WILDLIFE CRIME

STEALING OUR WILDLIFE...

From orchid theft to poaching and raptor persecution, wildlife crime is a major rural issue – and yet the future of the National Wildlife Crime Unit is unclear. **Susanne Masters** looks at the scale of the problem

A golden eagle is a rare sight, usually only glimpsed as it soars above Scottish glens. Alma, however, was one of the better known: the first golden eagle to be tracked using high quality GPS data, as part of research on eagle behaviour by Scottish National Heritage. The public could follow her journeys via the internet.

But one day in 2009, she stopped moving. When searchers scoured her last known location, they found her body; she had been deliberately poisoned. Tests revealed that Alma had ingested a carcass laced with carbofuran, a highly toxic agricultural insecticide that was banned in 2001. No one was charged with Alma's death.

This summer, the RSPB posted a video on YouTube that was filmed covertly by their investigation officers. It showed a member of a shooting club in Cumbria trapping and killing two buzzards. When the area was searched by Cumbria constabulary and the RSPB, the remains of other buzzards were found.

The perpetrator pleaded guilty to killing the two buzzards in February, and to killing five buzzards on previous occasions. He was given a suspended sentence when the case went to court in July 2013.

Killing of raptors is widespread. In 2011, there were almost 250 reported incidents of birds of prey being killed in the UK and these included buzzards, red

WILDLIFE CRIME

WILDLIFE

kites, goshawks, peregrines, a sparrowhawk and another golden eagle. As much of this activity takes place in remote areas unseen and unreported, the actual number is likely to be much higher.

Investigators – from the police and conservation bodies – lay the blame for the killings at the door of the game bird shooting industry. Raptors do prey on pheasants reared for shooting and can have an impact on grouse populations, and so may reduce the profitability of these businesses. Hence, the temptation to eliminate the birds.

Such persecution has a significant impact on raptor populations. In a scientific study, it was estimated that the 2006 population of 41 pairs of red kites around Black Isle, Highland, would have been 300 pairs if birds had not been persecuted, primarily through poisoning.

Organised crime

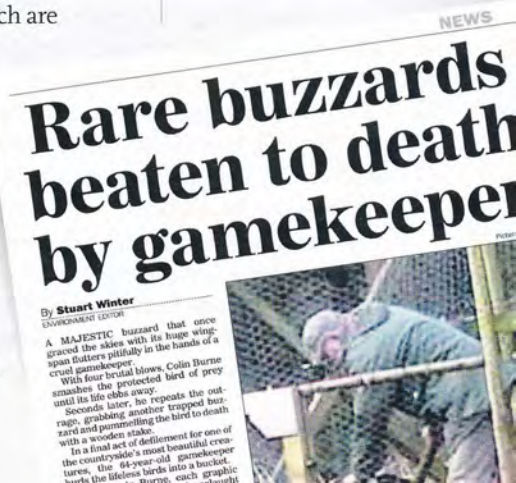
Raptor persecution is just one facet of modern crime involving wildlife, ranging from individuals accidentally breaking a law due to being unaware of the potential impact of their behaviour, to individuals who choose to break the law, organised crime and even major companies deliberately breaching wildlife protection legislation. Yet there are few prosecutions.

While a homeowner renovating their house might unintentionally disturb a bat roost (an illegal act and 301 such cases were recorded by the Bat Conservation Trust in 2010, although few were prosecuted), most people would know that it is not acceptable to dig up an orchid to take home. However, in June 2013, plant experts from Kent Wildlife Trust recorded a very rare lady orchid on one of their nature reserves. When they returned two days later, they found it had been dug up and taken away – presumably to be sold to a private collector. It was clear that a crime had taken place. John McAllister, head of reserves in East Kent, explained, "If one is dealing with an ultra-rare species where the population is measured in tens, then theft of one or two is significant."

Although only a few orchid species are among the plants with special legal protection in the UK, it is always illegal to dig up a plant without the landowner's permission. Bluebells, which are protected by special legislation due to their rarity at a global level, cannot be traded without a special licence. In a landmark case in 2007, two people were successfully prosecuted and subsequently fined £7,000 for trading in bluebells collected from the wild without a licence.

Perhaps the most obvious and traditional of wildlife crimes is poaching. But the idea of a local man »

FAR LEFT One of two buzzards found dead on a shooting estate in the Scottish Borders, 2003
TOP LEFT Hare coursing was made illegal in 2005 but is still a major issue, especially in eastern counties
ABOVE LEFT Deliberate or accidental river pollution is a serious crime and can lead to the deaths of thousands of fish
ABOVE A woodland on Dartmoor destroyed by an arsonist in 1997



NEWS

Rare buzzards beaten to death by gamekeeper

By Stuart Winter
ENVIRONMENT EDITOR

A MAJESTIC buzzard that once graced the skies with its huge wingspan flutters pitifully in the hands of a cruel gamekeeper.

With four brutal blows, Colin Burne smashes the protected bird of prey until its life ebbs away.

Seconds later, he repeats the outrage, grabbing another trapped buzzard and pummelling the bird to death with a wooden stake.

In a final act of defilement for one of the countryside's most beautiful creatures, the 64-year-old gamekeeper

WILDLIFE CRIME

nipping out at night to bring home a rabbit to supplement the family's meagre diet is long gone. Modern poaching is very different. Policeman John Baldwin, the 2012 Wildlife Law Enforcer of the Year, said: "Recent warrants in Cumbria have shown just how organised even our lower-level criminals can be, with walkie-talkies, night vision and camouflage gear, and garages turned into at-home meat processing areas. The countryside attracts people involved in all levels and types of criminality."

Wildlife crimes are not solely dealt with by the police. The Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime (PAW) brings together organisations to share specialist knowledge and skills. Baldwin said: "The list of agencies we work with is huge, but we all work together towards a common goal. We often find that our legal powers overlap. For example, a successful warrant we conducted involving the illegal trade in venison utilised not just police powers, but also those of Trading Standards and the Food Standards Agency." Meanwhile, many successful prosecutions of wildlife crimes have also been initiated by, or used evidence provided by, the public.

John Baldwin and John McAllister agree that it is better to be proactive and prevent wildlife crime offences than to respond to incidents that have taken place. Wildlife charities often take an active role in promoting awareness of legislation concerning wild species, with the aim of preventing accidental harm to wildlife. For example, the Bat Conservation Trust provides guidance on legislation concerning bats and what to do if bats are found during building works.

Government also has a role in preventing wildlife crime. Scotland is taking measures to increase the power of legislation by reviewing whether penalties are adequate. For example, in February 2013, Shawater Ltd – a firm that builds hydro-electric schemes – was prosecuted for pollution offences, including killing rare freshwater pearl mussels, and was fined £4,000. Considering that the case was described as an "ecological disaster" – the population of pearl mussels concerned may never recover – and that the species is considered critically endangered, is a fine of £4,000 really a sufficient deterrent?

Another measure taking place in Scotland, in order to deter raptor persecution, is examining whether licences to trap and shoot game birds can be restricted on land where crimes are believed to have occurred. While the Scottish government is actively working on deterring wildlife crime, English and Welsh wildlife crime governance is more passive. A report from the Environmental Audit Committee recommended that specialist wildlife police should be funded on a long-term basis. Yet the National Wildlife Crime Unit was granted just one year of funding, ending in March 2014. Although further

HOW TO IDENTIFY AND REPORT WILDLIFE CRIME

Cruelty to (wild) animals and buying, selling, harming or disturbing animals and plants protected by law and are wildlife crimes.

- If you think a wildlife crime is taking place, call the police on 999.
- If you have concerns or information to report, call your local police station on its non-emergency number.
- Be careful. Don't approach suspects or touch anything at the scene as you could jeopardise your own safety.
- Useful information to note includes the location, how many people are involved and descriptive information such as what they are wearing, whether they have tools or dogs with them, and vehicle details.
- For more information on the National Wildlife Crime Unit, visit www.nwcu.police.uk

WILDLIFE CRIME

funding may be granted, operating on a short-term basis can hinder long-term investigations.

Funding gap

The lack of funding suggests that wildlife crime is not a priority for government. In this matter, the UK is lagging behind other countries. Wildlife crime, such as illegal trade in specimens, is increasingly viewed as a component of international organised crime connected to the drug trade and violence.

This an issue that affects everyone. Some people suffer direct consequences from losing a pet to poisoned bait or being intimidated by groups of poachers or badger-baiters. Indirectly, we are all affected by the destruction of not only our cultural heritage, but also a resource for the future.

But not all is gloomy. John Baldwin, who has worked for the police for nearly 25 years, notes: "In the last couple of years, there has been a great reduction in cases of raptor persecution and deer poaching locally; Cumbria's newly introduced red kite population is thriving, and the osprey appears to be well and truly back here."

At the moment, though, we increasingly depend on a hodge-podge of police, charities, government departments and members of the public to tackle and prevent wildlife crime. Fortunately, there are many motivated individuals fighting the good fight.

FAR LEFT Modern poachers are well-armed and kill on a commercial scale – a far cry from the traditional village character of rural novels LEFT Do signs prevent criminal activity? TOP Collectors steal eggs of rare birds and can cause local extinctions BOTTOM Environment Agency officers patrol for poachers on Exmoor

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Photos: Alamy, RSPB Images, PA, Rex Features, Photoshot, UK Press

UK WILDLIFE CRIME PRIORITIES

Wildlife crime priorities are updated every two years on the basis of the volume of incidents within an area of wildlife crime, and the ecological impacts of particular crimes. Priorities for 2011-2013 are:

BADGERS

Accidentally or deliberately interfering with badger setts is illegal, although in some circumstances, such as building, licences may be issued to allow sett access to be restricted in order to encourage the badgers to move elsewhere. Badger baiting – forcing badgers to fight dogs – is not only of concern in relation to badger populations and cruelty to badgers, dogs used to disturb or fight badgers can sustain horrific injuries.

BATS

Bat populations have declined in the UK and Europe. Bats are highly dependent on man-made structures for places to roost, and this makes them vulnerable to redevelopment. In addition to legal protection making it illegal to damage or destroy roosting places or to obstruct bats' access to roosts, it is illegal to intentionally catch, injure or kill a bat. It is also illegal to possess, sell or exchange a bat or parts of a bat, whether it is dead or alive.

FRESHWATER PEARL MUSSELS

Freshwater pearl mussels are considered endangered in England as their population numbers are so low. Scotland is significant on a global level as the place where half the world's freshwater pearl mussels live. Although they are one of the longest-lived invertebrates with lifespans that can exceed 100 years, they are sensitive to pollution and disturbance of the rivers they inhabit, and have been depleted by illegal pearl fishing.

GAME POACHING

Poaching is the illegal pursuit of animals classified as game, such as rabbits and deer. Poaching has, in the past, been thought of as a lone poacher getting some meat for his family's own consumption, but is now largely associated with killing animals for pleasure or commercial gain and carried out by groups of people. While pursuing animals, poachers can be destructive to farmers' land and uncultivated countryside.

BIRDS OF PREY

Raptors have declined, not only because of the impact of using DDT as an agricultural pesticide which caused birds' eggs shells to thin, but also because of egg collecting, nest disturbance, and deliberate actions including poisoning, hunting and trapping. As predators at the top of the food chain, raptors are not only intrinsically valuable as part of wildlife diversity, they can have a significant role in regulating populations of their prey.