

# Wildlife crime: call to action

**Globally, wildlife crime threatens biodiversity and sustainable development of communities. Ana Vale, Mike Rendle and Emma Higgs, Wildlife Rehabilitation Ireland (WRI), discuss how veterinary professionals can provide medical assistance and raise awareness**

## SYNOPSIS

Between €18bn and €24bn is generated annually in wildlife crime-related activities (offences). Generating such big profit poses a major problem when tackling wildlife crime, as it is usually linked with other illicit activities. Wildlife crime is not only limited to whale hunting and the poaching of elephants and rhinos, but also includes our backdoor species like hedgehogs, bats, seals and buzzards.

Furthermore, wildlife crimes, which are frequently perceived as victimless crimes, are empowered by general public genuine ignorance and/or apathy, leaving veterinary professionals in the privileged position to promote awareness about wildlife crime within the community.

Animals are presented to veterinary professionals because they provide medical assistance to injured animals but they can also identify and collect wildlife crime evidence and raise public awareness.

In the event of 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.

## WILDLIFE CRIME – SETTING THE SCENE

Wildlife crime is a global threat to biodiversity and the sustainable development of communities. Additionally, wildlife crime occurs whenever national or international laws and regulations in place to protect fauna and flora are broken (Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora [CITES]). By definition, wildlife crimes include taking, trading, importing, exporting, processing, possessing, obtaining and consuming wild fauna (Cooper et al, 2009).

International demand for rare and endangered species to be consumed as delicacies or used in traditional medicine poses a threat to exotic species. However, illicit exploitation of natural resources can also relate to animals such as hedgehogs, bats, and seals. Furthermore, non-selective killing resulting from traps and poisoned baits jeopardises wildlife survival and environment preservation.

Environmental, cultural, economic and social factors dictate wildlife crimes around the globe. In many countries, wildlife products are perceived as essential goods like food and medicines but, no matter what drives this behaviour, killing protected species is illegal.

Many species are protected by international treaties such as CITES and the Bern Convention. This is augmented by local wildlife legislation in individual countries. In Ireland, the main legislation concerning conservation of wildlife is defined by the Wildlife Act (1976) amended by the Wildlife Act 2000, Wildlife Act 2010 and more recently by the Wildlife Act 2012.

European Union legislation also regulates wildlife protection through European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 and European Communities (Restrictions on use of Poison Bait) Regulations 2010.

Wildlife crimes are frequently perceived as victimless crimes that are reported when commercial value and/or personal loss are involved. Not all wild species are equally valued, which means that more public attention is given to crimes concerning animals that carry commercial value. Interestingly, many wildlife victims are collateral casualties of the very same commercial interests that promoted poaching. Predators at the top of the wildlife food chain continue to be relentlessly persecuted to protect game despite being near extinction. These crimes hinder the effort put into conserving these vulnerable and all too often rare species.

## WILDLIFE CRIME IN IRELAND

Wildlife crime in Ireland concerns mainly native species, although illegal trade in items of international concern may occur.

Irish native birds of prey, for example, are systematically killed to protect commercial pheasant stocks that are an intensively bred non-native species. Likewise, nests and eggs are being destroyed because peregrine falcons are perceived as a threat to racing pigeons.

This has catastrophic consequences for their breeding success and future generations. Illegal traps and poisoned



Dead, poisoned Peregrine Falcon at Carroll's Cross quarry  
©Brian Duffy



**Figure 2: Stupefied sparrowhawk after killing poisoned pigeon at Cappagh. It also died soon afterwards.**  
©Brian Duffy

baits that are continually used to catch and kill adult birds also pose a threat to other species like domestic animals. Predators such as pine martens and otters have also been hunted to critically low numbers throughout Ireland mainly because of their fur and predator potential. The removal of a major predator from the ecosystem allows a minor predator to take a new role with greater impact (mesopredator release); this has been well documented in Ireland by the increased number of mink while the number of otters decreased as they were hunted as a pastime and with the intention of preserving fish stocks. The relationship between individual species' populations and survival is much more complex than most realise or understand.

Another example of wildlife crime in Ireland, for many the most baffling of wildlife crimes, concerns badgers, often breeding females, that are dug from their setts and either savaged by dogs or taken captive. These 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. Then bets are placed and money changes hands in an atmosphere of cruelty and status.



**Figure 4: Lurcher chasing hare.** ©Maurice Eakin



**Figure 3: Snared badger.** ©Dan Donoher

Unsurprisingly, this kind of crime often takes place in a wider criminal context.

The list of Irish wildlife crime victims also includes bats that are commonly found in the roofs and eaves of residential homes. Bats can be found on draughty ruins and gothic churches, nevertheless most species prefer the comfort and security provided by modern housing. Irish bats are harmless insect eaters, yet demonised and disliked by many who do not relish them as tenants. According to legislation, bats and their roosts can only be disturbed by someone with a licence. Not all wildlife crime is as blatant or overt. The impact of human activity and development can't be overlooked as it has detrimental consequences for the species that share the environment. Demolishing buildings and other structures that shelter protected species is a crime against wildlife. Human activity and development endangers wildlife that is only protected to the extent of public awareness of the legislation.

#### IRISH VETS ON THE FRONT LINE

Veterinary professionals are on the front line when it comes



**Figure 5: Hare deaths.** ©Maurice Eakin

to wildlife casualties as their encounters with possible wildlife crime may range from a member of the public presenting a wildlife casualty for attention, to a request to treat a dog with suspicious injuries.

It is widely accepted that wildlife crime in Ireland is underreported 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 suspecting animal cruelty can't always be applied; the law permits dogs to hunt and kill a fox but not an otter or badger, for example. Frequently, wildlife offences are committed by individuals with criminal connections who 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?

Genuine ignorance and apathy certainly exists among the general public but there is often little incentive to report wildlife crime apart from caring about animals. Wildlife crime is a relatively obscure area of law enforcement and rarely a priority.

However, in 2013, the Veterinary Laboratory Service of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the State Laboratory and the NPWS acknowledged the importance of wildlife crime in Ireland and created a protocol for investigation of deaths of Irish birds of prey and other wildlife species.

To summarise, this national scheme to monitor mortality in wildlife aims to collect evidence to support prosecutions for illegal poisoning, monitor the impact of poisoning on Irish raptor populations, monitor the incidence and impact of poisoning on other vulnerable species, monitor the incidence of poisoning in species vulnerable to secondary poisoning by rodenticides (barn owl and kestrel, for example), monitor the impact of other types of persecution on Irish raptors and maintain a database, provide evidence of the causes of death of other wildlife species where poison is strongly suspected, and finally quantify the use of specific poisons. During 2011, alachloralose, nitroxylin, carbofuran and brodifacoum were the main four poisons implicated in the deaths of birds of prey.

While alachloralose is only registered and approved in Ireland for the control of mice, nitroxylin is an active ingredient in flukicides, and brodifacoum is a second-generation anticoagulant rodenticide that is regularly linked with primary and secondary poisoning of wildlife. Interestingly, carbofuran, which is highly lethal, has been banned in Europe since 2008 (Bird of Prey Poisoning and Persecution Report 2011, 2013).

In the context of our day-to-day life, sometimes we come across reasons to suspect the commission of a crime. 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.

After all, those of us who advocate for animals have a responsibility to report crimes committed against them.

However, in some delicate situations, the sensitivities of client confidentiality may pose a dilemma for veterinary professionals. Some feel that there is a need for Irish veterinary authorities (Veterinary Council of Ireland [VCI] or Veterinary Ireland [VI]) to provide clarification for veterinarians regarding balancing the obligations of reporting suspected wildlife crime cases and client confidentiality.

In the event of suspecting a wildlife crime, the NPWS and An Garda Síochána are the institutions to contact as their role is to pursue wildlife crime prosecutions. NPWS conservation field rangers play the key role by contributing valuable expert knowledge and experience to investigation, evidence gathering and prosecutions, and your local NPWS ranger can provide advice and guidance on reporting wildlife crime. Furthermore, an online Irish wildlife crime website ([www.wildlifecrime.ie](http://www.wildlifecrime.ie)) contains basic information on wildlife crime, links to further information, advice on recognising and recording a wildlife crime, and, most importantly, contact details for reporting a wildlife crime (<http://wildlifecrime.ie/pages/Reporting.htm>).

Members of the public presenting casualties for treatment should also be encouraged to report any suspicious incidents to the authorities.

### SCIENCE IN SERVICE TO WILDLIFE PRESERVATION

Ultimately, it is important to emphasise how technological developments have contributed many tools to assist in wildlife crime investigation such as acoustic traps, mobile technology, drones, radio frequency identification tags, encrypted data digital networks, camera traps, DNA testing, radio collars, metal scanners and satellite imagery (Cress and Zommers, 2014). However, the same technology is exploited by criminals and, notably, the internet facilitates wildlife crime and provides an international online market. Fortunately, advances in information and communication technology have also raised public awareness on important topics such as prevention, detection and eradication of wildlife crime through crime mapping, the use of satellites and crimes databases respectively (WHO, 2012).

Accurate data relating to wildlife crime need to be collected and analysed in order to develop prevention strategies and evaluate the impact and efficacy of policy, legislation and enforcement programmes. Promoting quality research is an essential component to strengthen science. Diagnostic surveys of illegal activities can be effective tools to estimate their magnitude, procedures employed, and the motivation behind the offenders and enforcers of wildlife crime. Relevant information from these surveys should be widely disseminated; to combat wildlife crime the veterinarian professionals' role in the collection, analysis and dissemination of data is critical.

Tackling an activity that generates global revenue of €18bn-€24bn per year (IEEP, 2016) may pose a big challenge in modern times but combined efforts can make the difference: take the first step by being vigilant!

### REFERENCES AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

# READER QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

## 1. I AM A VET OR A VET NURSE, HOW CAN I IDENTIFY A WILDLIFE CRIME?

Wildlife crime occurs when animal mortality or injury is human-inflicted and/or there is physical evidence suggesting potentially illegal human activity (eg. poison, snares, cartridge cases). In Ireland, birds, bats, badgers, hares, deer, seals and cetaceans are frequently targeted. Trading wildlife and CITES protected species is also considered wildlife crime; breeding, releasing or allow the escape of non-native species is also against the law. Cutting or destroying vegetation during the bird-nesting season and habitat destruction are also crimes.

## 2. I SUSPECT WILDLIFE CRIME, WHAT SHOULD I DO NEXT?

To report any suspected wildlife crime, contact National Parks & Wildlife (NPWS) on (01) 888 2000. Contact An Garda Síochána if a crime or incident is taking place at the moment or if anyone is in immediate danger (999 or 112).

## 3. A DOG PRESENTING SEVERE LESIONS COMPATIBLE WITH ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES WITH BADGERS CAME TO MY PRACTICE. THE OWNER TRIED TO EXPLAIN BUT I AM NOT CONVINCED. HOW SHOULD I PROCEED?

If you suspect any illegal practice just contact the NPWS or/and An Garda Síochána. They will be able to guide you accordingly.

## 4. WHAT INFORMATION WILL I RECORD FOR REPORTING A WILDLIFE CRIME?

- Record the date and time;
- Record the transport – do this as soon as possible, as suspects can be traced from the registration number;
- Record the person;
- Record the scene;
- Record the location; and
- Even if in doubt, take a photograph and email it to the NPWS at [nature.conservation@ahg.gov.ie](mailto:nature.conservation@ahg.gov.ie)

## 5. HOW IMPORTANT IS MY ROLE IN TACKLING WILDLIFE CRIME?

Veterinary professionals are in a privileged position to promote awareness within the community. Frequently animals are presented to veterinary professionals; their role is essential not only because they provide medical assistance to injured animals but also because they can identify and collect wildlife crime evidence, and raise public awareness about wildlife crime.

## 6. I FOUND A LIVE BIRD THAT I SUSPECT HAS BEEN POISONED. HOW SHOULD I PROCEED TO COLLECT EVIDENCE?

The first faecal droppings to be passed should be collected and sent via NPWS for testing at the Regional Veterinary Laboratory. If you are in the least bit suspicious of illegal activity, contact the NPWS ranger operating in your area and he/she will be able to assist you accordingly. For further recording and reporting advice see [www.wildlifecrime.ie](http://www.wildlifecrime.ie)