

Badger: a much persecuted native mammal. Photo: Andrew Kelly

# Wildlife crime in Ireland

**Mike Rendle** provides an overview of the threats to wildlife from persecution and lack of awareness.

**W**ildlife crime is a global phenomenon. Almost daily we hear reports of tigers, rhinos, elephants and many other animals being hunted to extinction to feed the international black market in animals and animal parts. Politicians and celebrities offer their patronage to conservation campaigns and engage with foreign governments to protect endangered species and stamp out illegal trade.

Closer to home, our own flora and fauna may not be considered as exotic or attract the same degree of attention, but wildlife crime in Ireland poses a very real threat to some of our rarest and most iconic native birds and animals. Yet the impact on our wildlife and the wider environment barely registers on the public psyche. This surely is evidence, if it were needed, that *familiarity breeds contempt*.

Often, wildlife crime is the result of reckless behaviour, but ignorance should not excuse. All of this is entirely avoidable with foresight, common sense and advice from the relevant environment agency.

In some cases, wildlife crime may be the result of a blatant disregard for the environment, leading to the destruction of important habitats and wildlife. In others, wildlife crime appears to be driven by an innate contempt for the natural world.

Demonising a particular bird or animal can result in its systematic persecution, often using inhumane traps and other means of destruction that are outlawed throughout Europe.

Many activities, once legal and considered acceptable in a different time, are outlawed today. However, barbaric pursuits like badger baiting still take place. Unlawful coursing or trapping of hares threatens the existence of our already vulnerable oldest native mammal species.

For other species, it's perceived as a victimless crime, perpetrated on birds and animals with no apparent 'value.' Not all wildlife is equal, and more attention is paid to crimes concerning animals that carry a commercial value. This mainly relates to poaching, where the wildlife crime is driven directly by personal gain, and consequently these offences attract a much higher public profile.

Paradoxically, some species are collateral casualties of the very same commercial interests that suffer the consequences of poaching. Predators at the top of the wildlife food chain are relentlessly persecuted to protect game. Despite being hunted to near extinction, their persecution continues. These crimes hinder the efforts put into conserving these vulnerable and, all too often, rare species.

For many years, our native birds of prey have been systematically killed to make way for game species. Their nests and

eggs are destroyed with catastrophic consequences for breeding success and the next generation. Adults are shot or caught and killed using illegal traps and poisoned bait, methods as cruel as they are unlawful.

Predators such as pine martens and otters have been hunted to critically low numbers throughout Ireland. Legal protection has helped bring them back from the brink.

There is another consequence of predator reduction, as explained by the mesopredator release theory. This describes the removal of a major predator which in turn allows a minor predator to have a disproportionate impact on prey species. By way of example in Ireland, low numbers of otters have allowed mink more breeding success than otherwise would

**X-ray of badger corpse full of lead shot.**  
Photo: Alex Barlow & Harriet Brooks



**“Many activities, once legal and considered acceptable, are outlawed today.”**

have been the case. Otters were hunted with the intention of preserving fish stocks, with unforeseen and unwanted consequences. The relationship between individual species’ populations and survival is much more complex than most realise or understand.

For many, the most appalling of wildlife crimes must be the persecution of wildlife for ‘tradition’ or entertainment. Many medieval practices not only survive but also thrive today. Badger-related wildlife crime is all too common. Badgers, often breeding females, are dug from their setts and either savaged by dogs or taken captive. These unfortunate animals are then used in ‘baiting,’ where they are forced to defend themselves against a dog, to the death, in an enclosure from which neither can escape.



**Rook found dead after eating bread laced with poison. Photo: Maurice Eakin**

Both animals sustain vicious, life-threatening injuries. Bets are placed and money changes hands in an atmosphere of cruelty, greed and status. Unsurprisingly, this kind of animal cruelty often takes place in a wider criminal context.

Not all wildlife crime is as blatant or overt. The impact of human activity and development can’t be overlooked and often has unseen, detrimental consequences for the species that share the environment. Welcome to the world of human-animal conflict, where the species that live closest to us suffer the most. Cutting trees and hedgerows during nesting time impacts on bird populations.



**Injured sparrowhawk in care. Photo: Dan Donoher (Kildare Animal Foundation)**

Clearing greenfield sites can destroy badgers’ setts and precious habitats. Destruction of woodland has an impact on the diverse wildlife it sustains. To ensure the conservation of any species it is essential to protect the habitat it lives in, and safeguard other environmental factors influencing its survival. An unsustainable environment is a threat to us all.

Demolishing or renovating buildings can wipe out entire colonies of bats. Bats are commonly found in the roofs and eaves of residential homes. Yes, they can be found in draughty ruins and gothic churches but, just like us, many prefer the comfort and security that modern housing provides. Irish bats are harmless insect-eaters, yet are disliked by many who do not relish them as tenants.

Bats and their roosts can only be disturbed by someone with a licence. Recklessly blocking access to roosts is not only illegal but risks entombing a colony of bats within the fabric of a house – not ideal for anyone concerned.

Bats are not the only species to suffer and, similarly, demolishing buildings and other structures that may be home to some protected species may constitute wildlife crime.

As well as bats, the homes of badgers and otters are protected too. They, too, can become casualties as human development encroaches on their habitats. Planning legislation to protect wildlife is only as effective as public awareness.

Despite being illegal, poisoning of wildlife remains widespread. The poisons themselves are outlawed yet appear to be freely available to those who know where to get them. The dangers of these highly toxic substances go far beyond the individual birds and animals targeted. Like snares, poisons are indiscriminate in their use. ‘Non-target’ species like domestic pets and livestock are as likely, if not more likely, to become collateral damage in this war on wildlife. Ultimately, we humans at the top of a complex food chain will not remain immune from poison’s toxic touch. ▶



**Pine marten kit. Photo: Andrew Kelly**



**Snared badger rescued by Kildare Animal Foundation being brought into care. Photograph: Dan Donohoe**

**“You can play your part too. You can learn how to recognise, record and report a wildlife crime.”**

knowledge and experience to investigations, evidence-gathering and prosecutions, and your local NPWS ranger can provide advice and guidance on reporting wildlife crime.

There is also a much wider wildlife community of individuals and groups in the voluntary sector who give of their time and expertise to protecting and nurturing our rich natural heritage. These people are the eyes and ears of the countryside, without whom many wildlife crimes would remain undetected.

You can play your part too. Further information can be found on the website **Wildlife Crime Ireland** at [www.wildlifecrime.ie](http://www.wildlifecrime.ie), which is dedicated to tackling wildlife crime. Created and maintained by **Wildlife Rehabilitation Ireland**, this resource contains information about wildlife crime and practical advice on recognising and recording a suspected wildlife crime, along with contact details for reporting it as quickly as possible.

If an injured animal is involved, its welfare is paramount. Get expert help as soon as possible. There's more about dealing with casualties and access to expert advice on the **Irish Wildlife Matters** website [www.irishwildlifematters.ie](http://www.irishwildlifematters.ie).

Organisations and individuals are encouraged to download and print the leaflet below from the website (or just go to <http://bit.ly/1mhvS2a>) and distribute it as widely as possible.

Don't forget that you are dealing with potential evidence. Don't handle or disturb anything, but take notes and photographs if you can, and remember: if something looks suspicious, it probably is.



▶ **Mike Rendell** is an Irish wildlife enthusiast with a lifelong interest in the environment. He has contributed to a number of wildlife conservation and protection initiatives in Ireland and Great Britain ■

The internet has brought global trade to our very doorsteps and living rooms. Buying and selling on the World Wide Web often circumvents local and international laws, as well as border controls. The anonymity that this virtual shopping affords amounts to nothing less than a wildlife criminals' and smugglers' charter.

Ireland is a signatory to CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora). This means that the Irish authorities can take action in the case of the trade, possession and dealing in species of flora and fauna which are listed as endangered in their country of origin. Often this involves the smuggling of endangered species and their parts, such as tortoises, rhino horn, ivory and caviar.

Wildlife offences are often committed by individuals with more mainstream criminal connections and may be known to the police in this context. A real climate of fear exists and this creates a dilemma for the would-be whistle-blower. Who can blame a farmer for not reporting

suspicious activity on his land for fear of possible repercussions?

Apathy certainly exists amongst the general public, but there is often little incentive to report wildlife offences.

This is a relatively obscure area of police work, perceived as rarely being given priority. The average citizen might be forgiven for thinking that taking the trouble to report a suspected crime is a waste of time and, if it is investigated at all, the clear-up rate is poor and sentences may not appear to constitute a deterrent.

For all of these reasons, wildlife crime needs to be proactively identified and reported. In this modern age, data are a valuable tool. Protocols, policies and resources, especially funding, are built on a foundation of information. There is an important role here for the general public, especially those who spend time in the countryside.

It is widely accepted that wildlife crime is under-reported and there are a number of likely reasons for this. For many, wildlife law can be complex and confusing, and the relatively straightforward criteria used for detecting animal cruelty can't always be applied. The law permits dogs to engage a fox but not an otter or a badger, for example.

Sometimes reasons to suspect the commission of a crime are apparent. However, where wildlife is concerned, the demarcation between lawful and unlawful is often complex and unclear. If the circumstances indicate that an animal may be the victim of wildlife crime, then that is sufficient reason to report a *suspected* offence.

In the event of your suspecting a wildlife crime, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and An Garda Síochána are the institutions to contact, as their role is to pursue wildlife crime prosecutions. NPWS conservation rangers play the key role by contributing valuable expert



**Red kite: many have been found poisoned. Photo: Andrew Kelly**