

Ireland's battle to save our wildlife



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Amy Lewis highlights the measures taken in tackling crimes against Ireland's wildlife and the need for more action.

Protecting the voiceless victims of wildlife crime is a constant battle.



The ongoing persecution of wildlife overseas is often highlighted but such incidences aren't as far away from home as one might imagine. In fact, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and Gardai face them each week.

In July, two men were charged before Portlaoise District Court for the trapping of protected wild goldfinches using bait and rat glue.

Meanwhile, an investigation is underway in Louth regarding the unlawful killing of two peregrine falcons nesting in the Cooley Mountains.

However, these and other known cases are only the tip of the iceberg.

“Many cases go undiscovered because by their nature, they’re suspicious and secretive activities,” says Dr Barry O’ Donoghue from the NPWS Agri-Ecology Unit.

The stakes are being raised to combat wildlife criminals and their increasingly sophisticated methods.

An Garda Síochána recently announced plans for a wildlife crime training course. Commencing in September, it will equip specially-appointed inspectors from each Garda division with tools to recognise and deal with wildlife crime.

Each inspector will work closely with their opposite number in the NPWS.

“Information is key. We want to show [inspectors] what the main offences are and demonstrate how to deal with them and prosecute them in the District Court,” says Kildare Superintendent Martin Walker, who previously led the Garda’s anti-poaching investigation Operation Bambi alongside the NPWS.



Although the Wildlife Act is the principal legislation regarding wildlife crime, Supt Walker says prosecution powers within it are limited.

Through training, he hopes to encourage Gardaí to ‘think laterally’ about other legislation that relates to these cases.

A surreptitious nature is a common denominator among wildlife crimes but offences take many forms.

According to Supt Walker, the illegal hunting of deer at night using lamps or lurchers is common.

Indeed, the Irish Deer Commission recently reported a significant increase in deer poaching and badger baiting in the Midlands.

“That’s particularly cruel. These animals release stress hormones and the meat isn’t even fit for human consumption. It’s just an absolute bloodlust,” says Supt Walker.

Catching finches is widespread, as is hare poaching with hounds.

“People are hunting hares across farmer’s land. They’ve no authority to be there, farmers are afraid and sometimes their livestock is getting injured,” says Supt Walker, who says that poachers often use hunts as intelligence-gathering operations for farm theft.

Birds of prey are also regular targets. The RAPTOR (Recording and Addressing Persecution and Threats to Our Raptors) protocol is a collaborative approach between the NPWS, Regional Veterinary Laboratories and the State Laboratory to determine non-habitat related threats to birds of prey.



“We needed a mechanism of investigating and recording incidents, as well as using that data to inform and provide intelligence for addressing these issues,” says O’ Donoghue, who is a Project Investigator for RAPTOR.

The sixth and most recently published report showed that in 2016, there were 19 poisonings, six shootings and one incident involving a vehicle collision.

Common buzzards, red kites and peregrine falcons were the most highly-recorded victims.

Niall Hatch of Birdwatch Ireland notes that peregrines are common targets.

While he says some crimes have been at the hand of pigeon-fanciers, he stresses that most people involved in this hobby wouldn’t harm peregrines in any way.

Project Manager of the White-tailed Sea Eagle Reintroduction Project Dr Allan Mee adds that peregrine chicks are sometimes taken from the wild by those without a licence.

“Buzzards are [also] being targeted because some see them as a threat to pheasants being released. Buzzards aren’t well-regarded by some gun clubs in parts of the country,” continues Mee, stressing that generally, his team have a good relationship with gun clubs.

“Buzzards were almost extinct in Ireland but now have spread across the country. There’s no earthly reason for anyone to persecute them,” adds Hatch.

People are sometimes worried that they’re a threat to lambs but they couldn’t kill a lamb in a million years. They’re nothing but a benefit to a farm as they kill rats and rabbits.

The RAPTOR report notes that some poisoning incidents, particularly those involving buzzards, red kites and barn owls are the result of bio-accumulation i.e. birds ingesting rodents that have been poisoned with rodenticides.

These cases are considered secondary and unintentional.

Through spreading awareness, Mee has seen that this can be mitigated.

Of 14 confirmed poisoning cases of white-tailed sea eagles, since their reintroduction from Norway commenced in 2007, Mee says not one has taken place since 2015.

He credits this to awareness, education and working with landowners.

“In the past when they were poisoned, it was largely because people weren’t aware that the birds were out there or of a change in their population.”

Some other poisoning incidents are more sinister, such the illegal placing of poisoned meat baits.

According to O’ Donoghue, some have been laced with enough poison to kill a human if touched and accidentally ingested.

To tackle these crimes, it’s universally agreed that more education and public awareness is key.



A poisoned

buzzard

“We must engage with local communities so that they have someone they know and trust they can report something to,” says O’ Donoghue.

The 2013 and 2015 Wildlife Crime Conferences organised by Wildlife Rehabilitation Ireland have helped to spread awareness.

The organisation, who run the information website Wildlifecrime.ie, will hold a public Wildlife Rehabilitation Conference in Slane this October which includes talks on wildlife crime.

Additionally, Hatch says that more resources could help.

“The NPWS needs to be much better resourced. They’re doing great work but are struggling because they don’t have the resources they need and deserve.”

Supt Walker hopes that with the upcoming training, potential plans for a wildlife crime recording system and liaising with various stakeholders, wildlife crime nationwide will be minimised.

This can be aided with the cooperation of the public.

If aware of a suspected wildlife crime, they should report it to the Gardaí and local NPWS ranger.

Supt Walker stresses that anyone who reports will have their anonymity fully respected.

www.wildlifecrime.ie/pages/Reporting.html