

Call of the wild

Dangerous and exotic pets are becoming more prevalent in the UK and officers can find the most unlikely creatures lurking in an ordinary garden shed. Helen Gilbert reports.

When firearms officers from Warwickshire Police were called to search a house in the middle of the night in relation to a firearms offence, the last thing they expected to stumble across in the garden shed was a 5ft snapping crocodile. But they did. So how did they deal with the situation? They promptly closed the shed door and contacted the force wildlife crime officer Craig Fellowes.

more and more dangerous or exotic pets,” he says. “The internet has opened up a new world of trade for exotic pet dealers. It has made the buying and selling of all the world’s animals a click of the mouse away, without any regard for the method they were caught or danger they are in.”



Photography: Animal Reception Centre

Dangerous: more people are selling endangered species

“On examination in daylight we confirmed that the croc was alive and in a rather elaborate garden shed with heat lamps and its own small pool,” explains Mr Fellowes. “The heat lamp was turned off to allow the croc to become less aggressive. We returned 24 hours later to catch the croc and take it to a wildlife park up North. The croc, nicknamed Clive, was imported from Germany having originated from South America.”

Such incidents involving exotic or dangerous animals appear to be on the rise, according to Andy Long, Essex Police wildlife crime co-ordinator. He discovered a green bush viper and a 5ft diamond back rattlesnake – both highly venomous – after executing a search warrant on an address in Basildon. The resident was trying to sell endangered species.

“I believe it is a trend amongst Essex residents to own

“Of course there is always the theft element,” he adds. “With a tortoise costing £200, for example, it is the same retail value to a criminal as an Ipod or Wii.”

Mr Fellowes agrees: “We have seen an increase in the desire to own more and more exotic pets. I believe this is partly driven by people watching wildlife programmes, but also money. Some exotics fetch good sums of money and that drives the trade.”

Rob Quest, manager of the City of London’s Animal Reception Centre based at Heathrow Airport – which often assists forces with incidents – described the internet as a big driver and difficult to police. “Last year there was a parcel addressed to a guy in Essex. In the parcel was a box with a puff adder and gaboon viper, both lethal, nasty snakes. People go on the internet and say ‘send us £50 and we will send you snakes in the post’. There was one incident of a



Top: Dwarf Crocodile

would recommend the course to any officer who performs a role that may require them to become involved in such situations.”

The day course, run by Mr Quest, Bob Wingate, animal health inspector is at the at the Department of Environmental Services Animal Reception Centre, and assistant manager Tristan Bradfield. Classroom sessions on how to handle birds and reptiles are provided as is a comprehensive booklet, which explains handling methods, and outlines the diseases – known as zoonoses – which can be passed from animals to man. A certificate of attendance is also awarded.

According to Mr Wingate officers should never physically handle an animal. “We teach them how to handle using equipment. There are ways to handle them without touching them and you can use stuff that’s in the house. A broom and dustbin [are good for snakes] a dustpan and brush and plastic boxes [are good for scorpions and spiders]. You can throw a towel over something. It’s good to stop a beak of a parrot. It takes the force out of the bite.”

The centre, which has operated for more than 20 years, is the live animal Border Inspection Post at Heathrow Airport. It is open 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year



Tigers: exotic animals should only be handled by professionals



Special facilities: dedicated wing for birds

teenager importing dangerous scorpions.”

And Mr Quest says there are also cases of criminals hiding drug stashes in the tanks with the animals. So with such incidents on the rise, how can officers prepare for these exotic encounters? The rule of thumb is to not touch the animals and call in the force wildlife officer who will have the knowledge and experience to handle the situation.

According to Hampshire Constabulary’s country watch sergeant Louise Hubble, it is not feasible financially and in terms of abstraction rates, to train every officer in animal handling. Instead, her force has trained six officers who can assist other departments when the need arises. She explains: “The officers attended the Animal Handling Course run at the Animal Reception Centre, Heathrow... It has provided them with the necessary skills and confidence to deal with these animals/birds safely and I

and receives and cares for millions of animals ranging from tarantulas to cobras and race horses to tigers.

Facilities include four reptile and amphibian holding rooms, a wing dedicated to birds, dog and cat holding facilities and an operating theatre for animals that have become sick during their journey. Forces also call on centre staff to attend incidents and in some cases the animals are temporarily housed at the centre. Recently the Met Police called the centre to report a wriggling sack in a Sutton phone box. “It was a spectacled caiman which is now here,” says Mr Wingate “If forces get anything like that they can phone us up.”

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