

Scott Chilton
Chief Constable
Dorset Police

By email

19 May 2022

Dear Chief Constable Chilton,

Re: Death of white-tailed eagle in Dorset

We are writing as members of the Link Wildlife Crime Working Group, England's largest coalition of organisations working to tackle wildlife crime, to express our concern regarding the response of Dorset Police to the death of a white-tailed eagle in the county in January.

Dorset Police's decision to close the investigation in March is hard to understand. The discovery of high levels of the poison brodifacoum in the bird, and the reported location of the bird's body on a game shooting estate, points to a need for further investigation.

Over recent years RSPB raptor persecution reports, and Link's annual wildlife crime reports, have charted an increase in incidents of gamekeepers killing raptors with the intention of preserving game stocks. In 2020 there were 104 incidents of confirmed raptor persecution recorded in England and Wales, a doubling on the year before. 26 of these incidents involved the poisoning of a bird. Almost two thirds (64%) of recent convictions for raptor persecution involved gamekeepers and game interests.¹ Set against this wider background, the death of the Dorset eagle would appear to fit into a clear pattern of illegality, necessitating further investigation.

The unique circumstances surrounding white-tailed eagles in southern England would have helped rather than hindered the progression of the investigation. As part of the Isle of Wight white-tailed eagle's reintroduction project, all eagles are fitted with a tracking device, allowing for their movements to be closely monitored. This data would have shown the bird's movements before its death, including any erratic movements that could have denoted when - and crucially where - poisoning occurred.² If, as had been widely reported, the poisoning occurred on a game shooting estate, powers of entry could have been utilized in partnership with Natural England's Wildlife Management Advisers, to investigate the location and any misuse and storage based offences, whether deliberate or not. Gamekeepers have been successfully prosecuted for unsafe storage of poisons.³

Given the alignment of details on the case with a suggested pattern of illegal behaviour, and the availability of tracking data material, it seems likely that further investigation would have yielded evidence sufficient to consult with the Crown Prosecution Service.

¹ https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/WCL_Wildlife_Crime_Report_Nov_21.pdf

² <https://www.roydennis.org/category/sea-eagle/isle-of-wight-sea-eagles/>

³ See for example - <https://www.suffolklive.com/news/suffolk-news/lakenheath-buzzard-poisoned-suffolk-gamekeeper-6179380>

However, instead of further investigation, the case was closed by Dorset Police in March. Disturbingly, this followed a public request from a Member of Parliament for the investigation to be deprioritised.⁴ It is also concerning to note that the wildlife crime officer that had been investigating the case was apparently subsequently assigned to non-wildlife-crime duties, with the 'wildlife and rural crime' team they had formed being rebranded as a 'rural crime' team only.⁵

In summary, a wildlife crime investigation that appears to have had a good chance of resulting in a charging decision was abruptly shut down, following apparent political intervention, with the wildlife crime arm of Dorset Police shut down.

The scale of our concern about this sequence of events is such that we intend to profile the case in the next Link Wildlife Crime report, which will be published in November.⁶ In the interests of fairness, we are writing to give you the opportunity to provide an explanation in good time. We would be grateful for your full response to the concerns raised in this letter, and notice of any actions planned to rectify them, by 1 August 2022.

Thank you in advance for your assistance in this matter. A further letter has been sent to the Police and Crime Commissioner for Dorset.

Yours sincerely,

Martin Sims, Chair, Wildlife Crime Working Group

Replies can be sent to matt@wcl.org.uk

This letter is supported by the following members of Wildlife & Countryside Link:

Wild Justice
League Against Cruel Sports
Institute for Fisheries Management
Bat Conservation Trust
Badger Trust
International Fund for Animal Welfare

⁴ <https://www.dorset.live/news/dorset-news/dorset-mp-says-police-should-6669551>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/apr/22/disbanding-of-dorset-wildlife-team-puts-birds-pray-at-risk>

⁶ Details of last year's report can be found here:
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/25/reports-of-wildlife-surged-in-england-and-wales-in-2020-survey>