yorkshire. A motion-activated camera had been set up by Natural England to monitor the progress of the chicks, but footage was interrupted one evening by a bright artificial light which obscured the camera's view. The following morning one of the parent birds, a female satellite-tagged Hen Harrier called Susie, was seen attempting to feed the lifeless bodies of her dead chicks.

In the latest Natural England satellite tracking update, it was revealed that Susie, the surviving parent bird, had subsequently been shot and died sometime between the end of November 2023 and February 2024. This case study starkly illustrates the struggle Hen Harriers face to survive and the devastating impact that persecution has on the species as a whole.

In October 2024, another high-profile incident took place on a grouse shooting estate near Grassington, in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Evidence gathered by the RSPB Investigations team led to the successful conviction of the head gamekeeper in January 2026.

Covert audio and video footage captured the head gamekeeper and two other men plotting to kill Hen Harriers at a roost site. In autumn and winter Hen Harriers use traditional, often communal, roost sites where birds come together for safety and shelter, typically in dense vegetation like sedge or reedbeds, gathering at dusk and leaving at dawn. For decades, the RSPB has received evidence of birds being illegally targeted at roost sites on grouse moors.

Secretly recorded radio conversations revealed the men coordinating their positions around the roost to locate birds and identify the best shooting positions. They were also heard discussing other protected species killed that day, including a Buzzard and a Raven. Crucially, they warned one another not to shoot satellite-tagged Hen Harriers, knowing it would attract attention from the authorities.

That evening a satellite-tagged bird was flushed from the roost with warning shots and an untagged Hen Harrier was later located. The head gamekeeper was filmed loading his gun and walking towards the roost. A single shot followed – and congratulatory messages were heard over the radio.

This case exposes the deliberate targeting of untagged Hen Harriers and the intentional avoidance of killing satellite-tagged birds. Such behaviour suggests that satellite-tagged individuals may in fact have higher survival rates than untagged birds, meaning population-level survival estimates based on satellite-tagged birds could be significantly underestimating the true scale of persecution and the impact on Hen Harrier mortality.

The case also represents a major milestone. Despite Hen Harrier persecution being recorded in the UK for decades, this is the first ever conviction for Hen Harrier persecution-related offences in England, and only the third in the UK. Previously, two gamekeepers were convicted in Scotland – in 2001 and 2006 – for separate Hen Harrier persecution incidents. In both cases, footage gathered by the RSPB proved crucial in securing the convictions.

The satellite-tagged Hen Harrier flushed from the roost site in the October 2024 incident was an RSPB-monitored bird, known as Ataksak. Tragically, in January 2025, Ataksak was found dead very close to another grouse moor in North Yorkshire. Toxicological analysis revealed that she had died after ingesting a lethal mixture of specific pesticides – often referred to by police and conservationists as the 'Nidderdale cocktail' – which has been associated with numerous bird of prey persecution incidents in the Nidderdale area of North Yorkshire in recent years. This incident is currently under investigation by North Yorkshire Police.



One of four Hen Harrier chicks found stamped to death in their nest in North Yorkshire in 2022. Their mother, Susie, was later found shot dead.

## Hen Harrier persecution at a glance

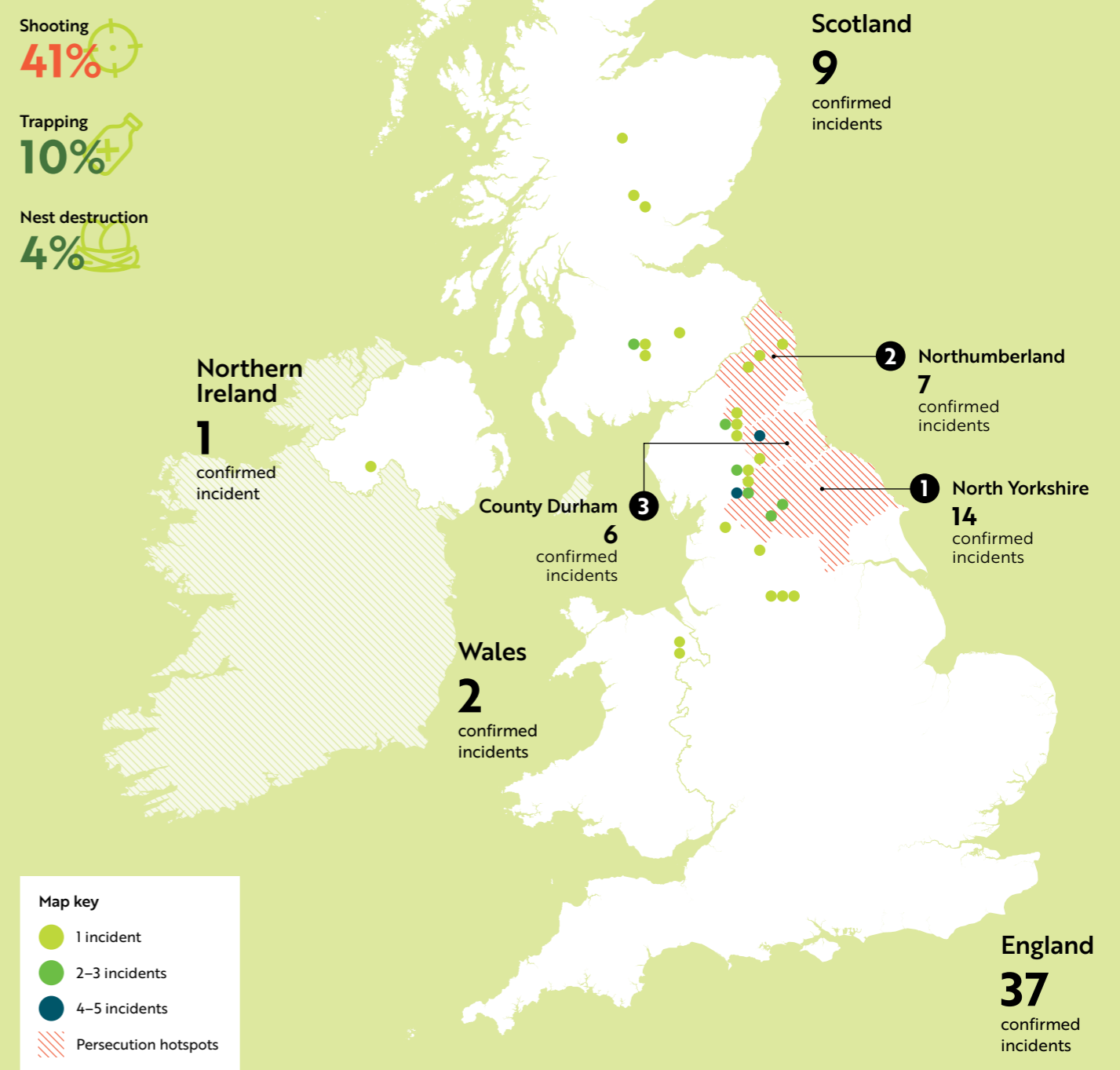
All data from 2015–2024

### Types of persecution

Shooting  
41%

Trapping  
10%

Nest destruction  
4%



100

Hen Harriers have disappeared in suspicious circumstances

49

confirmed Hen Harrier persecution incidents

121

days is the average lifespan of young Hen Harriers post-fledging in the UK

80%

of confirmed persecution incidents were related to gamebird shooting

Golden Eagle numbers are increasing, but persecution is still hampering their recovery.

## Golden Eagle

Golden Eagles are emblems of Scotland's wild and remote landscapes. Yet, despite their iconic status, these magnificent birds continue to face persecution in some upland areas.

Between 2015 and 2024

19

Golden Eagles suspiciously disappeared in Scotland

Golden Eagles were once widespread across our uplands, breeding in all four countries of the UK. However, severe persecution by landowners resulted in them being wiped out in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland by the mid-19th to early 20th century. Golden Eagles made brief returns to England after the two World Wars, but their numbers gradually declined again. The last resident Golden Eagle in England disappeared from a nature reserve in the Lake District in 2015, probably dying of old age.

In recent years, efforts have been made to bolster Golden Eagle populations in southern Scotland, where until recently only a handful of breeding pairs remained. Since 2018, the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project (SSGEP) has translocated a number of Golden Eagles from the Highlands to southern Scotland under licence from NatureScot,

to reinforce the existing population. The success of this project has sparked ambitions to reintroduce Golden Eagles to England.

Although Golden Eagle populations are increasing, persecution continues to threaten these magnificent birds, particularly on land managed for grouse shooting. A report commissioned by NatureScot, revealed that almost one-third of Golden Eagles in the study disappeared in suspicious circumstances, with the overwhelming majority of incidents occurring on grouse moors.

### Satellite-tagged eagles lost without a trace

Since 2004, conservation groups have been fitting satellite tags to Golden Eagles to better understand their movements and survival. As well as providing vital data on eagle ecology, these devices have also uncovered a number of confirmed and suspected persecution incidents. This evidence has helped identify persecution hotspots and exposed crimes that would otherwise have gone undetected.

Between 2015 and 2024, 19 satellite-tagged Golden Eagles suspiciously disappeared in the UK – all of them in Scotland. Of these, 16 sent their final transmission on or near land managed for grouse shooting, and another on land managed for mixed pheasant, partridge and grouse shooting.

Regionally, there were:

- 8 suspicious disappearances in the Highlands
- 5 in Perth and Kinross
- 2 in Aberdeenshire
- 2 in Angus
- 1 in the Edinburgh area
- 1 in Moray



A Golden Eagle chick in the nest.

Because reliable tags continue transmitting even if a bird dies naturally, it is highly likely these eagles were killed and their tags damaged or destroyed. Despite extensive searches, neither the birds' bodies nor their tags were ever recovered.

One typical example involves a female Golden Eagle known as Brodie. She was fitted with a satellite tag in 2014, before she fledged, and appeared to be doing well. But in 2016, her tag transmitted its final signal from the northern Monadhliath Mountains, south-east of Inverness – an area where driven grouse moor management dominates the landscape. She was never seen or detected again, making her the eighth satellite-tagged Golden Eagle to disappear in suspicious circumstances in that one area alone since 2011.

In 2017, NatureScot published a [report](#) on the fates of Golden Eagles in Scotland, using satellite tag data from 2004 to 2016. The report revealed that 31% of young, tagged Golden Eagles (41 of 131) had disappeared in suspicious circumstances, suggesting that illegal persecution was suppressing Golden Eagle populations. The majority of these cases took place in areas managed for grouse shooting.

Since the publication of the report, several more Golden Eagles have disappeared under suspicious circumstances in Scotland.

### Tampered tags reveal hidden crime

In 2020, a Golden Eagle's satellite tag was discovered in a Perthshire river wrapped in lead sheeting, four years after it suddenly stopped transmitting on a grouse moor just a few miles away. The aerial and harness had been intentionally cut. It's likely that this was done to avoid the eagle's body being found and allow the perpetrator to evade detection.



This Golden Eagle was fitted with a satellite tag in 2014. Two years later, its tag suddenly stopped transmitting whilst on a grouse moor in Perthshire, then in 2020 the tag was recovered from a river in Perthshire, wrapped in lead sheeting.

Another tag, linked to a Golden Eagle that vanished in 2012, was discovered in a loch in the Cairngorms National Park in 2021, wrapped in foil and tied to a rock. Until its disappearance in 2012, the eagle's satellite tag had been transmitting data regularly.

These cases show just how far criminals will go to avoid being caught and suggest that when a satellite tag suddenly stops sending signals, it is likely to have been tampered with, and the bird illegally killed.



This satellite tag belonged to a Golden Eagle that disappeared in 2016. In 2020, a walker discovered it in a river, encased in lead sheeting.



The carcass of a Mountain Hare laced with a highly toxic insecticide, and a poisoned Golden Eagle, were discovered on a grouse moor in the Cairngorms National Park in 2021. Poison baits like this one are frequently used to target and kill birds of prey.

**36%**

More than a third of all confirmed persecution incidents were in the Western Isles

**Confirmed crimes against Golden Eagles**

In addition to the Golden Eagles that disappeared in suspicious circumstances, 14 confirmed Golden Eagle persecution incidents were recorded between 2015 and 2024. Of these, 28.6% involved nest destruction, 21.4% shooting, 21.4% poisoning and 7.1% trapping. Most of these incidents took place in the Highlands, Aberdeenshire, Perthshire and the Western Isles.

In 2019, a member of the public photographed a Golden Eagle in the Cairngorms National Park with a spring trap attached to its leg – a likely death sentence through shock or lingering starvation. Two years later, just a few miles from where this incident was reported, a Golden Eagle was found poisoned on a grouse moor, in an area with a long

history of confirmed raptor persecution offences, also in the Cairngorms National Park. The eagle's body was discovered lying next to the dead body of a Mountain Hare laced with a high concentration of the insecticide bendiocarb. Based on this evidence, the estate received a government sanction by NatureScot, relating to licensed predator control.

In 2021, on the Isle of Lewis, in two separate and unlinked incidents, a total of four Golden Eagles and one White-tailed Eagle were found poisoned. All of the eagles had died after being exposed to a veterinary euthanasia product. A police investigation into one of the incidents, in which two Golden Eagles and a White-tailed Eagle were killed, resulted in an individual being found guilty of improper disposal of a sheep carcass. The same veterinary product was found to have caused the death of two other Golden Eagles in a separate incident that year. However, there was insufficient evidence to identify a suspect in that case.

A female satellite-tagged Golden Eagle, known as Merrick, suddenly disappeared in the Scottish Borders in October 2023, while in an area dominated by grouse moors. She had been in the location for just eight days. Merrick had been translocated by the Southern Scotland Golden Eagle Project (SSGEP) to southern Scotland in 2022 and spent the following year ranging across southern Scotland and northern England.

A police investigation of her last point of transmission – her roost site in the Moorfoot Hills – led to the discovery of feathers and a significant amount of blood. Police Scotland concluded that Merrick had been shot and killed, and that someone had removed her body and destroyed her satellite tag.



This female Golden Eagle was illegally killed at her roost site in southern Scotland in 2022.

# Golden Eagle persecution at a glance

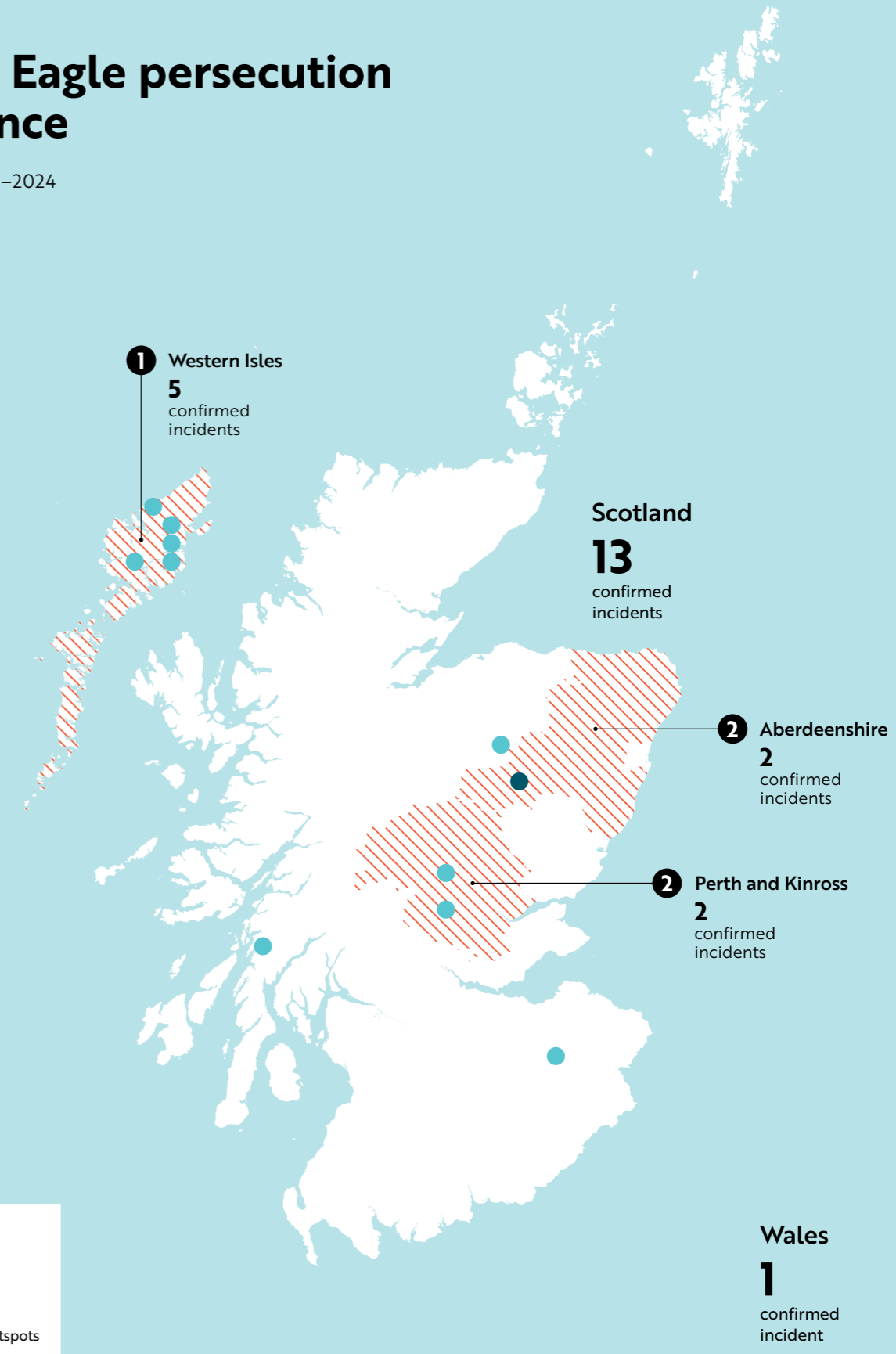
All data from 2015–2024

**Types of persecution**

Nest destruction **29%**

Shooting **21%**

Poisoning **21%+**



**Map key**

- 1 incident
- 2-3 incidents
- ▨ Persecution hotspots

**14** confirmed Golden Eagle persecution incidents

**36%** of all confirmed incidents were related to gamebird shooting

**29%** of these were related to grouse shooting

**0** people convicted for Golden Eagle-related offences



At least 10 satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagles have disappeared in suspicious circumstances between 2015 and 2024, and seven have been killed.

## White-tailed Eagle

Thanks to reintroductions, White-tailed Eagles have made a tremendous comeback, after being persecuted to extinction in the UK in the early 20th century. But their return is threatened by ongoing illegal killing.

With a wingspan of up to 2.5 metres, White-tailed Eagles are the UK's largest bird of prey and an incredible sight to behold. These magnificent birds were once widespread around Britain's coasts but had been persecuted to extinction in England by the early 19th century. They hung on in Scotland until the early 20th century, when the last bird was shot on Shetland in 1918, 10 years after losing its mate.

### Bringing back White-tailed Eagles

In 1975, the Nature Conservancy Council for Scotland (now NatureScot), reintroduced White-tailed Eagles to the UK by translocating young birds from Norway to the Isle of Rum. Further reintroductions throughout the 1990s and 2000s, supported by the RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage, led to populations becoming established in parts of mainland Scotland. Scotland now boasts around 200 breeding pairs.

White-tailed Eagles were reintroduced to the Isle of Wight in 2019 as part of a partnership project between Forestry England and the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation. Four years later, in 2023, a chick successfully fledged from a nest in West Sussex. This was the first White-tailed Eagle to fledge in England in over 240 years. This breeding success has continued, with two chicks fledging in 2024 and three in 2025. In 2007, a reintroduction programme was launched in Ireland, and in 2024 the first White-tailed Eagle chick fledged in Northern Ireland in 150 years.

### A comeback under threat

Though numbers are still recovering, the persecution of White-tailed Eagles is impacting reintroduction programmes across the UK. At least 10 satellite-tagged eagles have disappeared in suspicious circumstances between 2015 and 2024, and seven have been illegally killed, with incidents recorded in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England. Four of the confirmed incidents were associated with land managed for gamebird shooting – two with land managed for grouse shooting and two with pheasant or partridge shooting.

### The risk posed by poison

Like many large birds of prey, White-tailed Eagles are opportunistic, generalist feeders that will scavenge on carrion – a behaviour that makes them highly vulnerable to persecution, particularly incidents involving poisoned baits. Of the seven confirmed killings in the last decade, six involved exposure to high concentrations of pesticides.

For example, in 2020 a White-tailed Eagle was found poisoned on a grouse shooting estate within the Cairngorms National Park, in Strathdon. Toxicological tests revealed that the bird had died after being exposed to the banned pesticide carbofuran. A year later, in West Sussex, England, a reintroduced White-tailed Eagle died after consuming poison on a pheasant shooting estate. A dog also died just days later on the same estate, after being exposed to the same poison.

In 2023, in Northern Ireland, two young White-tailed Eagles were found poisoned on a grouse moor in Glenwherry. One had been released just nine months earlier as part of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) reintroduction programme in Ireland. The other was believed to be a wild Scottish bird.

These crimes continue to hamper significant conservation efforts and threaten the success of current and future reintroduction projects. In 2025 alone, four satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagles were confirmed to have been killed, or disappeared in suspicious circumstances: two in Scotland, one in Wales and one in England. To date, no one has been charged in connection with any White-tailed Eagle persecution incidents.



A poisoned White-tailed Eagle found on a shooting estate in West Sussex.

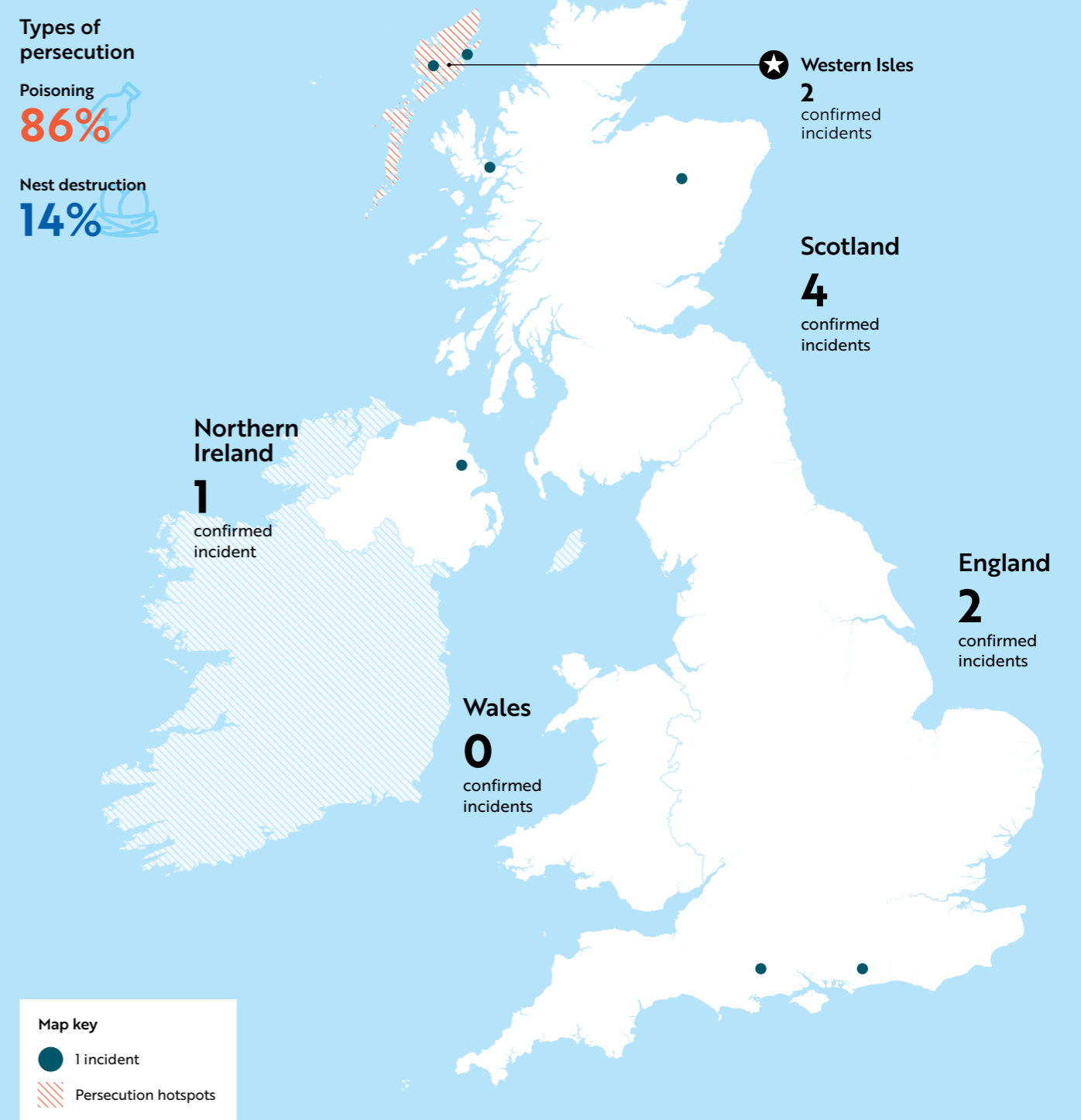
## White-tailed Eagle persecution at a glance

All data from 2015–2024

### Types of persecution

Poisoning  
**86%**

Nest destruction  
**14%**



**~200**

White-tailed Eagle pairs estimated in the UK

**7**

confirmed White-tailed Eagle persecution incidents

**10**

satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagles disappeared in suspicious circumstances

**57%**

of all confirmed incidents were related to gamebird shooting



80% of all persecution incidents involving Short-eared Owls took place in England.

## Short-eared Owl

Despite being scarce breeding birds in the UK, Short-eared Owls are frequently persecuted, with the vast majority of these crimes taking place on land managed for grouse shooting.

**87%**

of confirmed persecution incidents were linked to land managed for grouse shooting

Short-eared Owls breed mainly on open moorlands and rough grasslands in upland areas of the UK. Between 2015 and 2024, 15 confirmed persecution incidents have been recorded, with most involving owls being shot. Of these, 86.7% were linked to land managed for grouse shooting and 6.7% to land managed for mixed gamebird shooting.

80% of all incidents were recorded in England and 20% in Scotland, with hotspots in northern England and southern Scotland. County Durham had the highest number of incidents, followed by Cumbria and South Lanarkshire. No incidents involving Short-eared Owls were recorded in Wales or Northern Ireland between 2015 and 2024.



An X-ray of one of two Short-eared Owls shot by a gamekeeper on a grouse moor in the Yorkshire Dales National Park in 2017.

### Recent investigations and convictions

In 2017, RSPB Investigations officers saw a gamekeeper shoot two Short-eared Owls on a grouse moor in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. He was then filmed stamping on the birds and concealing them to remove evidence of these crimes. The remains of the two owls were later discovered. A rapid response from North Yorkshire Police, together with the overwhelming amount of substantive evidence, resulted in the gamekeeper being successfully convicted.

That same year, a grouse moor in South Lanarkshire – already associated with a number of bird of prey persecution incidents – was the scene of another Short-eared Owl shooting. A member of the public heard a gunshot, and then saw a person pick something up and drop it into a ditch. A search resulted in the recovery of the remains of the owl. A post-mortem concluded that it had been shot with a shot gun.

Three years later another Short-eared Owl was shot on the same estate in Scotland – this time witnessed by a member of the public and their eight-year-old son. In this instance, a person in camouflage was seen shooting a Short-eared Owl with a shotgun. The perpetrator retrieved the bird's body, before fleeing the scene on a quad bike.

A similar case was reported in 2022 by a member of the public, who witnessed a Short-eared Owl being shot on a grouse moor in the Peak District. The body of the owl was later found hidden down a rabbit hole. Forensic tests confirmed that it had been shot with a shotgun. Despite police efforts there was insufficient evidence to take forward a prosecution.

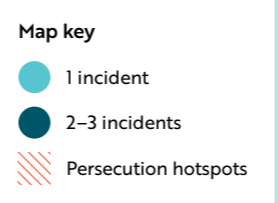
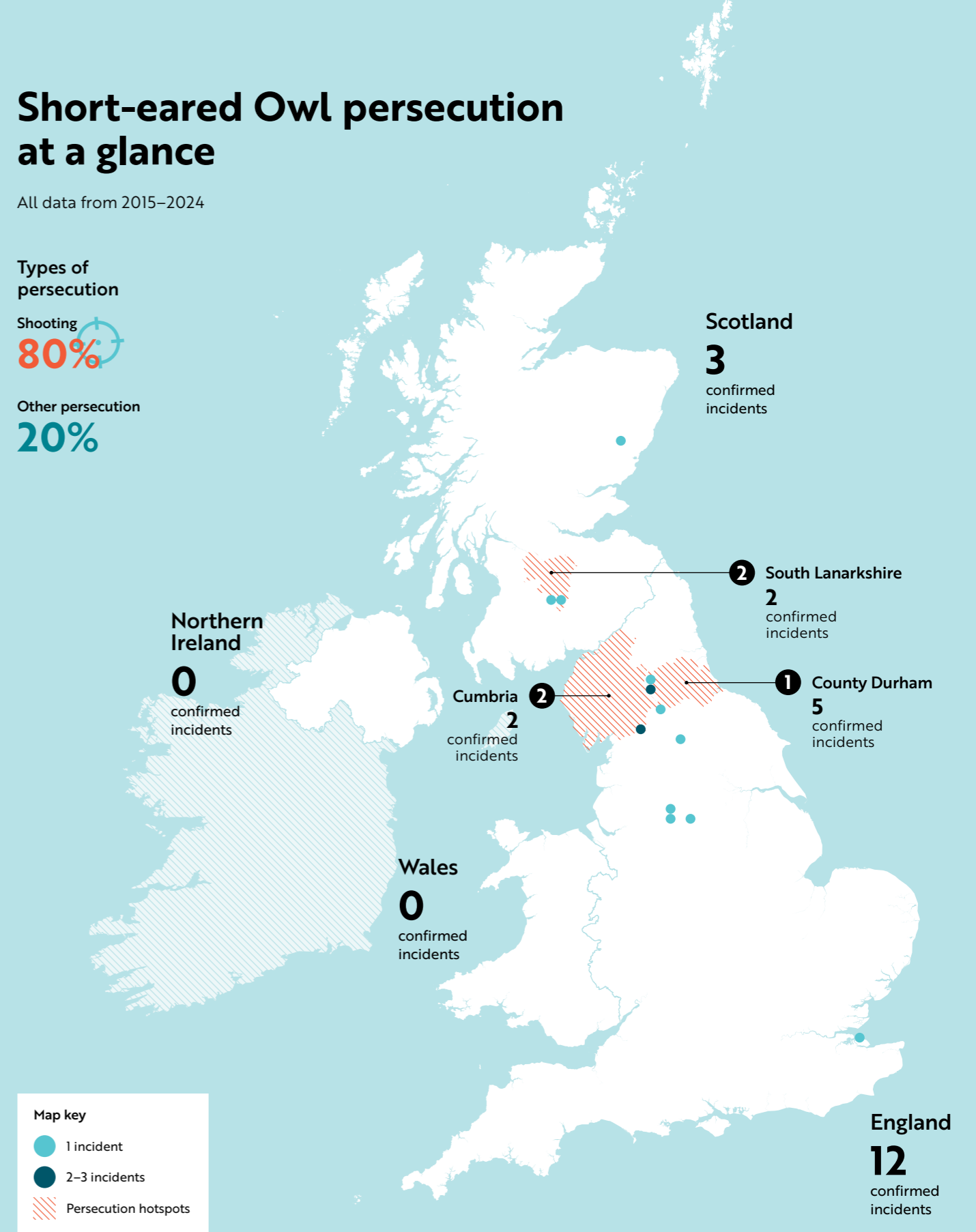
## Short-eared Owl persecution at a glance

All data from 2015–2024

### Types of persecution

Shooting **80%**

Other persecution **20%**



**15** confirmed Short-eared Owl persecution incidents

**93%** of all confirmed incidents were related to gamebird shooting

**87%** of these were related to grouse shooting

**1** person convicted for Short-eared Owl-related offences

# Other species

The indiscriminate nature of illegal persecution often results in the death of bird of prey species not typically associated with these crimes.

Confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents over a 10-year period (2015–2024):



Barn Owl by Ben Andrew (rspp-images.com)

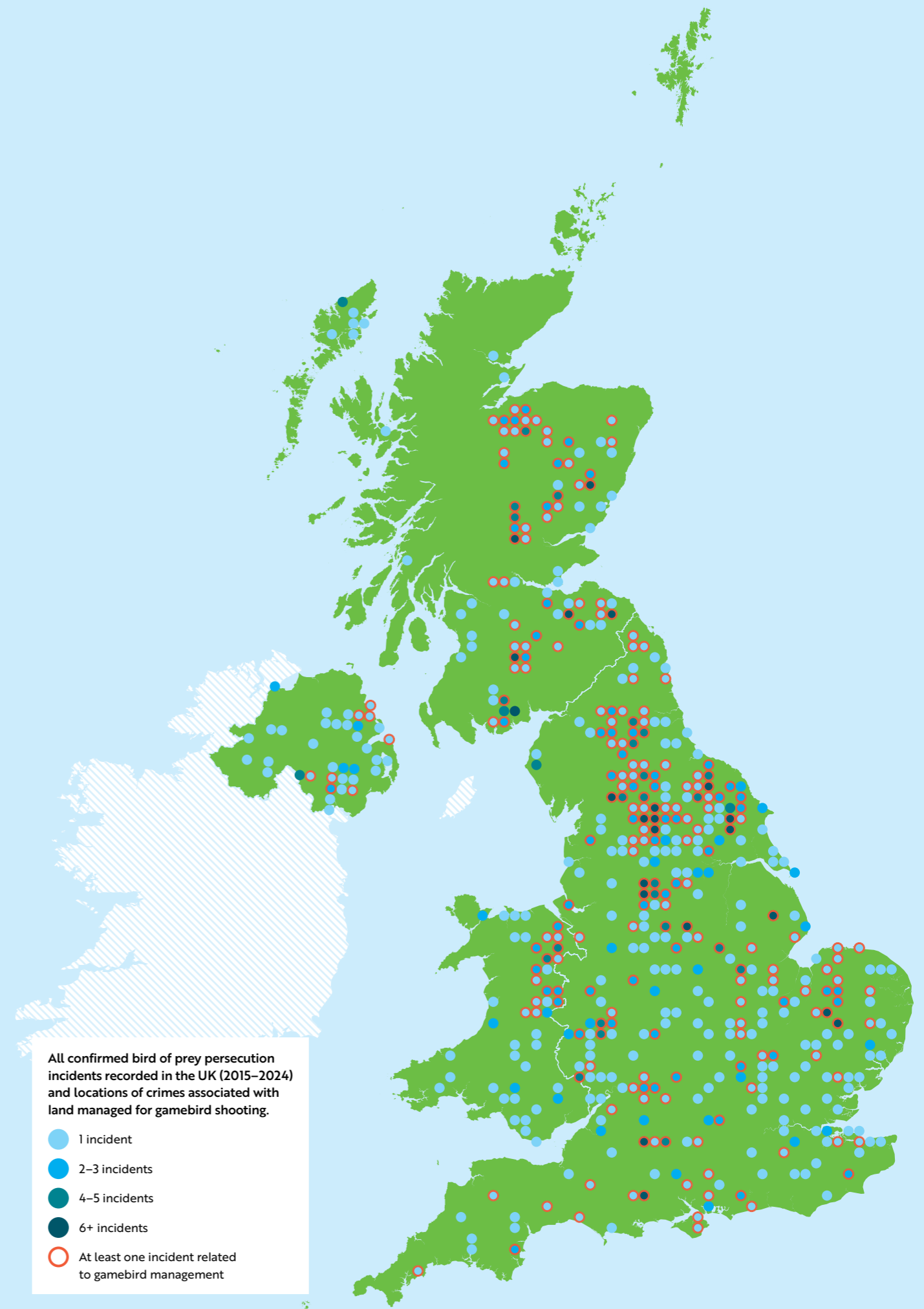
# Getting away with it

Birds of prey are being routinely killed across the UK – yet most offenders are never caught or punished.

Although birds of prey are legally protected, and the police and National Wildlife Crime Unit are making efforts to prevent and deter illegal persecution, these crimes continue unabated across much of the UK. Between 2015 and 2024, 921 confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents have been recorded, yet in that time, only 26 people have been convicted – 18 of which were linked to the gamebird shooting industry.

With detection rates low and the chance of the criminal being identified even lower, those killing birds of prey are often doing so with impunity. Even when convictions occur, penalties are rarely severe, despite the fact that custodial sentences and significant fines can be imposed for bird of prey persecution. As a result, there is little real deterrent for those committing these crimes. In the UK only one person has ever been jailed for bird of prey persecution offences.

Offenders are often also involved in other serious and organised criminal activity – from the illegal use of firearms and banned poisons, to using illegal traps or operating licensed traps unlawfully.



# The case for gamebird licensing

Despite decades of legal protection, birds of prey in the UK still face relentless persecution. As current laws are failing to protect them, legislative change is urgently needed.

In 2021, the Government published a [UN report](#) assessing wildlife crime in the UK, which set out recommendations to strengthen existing protective legislation.

Although no UK nation operated a licensing system for gamebird shooting at the time, to help prevent offences against birds of prey, the report identified a need to enhance enforcement powers through licensing. It recommended that under a licensing system, authorities should be given the ability to revoke or amend licences for gamebird shoots when there is evidence of unlawful activity – including the illegal killing of birds of prey.

Three years after the publication of the UN report, which supported the licensing of gamebird shooting, Scotland led the way by introducing mandatory licensing for all grouse shooting under the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Act 2024. Through this legislation, evidence is assessed under a civil rather than criminal burden of proof – based on the balance of probabilities – strengthening the enforceability of the law.

In Scotland, under this mandatory licensing scheme, if evidence suggests bird of prey persecution has occurred on land licensed for grouse shooting, NatureScot can suspend or revoke the licence to shoot. This protective legislation provides a robust deterrent to those committing this type of wildlife crime.

This licensing system promotes best practice, penalising only those who break the law while respecting the rights of responsible estates. Most European countries already have similar systems in place. Now, it's time for England, Wales and Northern Ireland to follow suit.

There is already hope for progress in England, following the publication of the Westminster Government's Land Use Framework in March 2026. This strategic initiative has recognised the need to 'transition to the highest standards of practice being consistently applied for upland and lowland shooting' and commits to exploring measures including the introduction of licensing.

**The RSPB is calling for the licensing of all gamebird shooting in the UK. This proportionate, cost-effective and measured approach will help prevent wildlife crime and protect birds of prey for future generations.**



# How you can help

Find out how you can help protect birds of prey from persecution and report suspected crimes.

## Help us stop wildlife crime

For decades the RSPB has been investigating bird of prey persecution – detecting and reporting incidents and supporting police investigations across the UK.

In recent years, a number of successful convictions relating to bird of prey persecution have taken place, with evidence gathered by the RSPB Investigations team proving vital in bringing these individuals to justice.

To find out more about the team and the work they do visit [rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/bird-crime-and-investigation](https://rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/bird-crime-and-investigation)

Your support makes this vital work possible. Discover how you can support the team's work at [rspb.org.uk/donate/help-us-stop-the-killing](https://rspb.org.uk/donate/help-us-stop-the-killing)

## Seen something? Say something

Many bird of prey persecution cases that result in a successful conviction are reported to us by members of the public. If you spot suspicious activity involving a bird of prey, reporting it quickly can make a huge difference.

Notify the police by calling **101** and submit a report to the RSPB by visiting [rspb.org.uk/report-crimes](https://rspb.org.uk/report-crimes)

Or call the RSPB's confidential Raptor Crime Hotline on **0300 999 0101**. Reports can be made anonymously.

# Speak up for birds of prey

Join us in calling for the introduction of gamebird licensing across the UK to give birds of prey the vital protection they urgently need.

Current UK laws have been failing to effectively protect birds of prey from persecution for decades, with hundreds of birds of prey shot, trapped or poisoned, nests and eggs destroyed, and chicks killed in the nest.

A wide range of species – from the most vulnerable to the most widespread – are impacted. In some areas, persecution is directly limiting population recovery, undermining conservation efforts and leaving otherwise suitable habitats devoid of these incredible species.

Extensive, long-term evidence indicates a clear pattern, with the majority of these crimes associated with land managed for gamebird shooting. On some gamebird shooting estates, some individuals will illegally kill birds of prey in an effort to remove any perceived threat to their gamebird stocks.

These crimes are often financially motivated to try to maximise the number of gamebirds available to be shot.

The RSPB is calling for the introduction of a robust licensing system for all gamebird shooting across the UK. Under this legislation, gamebird shoots involved in these crimes would be held accountable. This fair regulatory system would act as a clear and meaningful deterrent to those illegally targeting and killing birds of prey. Without legislative change, these crimes will continue.

To add your voice to our campaign, scan the QR code or go to [rspb.org.uk/saveourhenharriers](https://rspb.org.uk/saveourhenharriers)



# Links and further reading

## RSPB Birdcrime reports (2018–2023)

[rspb.org.uk/birdcrime](https://rspb.org.uk/birdcrime)

## RSPB Raptor Persecution Map Hub

[rspb.org.uk/raptormap](https://rspb.org.uk/raptormap)

## Raptor Persecution UK blog

[raptorpersecutionuk.org](https://raptorpersecutionuk.org)

## Buzzard

BBC News (2024): Bird farm that used banned pesticide fined £40,000.

[bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckmg175450go](https://bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckmg175450go)

ITV News (2022): Gamekeeper Matthew Stroud admits shooting and poisoning birds of prey in Norfolk woodlands. [itv.com/news/anglia/2022-10-05/gamekeeper-admits-shooting-and-poisoning-birds-of-prey](https://itv.com/news/anglia/2022-10-05/gamekeeper-admits-shooting-and-poisoning-birds-of-prey)

BBC News (2022): Gamekeeper filmed beating buzzards to death. [bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-nottinghamshire-60173428](https://bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-nottinghamshire-60173428)

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## Red Kite

Raptor Persecution UK (2018): Red kites found illegally poisoned at nest site.

[raptorpersecutionuk.org/2018/06/20/red-kites-found-illegally-poisoned-at-nest-site/](https://raptorpersecutionuk.org/2018/06/20/red-kites-found-illegally-poisoned-at-nest-site/)

Wiltshire Police (2022): Man sentenced in England's largest raptor persecution case.

[wiltshire.police.uk/news/wiltshire/news/2022/may-2022/man-sentenced-in-englands-largest-raptor-persecution-case/](https://wiltshire.police.uk/news/wiltshire/news/2022/may-2022/man-sentenced-in-englands-largest-raptor-persecution-case/)

## Peregrine

Amar A, et al. (2012) Linking nest histories, remotely sensed land use data and wildlife crime records to explore the impact of grouse moor management on peregrine falcon populations. *Biological Conservation* 145 (1): 86–94.

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[raptorpersecutionuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/raptor-persecution-in-peak-district-np\\_melling-et-al-2018\\_british-birds.pdf](https://raptorpersecutionuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/raptor-persecution-in-peak-district-np_melling-et-al-2018_british-birds.pdf)

RSPB (2018): Peregrine caught in a spring trap in Bowland, Lancashire.

[youtube.com/watch?v=U8Q1lcKPK8](https://youtube.com/watch?v=U8Q1lcKPK8)

BBC News (2024): £10k reward for information after peregrine shot. [bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c8vz02lrnz7o](https://bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c8vz02lrnz7o)

BBC News (2024): Peregrine falcon takes flight after Doncaster shotgun attack.

[bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-68087853](https://bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-68087853)

Raptor Persecution UK (2025): Northern Ireland Minister commits to taking action on illegal poisoning of birds of prey. [raptorpersecutionuk.org/2025/07/06/northern-ireland-minister-commits-to-taking-action-on-illegal-poisoning-of-birds-of-prey/](https://raptorpersecutionuk.org/2025/07/06/northern-ireland-minister-commits-to-taking-action-on-illegal-poisoning-of-birds-of-prey/)

BBC News (2024): Man who abseiled down cliff to take peregrine falcon eggs jailed.

[bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-67987416](https://bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-67987416)

RSPB (2024): Men given community order for possession and trade of 22 wild Peregrines. [rspb.org.uk/media-centre/community-order-for-possession-and-trade-of-wild-peregrines](https://rspb.org.uk/media-centre/community-order-for-possession-and-trade-of-wild-peregrines)

## Goshawk

BBC News (2023): Gamekeeper pleaded guilty to dumping goshawks in Suffolk forest.

[bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-66055112](https://bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-66055112)

North Wales Police (2024): Wrexham man charged with wildlife offences. [northwales.police.uk/news/north-wales/news/news/2024/march/wrexham-man-charged-with-wildlife-offences/](https://northwales.police.uk/news/north-wales/news/news/2024/march/wrexham-man-charged-with-wildlife-offences/)

BBC Scotland (2025): Highland Cops X-ray Bombshell. [youtube.com/watch?v=kAdVhVJ68kE](https://youtube.com/watch?v=kAdVhVJ68kE)

## Sparrowhawk

BBC News (2023): Gamekeeper filmed by RSPB shooting bird of prey. [bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-65137738](https://bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-65137738)

RSPB (2023): Gamekeeper pleads guilty to shooting Sparrowhawk on Scottish grouse moor. [rspb.org.uk/media-centre/gamekeeper-pleads-guilty-to-shooting-sparrowhawk](https://rspb.org.uk/media-centre/gamekeeper-pleads-guilty-to-shooting-sparrowhawk)

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RSPB (2025): *Hen Harriers in the firing line*. [rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/bird-crime-and-investigation/hen-harrier-report](https://rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/bird-crime-and-investigation/hen-harrier-report)

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Murgatroyd M, et al. (2019) Patterns of satellite tagged hen harrier disappearances suggest widespread illegal killing on British grouse moors. *Nature Communications* 10: 1094. [nature.com/articles/s41467-019-09044-w](https://nature.com/articles/s41467-019-09044-w)

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Natural England (2026): Hen harrier tracking update: overview. [gov.uk/government/publications/hen-harriers-tracking-programme-update/hen-harrier-tracking-update](https://gov.uk/government/publications/hen-harriers-tracking-programme-update/hen-harrier-tracking-update)

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Natural England (2025): Numbers of nesting hen harriers in England have risen slightly in 2025. [naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2025/10/01/numbers-of-nesting-hen-harriers-in-england-have-risen-slightly-in-2025/](https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2025/10/01/numbers-of-nesting-hen-harriers-in-england-have-risen-slightly-in-2025/)

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The Guardian (2023): Killing the Skydancer: episode one, Susie's Chicks – podcast. [theguardian.com/environment/audio/2023/aug/15/killing-the-skydancer-episode-one-susies-chicks](https://theguardian.com/environment/audio/2023/aug/15/killing-the-skydancer-episode-one-susies-chicks)

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BBC News (2019): Appeal over golden eagle 'with trap on leg'. [bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-49330589](https://bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-49330589)

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Forestry England (2023): First white-tailed eagle in 240 years born in England. [forestryengland.uk/news/first-white-tailed-eagle-240-years-born-england](https://forestryengland.uk/news/first-white-tailed-eagle-240-years-born-england)

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Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group (2023): Eagles found dead at Glenwherry in Antrim both poisoned! [nirsg.com/eagles-found-dead-at-glenwherry-in-antrim-both-poisoned/](https://nirsg.com/eagles-found-dead-at-glenwherry-in-antrim-both-poisoned/)

RSPB (2026): White-tailed Eagles disappear in suspicious circumstances. [rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/white-tailed-eagles-disappear-in-suspicious-circumstances](https://rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/white-tailed-eagles-disappear-in-suspicious-circumstances)

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RSPB (2018): Gamekeeper shoots then buries two short-eared owls in Wharfedale, Yorkshire Dales National Park. [youtube.com/watch?v=0-bkVURvGkQ](https://youtube.com/watch?v=0-bkVURvGkQ)

RSPB (2023): Short-eared Owl Shot on Moor: An Eyewitness Account. [youtube.com/watch?v=hZasLmWbb6A&t=44s](https://youtube.com/watch?v=hZasLmWbb6A&t=44s)

## Legislative change

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2021): *Wildlife and Forest Crime Analytic Toolkit Report*. [unodc.org/documents/Wildlife/UK\\_Toolkit\\_Report.pdf](https://unodc.org/documents/Wildlife/UK_Toolkit_Report.pdf)

RSPB (2024): Eagles and other rare wildlife to benefit from landmark legislation in Scotland. Could England follow suit? [rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/wildlife-to-benefit-from-legislation](https://rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/wildlife-to-benefit-from-legislation)

The persecution of birds of prey in the UK is not a relic of the past – it's happening today, right across the UK. Despite full legal protection, these magnificent birds are still being shot, trapped, and poisoned.

**Between 2015 and 2024, 921 confirmed persecution incidents involving 19 bird of prey species were recorded.**

However, as many incidents go undiscovered and unreported, detected incidents represent just the tip of the iceberg.

**At least 55% of these confirmed incidents were linked to land managed for gamebird shooting. And 67% of all individuals convicted of bird of prey persecution-related offences from 2015 to 2024 were connected to the gamebird shooting industry.**

On some shooting estates, birds of prey are killed in an effort to protect gamebird stocks and maximise the numbers of partridges, pheasants or grouse available to be shot. This is illegal, unacceptable and it must stop. Now.

To end the ongoing illegal killing of birds of prey, the RSPB is calling for a licensing system for all gamebird shooting across the UK – ensuring accountability and enforcement, giving our birds of prey the protection they urgently need.

For more information and to see the full data behind this report, scan the QR code or visit: [rspb.org.uk/patterns](https://rspb.org.uk/patterns)



### Stay connected

Keep up to date with the latest thinking, news, events, and information from the RSPB in your local community.



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