Wildlife and Countryside LINK

Wildlife crime in 2025: reports, convictions and case studies

Introduction

This is the tenth annual publication by Wildlife and Countryside Link's Wildlife Crime group, documenting suspected wildlife crime incidents and the small proportion that result in convictions.

It covers offences involving protected species, including badger, bat and bird of prey persecution, breaches of the Hunting Act, illegal wildlife trade and acts of cruelty to wildlife — many of which may also breach the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

The report is intended to support stronger government, policing and sentencing responses.

There is no place for wildlife crime. These crimes are not victimless; they cause serious suffering to animals and destroy habitats, many of which are already under pressure. This undermines conservation contributions towards the Government target to halt species decline.

Communities also feel the brunt of these incidents. Link's previous wildlife crime report shed light on the understanding of '*polycriminality*'.[i] Analysis by the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) demonstrated the link between offenders of wildlife crimes and other serious crimes, including the priority issues of domestic violence against women and girls and organised crime. Wildlife crime offenders were also associated with theft/criminal damage type offences, illegal firearm use, money laundering and drug offences.

Wildlife crime is often under-recorded, under-prioritised and unevenly prosecuted. In 2025, the categories reviewed in this report show 2,149 reported incidents but only 41 convictions. This conviction rate is still under 2%. These figures only represent a partial picture as many wildlife crimes go undetected, unreported or unrecorded, and several key offence types are not currently captured consistently in national crime statistics.

Making major wildlife crimes notifiable to the Home Office would be a critical step towards improving transparency, accountability and prevention. Police forces will be able to better identify trends and target enforcement resources to prevent and tackle criminal activity. New research finds that levels of police funding and the allocation of resources are the most notable factors that impact the effectiveness of police enforcement of wildlife crime offences.[ii]

The recommendations in this report therefore call for urgent action to close the gap between the scale of wildlife crime and the response it currently receives. Stronger penalties, clear sentencing guidelines and a more consistent enforcement framework are needed to ensure wildlife crime is treated with the seriousness it deserves.

Wild animals deserve better, as do communities and future generations.

Recommendations

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

1. Make at least eleven major wildlife crimes reportable (notifiable) to the Home Office so that they are recorded in national statistics, making emerging trends more easily identifiable, and resources more strategically targeted.[iii]

2. Increase penalties for wildlife crime offences in line with higher levels of sentencing available for companion animal welfare and livestock offences, as committed to in the Animal Welfare Strategy (2025).

3. The Sentencing Council should consult on producing 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 (CITES) regulations.

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

5. Improve understanding of catapult and slingshot-related wildlife crime offences and agree meaningful policy changes to reduce the harm that they cause. For example, appropriate age and safety restrictions and responsible retail practices.

6. Raise compassion for wildlife and improve awareness of wildlife crime within the upcoming Natural History GCSE, leading to long-term prevention of wildlife crime.

7. Require all wildlife tour operators to complete mandatory training and obtain permits for wildlife viewing, with permits subject to suspension or revocation where operators breach required standards or engage in unacceptable wildlife disturbance.

Table 1 Number of reports and convictions of wildlife crime

NUMBER OF **INCIDENTS** REPORTED									
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	**2025**
Badgers (England & Wales)	633	551	452	713	654	600	636	610	**625**
Bats (England, Wales & Scotland)	173	108	136	94	133	161	186	157	**191**
Hunting (England & Wales)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	**-**
Illegal Trade CITES (UK wide)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	**-**
Marine Mammals (certain counties only)	169	326	193	366	450	508	1,290	1,098	**1,197**
Birds of Prey (England & Wales)	217	279	229	315	331	260	192	154	**136**
Total	1,192	1,264	1,010	1,488	1,568	1,529	2,304	2,019	**2,149**

NUMBER OF **CONVICTIONS** REPORTED									
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	**2025**
Badgers (England & Wales)	0	8	14	8	6	18	6	18	**15**
Bats (England, Wales & Scotland)	4	2	2	1	5	3	2	1	**2**
Hunting (England & Wales)	22	21	17	17	42	21	15	14	**18**
Illegal Trade CITES (UK wide)	4	5	8	4	4	3	3	8	**5**
Marine Mammals (certain counties only)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	**-**
Birds of Prey (England & Wales)	0	1	0	1	3	2	5	2	**1**
Total	30	37	41	31	60	47	31	43	**41**

Notes on 2025 data

Due to new data the numbers in this table may be different to the 2024 report. This table should be used over previous reports.

The bird of prey data in this table was extracted from the RSPB databases and were accurate as of 09/09/2026 but are constantly being updated and may be subject to change. Additional incidents, convictions or details may be added retrospectively, pending release from statutory agencies or other sources. The RSPB suspects that the true number of persecution incidents is likely to be significantly higher than the data in this table suggests.

Bat crime incident data was received by 28 police forces, Bat Conservation Trust and PND. The force with the highest number of incidents in 2025 was Avon and Somerset. 53% of these total reports in 2025 were of damage or destruction to a roost. There are still a number of additional 2025 bat crime cases awaiting hearings in 2026 that are not yet represented in this table.

Spotlight on crime

Badger persecution

Encouraging dogs to attack wild animals for entertainment is inherently cruel for all animals involved. When a dog attacks a badger, it is likely to be a violation of the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 and the Animal Welfare Act 2006. In 2025, 15 cases related to badger persecution resulted in a conviction at court. Eleven of these involved dogs being deliberately encouraged to harm badgers and four related to illegally interfering or blocking a badger sett.

- **North Yorkshire (February 2025**) – Badger baiting, sett disturbance and animal welfare abuse. Two men were jailed (24 and 23 months) for killing a badger and disturbing a sett, as well as causing unnecessary suffering to the dogs.
- **Caerphilly, Wales (October 2025)** – Badgers were filmed being **stabbed, kicked and attacked** by dogs. Following investigations by the RSPCA Cymru and Gwent Police a man was jailed for 16 weeks and banned for keeping all animals for life.

Although the science does not show that culling badgers reduces the spread of Bovine TB, persistent culling has amplified the public perception that badgers are a pest, which may be contributing to the illegal persecution of the species. Since the previous Link report, the English Government have followed the science and ended the badger cull in favour of a vaccination programme. This is an excellent improvement for conservation of badgers. Badger culling has not been routine in Wales since 2012 but is now being considered a possible option. Wales must uphold their policy and to remain a nation free of badger culling.

Bat persecution

Some of the UK's 17 bat species are the rarest mammals in Britain. They form a critical part of our ecosystems and are indicators of wider ecological health. They are legally protected but irreplaceable harm is caused by the unlawful destruction of a bat roost, frequently due to development activities. Developers and property owners must adhere to the law and secure the necessary surveys and licences, committing to and implementing appropriate mitigation measures before and during development work. Nature protection and sustainable development need not be at odds, but the avoidance of harms, not compensation, must be the first priority for wild animals affected by planning.

At the time of writing there are two confirmed convictions for bat offences in 2025:

- **South Yorkshire (October 2025):** destruction of bat roosts. The defendant was sentenced to a £1,200 fine, plus £680 in costs and victim surcharge, giving a total financial penalty of £1,880.
- **Scotland (October 2025):** destruction of a bat roost and breach of licence conditions. The court-imposed fines of £1,800 for the destruction of the roost and £450 for the licence breach.

Bird of prey persecution

Birds of prey are legally protected under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, which makes it a criminal offence to deliberately kill, harm or capture them, or to interfere with their nests or eggs. Yet, despite these protections, extensive evidence gathered over many years by the RSPB and police forces shows that illegal persecution remains a key driver behind the disappearance of important raptor species, particularly on land managed for gamebird shooting.

The RSPB report 'Patterns of Persecution' outlines 10 years' worth of evidence.[iv] Between 2015-2024 there were 921 confirmed incidents of bird of prey persecution. 55% of these incidents occurred on or near land managed for gamebird shooting. These statistics are likely to be a small snapshot of the total persecution incidents as many are unrecorded or unconfirmed.

Case study: the first ever conviction in England in relation to hen harrier persecution was secured in January 2026. A head gamekeeper pleaded guilty to two offences committed at a hen harrier roost on a grouse moor estate in Yorkshire in October 2024. The prosecution relied on covert surveillance evidence lawfully obtained by the RSPB's Investigations Team. Footage captured the gamekeeper communicating with two other men by radio (often in code) about coordinating killing the hen harriers. He was given a financial penalty that totals £1520.

Reptiles and amphibians

Allegations of wildlife crime relating to native reptiles and amphibians includes the destruction of key habitat features, the killing or injuring of individuals, especially adders (*Vipera berus*), and the sale of amphibian spawn and tadpoles, especially common frogs (*Rana temporaria*).

Froglife, Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the UK (ARG UK) and Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust (ARC Trust) were made aware of several 2025 police investigations involving native amphibians, including the unlicensed removal of great crested newts, damage to their terrestrial habitat, and disturbance of natterjack toads. Although we are not aware of specific police investigations of the deliberate release of non-native reptiles and amphibians, there are numerous new reports of non-native reptiles and amphibians spotted in the wild, and it is likely that at least some of them are the result of deliberate illegal release.

The trade in both native and non-native reptiles and amphibians illustrates a weakness in the law, in that for most species legal control effectively covers only wild animals. This means the trade in captive-bred stock (or stock purporting to be captive-bred) continues lawfully, despite risks of disease transmission to wild populations. All three organisations continue to monitor the situation.

RSPCA reports of wildlife abuse

The RSPCA has received a substantial increase in wildlife crime reports from 2024 to 2025, with the total going from 904 to 1331. These numbers may indicate an increase in wildlife crime, an increase in public awareness or concern, or a combination of factors.

The data relating to wild birds is especially concerning. From 2024 to 2025, reports have increased of wild birds being **beaten** (58 to 93) and **improperly killed** (158 to 246) with the greatest rise for both seen in ducks, geese, and pigeons. Reports of **attempted killing** of gulls has increased by 50% (14 to 21), and in swans, it's increased fourfold (3 to 12).

There has been a striking increase in reports of **illegal trapping** in 2025 (188 to 415, more than any year back to 2020). The rise in trapping incidents is largely related to pigeons (33 in 2024, 137 in 2025), corvids (21 to 69), birds of prey (4 to 13), blackbirds (3 to 11) and gulls (9 to 23). Reports of badger trapping is also the highest it has been in recent years (9 reports).

Reports of intentional harm to wild animals has increased from 645 to 848, for example with increases in reports concerning pigeons (156 to 308), ducks (36 to 65), Canada geese (7 to 26), swans (38 to 84) and gulls (65 to 81). There were increased reports of attempted killing (16 to 26) and improper killing (31 to 56) in foxes.

Catapults and slingshots

The growing use of catapults and slingshots to injure or kill wildlife or harm companion animals is a serious concern, with links to social media and younger offenders.

- **Newbury (November 2025):** RSPCA responded to a call that a hedgehog had died from injuries caused by a catapult attack.
- **Maidstone (June 2025):** RSPCA responded to a Canada goose found seriously injured from a catapult attack and later had to be euthanised.

Reports from eyewitnesses and animal welfare charities suggests that while this is a growing issue, it is difficult to know the true scale of the problem, since catapult-related incidents are not consistently recorded as a specific criminal offence. Instead, police forces may record incidents under a range of categories, making it difficult to show national trends or understand the true extent of offending.

Better recording of incidents, improved enforcement powers, responsible retail practices and consideration of an appropriate age and safety restrictions could help protect animals, communities and property while ensuring legitimate recreational use is not restricted.

Illegal hunting

In 2025 there were 25 prosecutions for offences under the Hunting Act, and 18 convictions. The average fine for those convicted was £460.[v] The League Against Cruel Sports recorded 593 reports of suspected illegal hunting during the full 2025/26 fox hunting season, from 1 August 2025 to 31 March 2026. This included 488 incidents of foxes being chased. This represents a more than 25 per cent increase in the number of reports of suspected illegal hunting and of foxes pursued compared to the previous season.

Many trail hunt groups were observed casting hounds into environments where it would have been impossible to lay a trail, including areas of dense hedgerow and thick brambles. **Case study: Mendip Hunt Saboteurs (December 2025)** where 7 foxes were allegedly chased. The Mendip Farmers Hunt reportedly sent hounds into a sewage works. A fox was later seen to be chased from a disused quarry, where no trail could have been laid due to steep slopes and dense vegetation, yet the huntsman was reportedly heard encouraging the hounds as they picked up on the fox's scent.

The League Against Cruel Sports also recorded 1,220 reports of anti-social behaviour and disruption linked to hunts during the 2025/26 fox hunting season, up from 1,102 in 2024. **Case study: Salixby level crossing, Lincolnshire (December 2025**). Around 20 foxhounds had entered the railway line, with one horse rider seen nearby. The train driver applied the emergency brake and sounded the horn continuously but could not prevent the collision in which one or two hounds were killed.

Illegal wildlife trade

Wildlife trafficking increasingly involves organised criminal groups operating across multiple jurisdictions. High profit drives the demand for live wild plants and animals, animal parts such as ivory, and wildlife for pets or food. Illegal wildlife trafficking is the fourth-largest largest illicit transnational activity– behind firearms, drugs and human trafficking – and is thought to be worth up to £17bn a year globally. Online platforms remain largely unregulated and continue to sell unlawful products often advertised as legal and promote these via social media.

Limited data and court records continue to constrain understanding of illegal wildlife trade in the UK, making it harder for government and national agencies to track trends, measure impact and target enforcement. We are aware of five CITES prosecution cases in 2025. Border Force seizure records for 2025 show a slight decrease in total seizures compared to 2024 (from 830 to 721) but this is likely a significant underrepresentation of the true scale of wildlife trafficking.

- **Operation Thunder, led by Interpol and World Customs Organisation (between 13 September and 15 October)** – Over 250 endangered species and illegal wildlife products were seized at the UK border. Individual vehicles were found with over 2000 live tarantulas (of 300 protected species), rainbow boa constrictors, and over 100 endangered birds transported in horrendous conditions, with many already deceased. King cobra balm, a tiger claw bottle, ivory carvings and shark meat were also seized.
- **Operation EXOMIS, led by UK Border Force, NWCU, CEFAS, North Wales Police & Police Services Northern Ireland (January 2025)** – A man from Wales was charged with customs and animal welfare offences for smuggling 37 cardboard boxes, each containing around 15 fully grown eels, on a lorry from Northern Ireland to Wales. Many of the eels were already deceased or were euthanised to end suffering. To date the destination and the buyer for these eels is unknown.

Marine Mammals

Disturbing marine mammals can have consequences for their long-term health and survival.

Grey seals: Disturbance is a significant threat to grey seals but is only illegal in England and Wales where they are a monitored feature of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). 2025 saw a substantial increase in both disturbance incidents and number of seals disturbed across the southwest of England. 413 disturbance incidents were recorded impacting 3029 seals. Of the 413 seal disturbance incidents, 73 (18%) were in a SSSI where disturbance is an offence.[vi]

Cetaceans: Data on wildlife crimes against cetaceans is poor as many crimes go unreported to or unrecorded by the police. Protections for cetaceans are currently scattered across multiple pieces of primary and secondary legislation making it difficult for the police to pursue cases.

Case study: Wildlife disturbance in the Farne Islands and irresponsible tour operators
The Farne Islands are important habitat for wildlife. They are home to a large colony of grey seals, around 200,000 breeding birds in early summer and multiple cetacean species in the surrounding seas. Wildlife tours are popular here, but reports of disturbances are increasing with boats observed coming within a few metres of animals and causing harmful behaviours. Seabirds were seen knocking their eggs off ledges, causing them to smash, and seals were sometimes frightened into the water which can cause direct injury and energy losses. These species are protected features of the Farne Islands SSSI making it illegal to disturb them. While investigations are ongoing, no prosecutions have yet taken place relating to these incidents.

Footage captured in spring 2025 shows a pod of 6-8 orcas being chased and crowded by tour boats and the orcas responding with clear signs of stress. Interactions like this can disrupt important behaviours of feeding, resting and socialising. Boats operating too close to cetaceans can also increase the risk of serious injury from vessel strikes.

Wildlife tour operators should be subject to permits and be required to undertake training on responsible viewing. The permits should be revoked if the guidelines are not followed.

Conclusion

The data in this report shows that once again, reports of suspected incidents of wildlife crime are continuously high while convictions remain low.

Less than 2% of wildlife crime reports result in a conviction.

Wild animals are already facing a barrage of threats to their survival, including habitat loss or degradation, climate change and now wildfire.

Human induced harm for entertainment or profit is another senseless blow.

The animal welfare strategy committed to increasing penalties for wildlife crime. We urge Government to make this change to provide a greater deterrent to committing these offences. However, this policy change won't be enough. It is clear that there is more work to do to ensure that all incidents of wildlife crime result in a prosecution and ultimately, a strong and just conviction.

This means greater awareness and prioritising of wildlife crime amongst the public and police forces, greater support for the National Wildlife Crime Unit and, crucially, making key wildlife crimes notifiable to the Home Office. Notifiable status will increase data collection to allow for greater targeting of resources and enforcement. Wildlife crime is increasingly understood to have links to other violent and organised criminal activity.

Criminal attacks on wild animals must not be overlooked. There is no place for wildlife crime.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 99 organisations to campaign for nature, climate, animal welfare and a healthy environment for everyone. Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 3889519.

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References

i WCL_Wildlife_Crime_2025_DIGITAL.pdf

ii Weedy, A., 2025. *The Policing of Wildlife Crime-What Can We Learn?* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Northumbria at Newcastle (United Kingdom)). Available at: weedy.alice_phd_15011957_.pdf

iii See Link dossier for the eleven offences recommended for addition to the notifiable list: Notifiable_status_for_wildlife_crimes_Evidence_dossier_17.10.22.pdf

iv Patterns of Persecution RSPB report, May 2026 Patterns of persecution

v Ministry of Justice Criminal Justice Statistics Quarterly: December 2025: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/criminal-justice-statistics-quarterly-december-2025

vi More details of the seal disturbance events collected by the Seal Research Trust can be supplied upon request

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