



IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Help end wildlife persecution

Everyone can help tackle illegal and indiscriminate killing of wildlife, and now there is help at hand. **Mike Rendle** of **Wildlife Rehabilitation Ireland** reports.

We are constantly being exposed to media coverage of tigers, rhinos, elephants and other exotic animals being hunted or persecuted to extinction to feed the international black market in animals and animal parts. Politicians, celebrities and royalty offer their patronage to campaigns and engage with foreign governments to protect endangered species abroad.

Closer to home, wildlife may not be considered as exotic, or attract the same degree of publicity, but wildlife crime in Ireland is a very real threat to some of our rarest and most iconic native birds and animals. Yet many folk remain unaware of the extent to which our wildlife is persecuted and plundered on this small island of ours. This is evidence, surely, if it were needed, that familiarity breeds contempt.

Domestic wildlife crime is shockingly common. It may result from blatant disregard for the environment, leading to the destruction of important habitats and wildlife. Criminal gangs and individuals target individual species for profit or in the course of pursuing cruel pastimes that should be confined to the history books.

Cutting trees and hedgerows during nesting time can have a devastating effect on bird populations. Clearing greenfield development sites can destroy badgers' setts and precious habitats. Demolishing or renovating buildings can wipe out entire colonies of bats. Often these offences are the result of reckless behaviour but, when it comes to wildlife crime, ignorance should not be an excuse. All of this is entirely avoidable with foresight, common sense and advice from the relevant environment agency.

Many activities, once legal and considered acceptable in a different time, are outlawed today. Barbaric pursuits like badger baiting remain all too common. Unlawful coursing or trapping of hares threatens the existence of our already

vulnerable oldest native mammal species.

However, an innate contempt for the natural world appears to drive much of the wildlife crime. Demonisation of a particular bird or animal can result in its systematic persecution and death, often using inhumane traps and other means of destruction that are outlawed throughout Europe. The internet facilitates these underground communities, who use social media sites to boast of their exploits.

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, 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 poisons' toxic touch.

Since 2007, over 100 incidents of poisoning or bird-of-prey persecution have been recorded in Ireland. It is widely agreed that wildlife crime is under-reported and we can only conclude that this is merely the tip of the iceberg, as many such incidents will never come to light.

The RAPTOR scheme – Recording and Addressing Persecution and Threats to Our Raptors – initiated in 2011 by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in collaboration

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with the State Laboratory and the Department of Agriculture's Regional Veterinary Laboratories, has been important in highlighting that we have serious issues with poisoning and persecution.

However, prioritisation and resources need to be given now in order to move from recording these incidents to being proactive and gathering intelligence.

In 2011, 33 incidents of poisoning or bird-of-prey persecution were confirmed. These included 24 bird-of-prey deaths and, of these, 15 died as a result of poisoning.

Indiscriminate killing also threatens the populations being preyed upon, and often the methods used are damaging to the wider environment. Wildlife crime is not only destructive, it also serves to undermine the conservation and reintroduction of rare and vulnerable species. An unsustainable environment is a threat to us all. Consequently, it is important that our communities are aware of the extent of wildlife persecution and do more to bring the perpetrators to justice. There is nothing traditional, cultural or acceptable about destroying our wildlife and habitats. Passive regulation and voluntary compliance has proven to be ineffective; a more proactive approach is needed.

Clockwise from top left:
 1. X-ray photo of badger corpse full of lead shot shown at 2nd Annual Irish Wildlife Crime Conference.
 2. Some gin traps and unstopped snares available over the internet.
 3. Conference-goers examine display of badger, rabbit and fox cub killed using snares.
 4. An injured sparrowhawk in care.
 5. Fresh corpse of snared badger.



Wildlife Rehabilitation Ireland

The charity group Wildlife Rehabilitation Ireland provides information about rehabilitating wildlife as well as accredited training and support for the professional and voluntary wildlife sectors.

In September, the group held its second annual Irish Wildlife Crime Conference in Ashbourne, Co Meath. This was attended by many of the key figures at the sharp end of fighting wildlife crime.

You can play your part too. The latest addition to the group's portfolio of wildlife initiatives is **Wildlife Crime Ireland**, and for this it recently launched a new website to help tackle wildlife crime, <http://wildlifecrime.ie>. The website contains information about wildlife crime and practical advice about how to address it, with advice on recognising and recording a suspected wildlife crime, along with contact details for reporting it as quickly as possible.

PLAY YOUR PART

<http://wildlifecrime.ie> is a new website set up by **Wildlife Rehabilitation Ireland** to help tackle wildlife crime. It contains information and practical advice on recording a suspected crime, and contact details for reporting it as quickly 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. 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 **Wildlife Rehabilitation Ireland** website, <http://www.wri.ie>.

Sharing information plays a crucial role in empowering individuals and groups. The Wildlife Crime Ireland website contains a prosecution page with tables of National Parks and Wildlife Service and Garda Síochána crime statistics. Organisations and individuals are encouraged to download and print the leaflets and publications from the website and distribute as widely as possible.

Please share this information, and remember, if something looks suspicious, it probably is. ■

