Wildlife and Countryside LINK

Cymdeithas Amgylchedd Cymru | Wales Environment Link

Wildlife crime

Executive summary

Background

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link), a coalition of environmental organisations, produces annual reports on the extent of wildlife crime in England and Wales. The reports, prepared to try and fill the gap resulting from the lack of official nationwide statistics, are drawn from data collected by Link members working on wildlife crime. Due to the nature of the data it should be viewed as an indication of levels of crimes being committed, rather than a comprehensive record. Link gratefully acknowledges all of the organisations who have helped to collect this data, and the National Wildlife Crime Unit and local police wildlife crime teams working at the wildlife crime frontline.

The latest report, published in November 2024 and presenting data for 2023, can be found at www.wcl.org.uk/wildlife-crime.asp

Wildlife crime reports and convictions

Link has been collecting data on reports of wildlife crimes, and successful prosecutions arising from those reports, since 2017. The below data show reports and convictions from 2017 to 2023, broken down by key types of wildlife crime.

		Badgers England & Wales	Bats England, Wales & Scotland	Fisheries England & Wales from 2020	Hunting England & Wales	Illegal trade UK wide	Marine mammals Certain countries only	Birds of prey England & Wales	Total	Total excl. fisheries
Number of incidents reported	2017	633	173	4,169	–	–	169	208	5,352	1,183
	2018	551	108	2,681	–	–	326	260	3,926	1,245
	2019	452	136	3,095	–	–	193	224	4,100	1,005
	2020	713	94	4,136	–	–	366	312	5,621	1,485
	2021	654	133	3,337	–	–	450	314	4,888	1,551
	2022	600	161	2,972	–	–	508	245	4,486	1,514
	2023	**636**	**184**	**2,474**			**1,290**	**151**	**4,735**	**2,261**
Number of convictions	2017	–	4	2,648	22	4	–	–	2,678	30
	2018	–	2	1,626	21	5	–	1	1,655	29
	2019	–	2	2,037	17	8	–	–	2,064	27
	2020	–	1	679	17	4	–	1	702	23
	2021	–	5	846	42	4	–	3	900	54
	2022	–	3	497	21	3	–	2	526	26
	2023	–	**2**	**432**	**15**	**3**	–	**4**	**456**	**24**

The seven-years worth of data shows that reports of wildlife crime have remained stubbornly high since a surge during the Covid-19 pandemic, with 4,735 incidents reported in 2023. Convictions have not kept pace with the increase in reports seen since 2020. 456 convictions were reported in 2023, a record low.

The need for action

Environmental organisations have been making the case for Government to act on this growing gap between wildlife crime reports and the number of convictions. Allowing more people to get away with causing criminal damage to wild habitats and species hurts everyone. By contributing to nature's ongoing decline offenders diminish a common treasury of natural beauty, meant to be enjoyed by all. Growing evidence also suggests that wildlife criminals are often closely linked to other crimes; as such sanctions for wildlife offences can help prevent crimes directly against people.

Just as wildlife offences constitute a theft against society as a whole, the maintenance of wildlife legislation touches upon society-wide confidence in policing. These laws were passed by Parliament in response to public pressure for more to be done to conserve biodiversity and protect wild animals from unnecessary suffering inflicted by people. It is important, both for the rule of law and for confidence in the democratic process, for these laws to be upheld to best ability of the police and the courts.

Recommendations for action

At every stage of the criminal justice journey, the enforcement of wildlife legislation is underpowered, contributing to the ongoing decline in successful prosecutions. An increased understanding of the importance of wildlife crime, as set out above, and the following package of reforms would strengthen enforcement and secure more wildlife crime convictions. Link recommends that:

- The Home Office and Defra should agree a rolling multi-year programme of funding for National Wildlife Crime Unit, to allow it to expand.
- The Home Office should produce new guidance for police forces, encouraging them to invest in wildlife crime teams and to provide regular specialist training opportunities for wildlife crime officers and call handlers.
- The Home Office should, by statutory instrument, add key wildlife crimes to the notifiable register, to allow better understanding of offending and inform efforts to tackle it
- The Crown Prosecution Service should invest in new wildlife crime training for prosecutors, and reconvene the Wildlife, Heritage and Rural Crime Community Involvement Panel, to ensure CPS staff are supported to work through challenges specific to wildlife crime.
- The Sentencing Council should consult on producing sentencing guidelines in England and Wales for a range of key wildlife crimes, including breaches of the Wildlife & Countryside Act, Hunting Act, Protection of Badgers Act, Habitats Regulations and control of trade in endangered species (COTES) regulations.

These reforms would enable better enforcement of wildlife crime legislation. This would support nature's recovery, help safeguard public safety and enjoyment of the natural environment and boost confidence in policing. Link looks forward to working with a range of partners to get these vital wildlife crime reforms over the line, to the benefit of all.

The 2023 Wildlife Crime Report is supported by Wildlife and Countryside Link, Wales Environment Link and 19 environmental organisations. For more information contact matt@wcl.org.uk

For the full report published in November 2024 visit www.wcl.org.uk/wildlife-crime.asp