

Preying on criminals

Wildlife crime has been regarded in the past as a backwater when it comes to police activity but this image is rapidly changing. John Dean spent a morning with one of the country's longest-serving wildlife liaison officers.

 Selling a Sperm Whale tooth to flogging frog spawn on the international auction site eBay are some of the more unusual wildlife crimes PC Paul Henery has found himself dealing with.

PC Henery, from Northumberland Police, has been an officer for 17 years, the vast majority of which he has specialised in wildlife crime. Eleven years ago, the force appointed him as its only full-time wildlife officer.

It is a wide-ranging job but persecution of birds of prey tends to occupy much of his time. For instance, on the day I spend with him, a message is passed to PC Henery that a member of the public is believed to be shooting at red kite - a spectacular bird protected in law - in part of rural Northumberland.

For Northumbria Police's wildlife liaison officer, the information supports a growing body of evidence that the birds are in serious danger in that part of the county.

Red kite are one of the North East's success stories, recently reintroduced after an absence of more than a century and now starting to re-establish themselves.

The birds are carrion feeders, they do not hunt, so do not pose a threat to anyone's livestock, yet still they are persecuted.

Today begins with PC Henery putting in a call to the informant. Although the information is tantalising rather than conclusive, it is enough to strengthen the officer's dossier which is already being investigated.

Northumberland has some of the most persecuted birds in Britain: peregrines and merlins are



Credit: RSPB Scotland

Collectors target chicks as well as eggs

stolen by illegally-operating falconers, hen harriers are targeted because they threaten commercial grouse moors and Red Kite are shot at, or fall victim to poison left for other creatures.

Although buzzards rarely take anything larger than a rabbit they are still subject to the onslaught with regular reports of them being shot at and poisoned.

Then there are the illegal egg collectors, targeting not just birds of prey but taking clutches from a wide range of species, sometimes to sell but more usually to add to personal collections.

For many years, the police service has not prioritised such incidents, PC Henery says, the main reason being that they are not recordable crimes. Clear up a burglary and it comes off the crime figures, solve a wildlife crime and it doesn't.

Although wildlife crime is still not a recordable crime, the

Government has now made it a recordable incident, so that the public can see how many offences are cleared up. In addition, Richard Brunstrom, ACPO lead on wildlife issues and chief constable of North Wales Police, is raising its profile nationwide.

Nationally, although it is difficult to get the full picture in terms of figures, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) published a report, *Birdcrime*, in 2004, which recorded 481 confirmed or alleged incidents against wild birds, including many against birds of prey.

The annual Customs Service review for 2005 showed that they had seized 7,846 live birds and animals, 332,043 animal parts and 192 ivory objects.

Northumbria Police's own approach has long been an enlightened one, prepared to allow a full-time officer to concentrate on inquiries which are often

protracted and sometimes do not come to fruition.

PC Henery, who has the support of eight officers who do wildlife liaison on a part-time basis, said: 'The profile of wildlife crime is being raised and the move towards recordable incidents means that the police service can quantify wildlife crime, which allows accurate decision-making when forces come to setting priorities.'

To strengthen that process, the Government's Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) has set three main law enforcement priorities.

Protecting birds of prey is a major one but there are others, including the protection of bats.

The second JNCC area is breaches of CITES (Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species). Northumbria does not come across many incidents but the officer has been

investigating the use of the eBay auction site to sell proscribed items. Some items are used in oriental medicine, others as trophies. One recent prosecution involved the sale of Sperm Whale teeth.

PC Henery said: 'E-Bay is a growth area in wildlife crime with people trying to advertise animal parts on the site. A lot of leads involve eBay and I have issued cautions. Some cases are people selling items without knowing they are not allowed - I cautioned a woman selling frog spawn and publicised the incident to get the message across. But the bad guys are trying to use eBay as well.'

But for PC Henery, the third main area identified by JNCC is his biggest concern, persecution of birds of prey, particularly the hen harrier.

The hen harrier is the most endangered of all of them, according to PC Henery. A moorland bird with a liking for red grouse, it finds itself heavily persecuted, either shot or with nests destroyed.

PC Henery was joint launch co-ordinator of the national Operation Artemis, set up recently to crack down on the number of incidents involving hen harriers.

'National priorities are reflected in Northumbria and one of our main regional priorities is the hen harrier, which is the most persecuted bird of prey in the country. 'We should have a healthy population of hen harriers in our area, this year we had none. When I started as a full-time wildlife liaison officer in 1994 we had six nesting hen harriers.'

But, as with other birds of prey, the difficulty is obtaining enough evidence to prosecute: indeed, there has only been one prosecution for hen harrier persecution in Britain.

PC Henery explained: 'We have tried everything in our area, covert surveillance, overt patrols using the mounted section, raiding suspects' houses but there is not enough evidence to bring a case.'

The reason such cases are so difficult is illustrated by his first visit of the morning. A member of the public has phoned in from one of the district's towns, having seen



Credit: RSPB Scotland

a man alight from a van carrying a dead rabbit with its legs tied together.

PC Henery contacts the witness, who says he fears the bird was laced with poison before being dumped in a large field and that birds might be the target.

Although on this occasion, the information proves too inconclusive, PC Henery knows that such reports can lead to tragic circumstances, as it did with one of his most high-profile recent cases, the poisoning of a red kite.

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For PC Henery, such incidents illustrate why his job is so challenging. He said: 'Persecution of wildlife like birds of prey presents difficult problems. If you take a burglary, it usually happens where there are a lot of people, there may be witnesses, there may be evidence in the property, and there may be a car registration you can follow up. The burglar is trespassing and has no legitimate reason to be in the house.'

'But when it comes to bird of prey persecution, they usually happen in remote areas, on pri-

vate land. There is little chance of a witnesses and little forensic evidence. You might have local suspects but they were people who probably had a legitimate reason to be on the land.'

But he pursues the cases all the same, pointing out that they could lead to something bigger. He believes badger baiting - he has taken forward successful prosecutions for illegal disturbance of setts - is a crime which reinforces the reason wildlife offences should be taken seriously.

Many wildlife criminals are also involved in other serious offences, drug trafficking and violence among them. Arrest a wildlife criminal and you might have collared a well-known villain.

PC Henery said: 'It is a sadistic offence. These people take pleasure in inflicting cruelty. These people are potential serial killers, they may be wife-beaters, they are into serious crime, they are prepared to use violence in their daily lives and they have a lack of respect for animal and human life.'

There is another reason he believes wildlife crimes cases are important, even though investigations may take a long time.

PC Henery, who says the number of prosecutions he brings in a year is 'in the tens', says each one acts as a deterrent.

And sometimes it leads to changes in the law. One unsuccessful case about the wrong use of a trap was dismissed on a technicality which has now been changed.

For PC Henery, who is also an award-winning wildlife and landscape artist, it adds up to a rewarding job.

He said: 'I have had a lifelong interest in wildlife. The force cannot teach that, they cannot teach the difference between a magpie and an eagle. They cannot teach ecology. They can teach the law but wildlife liaison officers need that natural interest in the subject. When a case is lost, it is heart-breaking because you know how much work went into it but when you get a successful prosecution it is pennies from heaven.'



Cracking the crimes of egg collectors

Possibly the best example of the growing impact of wildlife crime investigation is the way it has changed the methods used by Britain's illegal birds' egg collectors.

They are being forced to ply their trade abroad following a series of successful operations directed against them in the UK by police and wildlife investigators.

According to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and police wildlife liaison officers, the number of active egg collectors has reduced dramatically since they started to be jailed. Several have been sent to prison in recent years.

Guy Shorrocks, senior investigative officer for the RSPB, said: 'You can lecture people about the immorality of what they do all the time but the biggest deterrent is being caught. There has certainly been an increased effort, there has been more enforcement, prosecutions have been brought and there are less egg collectors operating.'

PC Henery is another investigator who has seen a reduction. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which amended the Wildlife and Countryside Act, allows courts to impose a jail sentence of up to six months.

In 2001, his investigation resulted in the country's first egg collector being jailed under the new legislation.

The 41-year-old from Blyth, Northumberland was sent to prison for four months by magistrates, after he admitted possessing three goshawk eggs, four goosander eggs, and possessing, with intent to commit an offence, a tin with compartments for eggs.

PC Phil Briggs, a wildlife liaison officer with Strathclyde Police, in Scotland, said: 'Although egg theft appears to be on the decrease throughout Scotland and the UK, there will always be a hard core of criminals that will continue to carry out this type of crime.'