

Wildlife Crime – Poisoning of Birds of Prey

The confirmation in May this year that the deaths of 23 buzzards in Co. Cork, December 2019, were the result of deliberate poisoning generated much publicity and outrage both locally and nationally. It is the largest known fatal mass poisoning of birds of prey since legislation was amended to better protect these animals in 2010. The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) who published the toxicology reports at the start of May this year show that the poison used was the banned pesticide Carbofuran. The very same poison used to kill the Hen Harrier 'Mary' in Meath that same year.



Figure 1 Dead Hen Harrier 'Mary' - RSPB 02.11.19

At the time of being published, no one has been held responsible for either poisoning in Cork or Meath. Although the NPWS are confident that both were deliberate acts the delay of time between the poisoned birds being discovered and confirmation of toxicology reports will make finding the perpetrators far more difficult.

In both cases confirmation of such acts of wildlife crime were only made public months after the event. The poisoning of 'Mary' happened in November 2019 with the cause of death being made public in March 2020.

Such poisoning events not only threaten our wildlife they are toxic and just as lethal to the general public.

Carbofuran, commonly found as Furadan, is a lethal pesticide that was used to control insects, mites and nematodes in soil before it was banned in Ireland and the EU in 2009. Its toxicity is quite remarkable; a quarter of a teaspoon can kill an adult human and a single grain of the substance can kill a bird of prey.

Between 2011 and 2019, this specific poison has killed 55 birds of prey in Ireland. Our neighbours in the United Kingdom have also suffered significant loss of birds of prey to this poison. More worryingly a report from Scotland in 2012 found that the deaths of golden eagles and white-tailed sea eagles could be linked to Carbofuran sent from Ireland. In 2011, a gamekeeper in Scotland was found to possess 10kg of Carbofuran, this amount would be enough to kill every bird of prey in the United Kingdom. Reports like these show that there is not only enough of a supply of this pesticide to satisfy the criminal demand for persecution of wildlife in Ireland but also for the UK.

When the Department of Agriculture, Food and Nature was asked about the regulations towards the ownership and use of biocides (chemical substances intended to kill living things, for example weeds and pests) they assured us that Cross Compliance inspections are mandatory for farmers who receive payments under the Basic Payment Scheme and these Cross Compliance inspections incorporate the storage and use of biocides. Relating to deregistered pesticides or plant protection products (PPP), it is not illegal to have these in your possession as long as it can be proven via records that none of these biocides have been used or purchased since they became hazardous waste. Advice is then given on how to dispose of these chemicals properly (Hazardous Waste Collection scheme) and a follow up inspection will take place depending on the severity of the issue. The Department believes that if the possession of these deregistered PPP were to be made illegal that it would encourage the improper disposal or storage of the chemicals which would lead to further environmental problems.

The persecution of those responsible for the killing of birds of prey and other animals using biocides, whether illegal or not, is very rare. Similarly reporting cases and establishing exactly how many birds are killed is a nearly impossible task. In 2011, a protocol for dealing with suspected poisoning or persecution incidents was agreed between the National Parks & Wildlife Service, the Veterinary Laboratory Service and The State Laboratory. The NPWS Bird of Prey Persecution and Poisoning Database was also set up in 2011. The idea of this

protocol is to have a network where victims of poisoning can be found, the origin and identity of this poison can be traced, and the authorities can be notified appropriately.



Figure 2 Dead Buzzard, Cork, IRSG 00.12.19

If highly dangerous and illegal poisons such as Carbofuran are being used as bait to kill birds of prey, the knock-on effects of using such a potent poison could lead to the accidental death or illness of people, and this does not just apply to Carbofuran. This goes for any pesticide, whether legal or not, that is used irresponsibly. These chemicals are called biocides for a reason, and they should never just be haphazardly thrown into an ecosystem in a large quantity.

There are clearly flaws in the current set-up for reporting wildlife crime, with some conservation bodies calling for a wildlife crime unit to be established. But some simple changes to the existing process could help too. The establishing of sources of illegal biocides or implementing new education strategies on the dangers of these chemicals could also reduce their reckless use. Better still, the official confirmation of poisoning incidents could be expedited to better help find and prosecute those responsible. This is something that has already been established with the recent spate of poisoned dogs.

On the 4th of June this year the Search and Rescue Dog Association (SARDA) Ireland posted on social media that Bonnie, a trainee trailing dog died after eating poison bait intended to target wildlife in the foothills of the Knockmealdowns, Co. Tipperary. Similar incidents have

also been occurring in Connemara, Co. Galway with dogs being poisoned and dying by ingesting intentionally laid down bait. In both cases the confirmation of poisoning was established a few weeks after the event, not months.

It is difficult to catch someone in the act of laying poison bait or shooting birds of prey and harder still months after the event has taken place.

With the recent confirmation of another buzzard poisoned in Tipperary and Limerick it's clear, that for some, 23 dead buzzards was not enough. If we are to ensure such an incident does not happen again, we must make these changes now. Not doing so and allowing more birds of prey, native wildlife, pets, assistance animals and potentially people to suffer and die would be the real crime.

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