

Wildlife Crime in Scotland 2022 – Data Sources and Methodology

This document sets out information on the data compiled in the Wildlife Crime in Scotland 2022 report, including where the data comes from, how it is collected and quality assured, and supporting notes and definitions.

Information is also provided on how statistics from different data sources require caution in terms of direct comparability.

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1. Data sources

Organisation/data source	Information used in this report
Recorded Crime statistics: Scottish Government statistical output derived from Police Scotland's recorded crime database	Numbers of wildlife crimes recorded (see definitions) by crime classification.
Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) operational database	Number of cases reported to COPFS and associated case outcomes.
Criminal Proceedings Statistics, Scottish Government	Number of people proceeded against and those with a conviction. Types of punishment issued in courts.
Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture (SASA)	Wildlife DNA forensic cases. Pesticide abuse incidents including bird of prey poisoning data.
Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)	Wildlife cases examined by SRUC Veterinary Services which were suspected to have been the result of criminal activity.
NatureScot (formerly known as Scottish National Heritage)	Freshwater pearl mussel (FWPM) incidents. Health of the species (supporting document).
National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU)	Wildlife crime intelligence logs summary.
Scottish Society for Protection of Cruelty to Animals (Scottish SPCA)	Summary of Scottish SPCA Investigations.
Police Scotland, data derived from Police Scotland's recorded crime database	Disaggregated recorded crime data by species, type of wildlife crime.

2. Data collection and quality assurance

Data are obtained from a range of sources and come from Scottish Government directorates and other organisations, as detailed above.

Analysts from the Scottish Government Rural & Environmental Science and Analytical Services division request data from these organisations then carry out a range of quality assurance checks and resolve any subsequent queries with the data provider before compiling the statistics.

Quality assurance checks included:

- checking for any marked changes in trends;
- comparing data with previous publications to identify significant revisions;
- checking tables sum correctly;
- where multiple tables are provided, checking for internal consistency (e.g. totals match); and
- investigating any possible inconsistencies between data from different sources.

3. Definitions and further information about data sources

3.1 Definition of wildlife crime

The report uses the following definition of wildlife crime, as agreed by the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime (PAW) Scotland in 2010.

"Wildlife crime is any unlawful act or omission, which affects any wild creature, plant or habitat, in Scotland."

3.2 Recorded crime classifications

Recorded crime data is provided by the Scottish Government Justice Analytical Services division and is extracted from the data used to produce annual official statistics on [Recorded Crime in Scotland](#). However, the definition used in this publication for wildlife crimes differs from the "wildlife offences" category in the Recorded Crime in Scotland statistics. In particular, the crime classifications in this publication exclude some crime classifications that are unlikely to relate to wildlife (e.g. "Pet and kept animals", "Cruelty to dogs") and include some offences categorised in Recorded Crime in Scotland as "environmental offences" (e.g. Salmon and freshwater fisheries offences").

Wildlife Crime in Scotland 2022 includes the following Recorded Crime in Scotland "wildlife offences":

- Birds, offences involving
- Hunting with dogs
- Cruelty to wild animals
- Offences involving badgers
- Other wildlife offences
- Possession of salmon or trout unlawfully obtained
- Possession of salmon or trout as result of offence
- Poaching and game laws
- Deer (S) Offences

The following crime classifications are included within Record Crime in Scotland "wildlife offences" figures but are excluded from Wildlife Crime in Scotland 2022 recorded crime figures:

- Cruelty to animals (ex dogs) inc killing and maiming cattle
- Rabies Orders
- Animals, offences involving (ex dogs, birds elsewhere classified)
- Pet and kept animals
- Cruelty to dogs
- Protection of livestock from dogs
- Guard Dogs Act 1975
- Dogs bred for fighting
- Keeping dogs under prop control, contravention of an order
- Dogs, other offences

In addition, Wildlife Crime in Scotland 2022 includes the following Recorded Crime in Scotland “environmental offences”:

- Salmon and freshwater fisheries offences
- Other conservation offences

3.3 Notes and definitions for Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) data

- The information provided was compiled on 30 August 2023.
- At the stage of preparing this report, there remained a number of court cases pending trial.
- The figures reflect current Scottish Government offence categories.
- The figures relate to cases in which at least one statutory wildlife offence was reported to COPFS. The figures may also include those reported as animal welfare offences only or in which a common law offence with a wildlife element has been reported, such as breach of the peace or culpable and reckless conduct.
- The figures represent the number of cases reported and their outcomes but where cases have been combined, only one is counted. A case may relate to multiple incidents and to multiple accused persons.
- Where cases involve more than one accused person and the outcome for each person is different, they are counted at the level of the highest outcome only. For example if one person is acquitted while another is convicted, the case is shown as a conviction.
- Cases which contain several charges falling into different categories are listed only once. In most cases, the category will reflect the most significant wildlife offence reported to COPFS by the investigating agency but in some the category may be adjusted to take account of the prosecution of a more appropriate charge or of the conviction recorded.
- Since 2012, the poaching of game birds has been an offence under section 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and is now categorised as "Birds, offences involving".
- Offences involving the poaching of mammals may be included in the categories “Hunting with Dogs”, “Cruelty to wild animals”, “Deer” or “Other wildlife offences” depending on the circumstances and the charges reported or prosecuted.
- Alternatives to prosecution include conditional offers by the Procurator Fiscal (“fiscal fines” etc. under section 302 of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995) which have been accepted, or deemed to have been accepted, by the accused and also warning letters.
- COPFS uses a live operational database and the information contained within it is structured accordingly. Information provided may therefore be subject to change as our systems are updated for operational reasons.
- A 'conviction' is where a case involving a wildlife offence has been prosecuted and at least one accused in the case has pleaded guilty to or been found guilty of at least one offence having an element which directly relates to a relevant wildlife offence.
- Further information on prosecutorial decision making is available in the [COPFS Prosecution Code](#).

3.4 Notes regarding Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Scottish SPCA) Special Investigations Unit (SIU) cases reported to COPFS

The SIU report cases directly to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS). As a result, any crimes or suspected crimes investigated solely by the Scottish SPCA, will not appear in the Police recorded crime statistics. If reported for prosecution however, they will be included in the COPFS figures and those cases will have been given a Scottish Criminal Records Office (SCRO) number.

3.5 Notes regarding people prosecuted in Scottish courts for wildlife crimes

Although a single court proceeding can involve a number of different offences, it should be noted that Criminal Proceedings statistics only report on the 'main charge'. Unless otherwise stated, proceedings and convictions for wildlife crimes referred to in this section are for when the wildlife crime was the main charge in a single court proceeding. For example, if a shotgun offence receives a higher penalty than a wildlife offence in the same proceeding, the shotgun offence would be counted, not the wildlife offence.

3.6 Notes regarding National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) intelligence logs

The National Wildlife Crime Unit has a dedicated intelligence function. All intelligence relating to wildlife crime in Scotland is gathered by the NWCU and researched on a weekly basis to identify emerging trends and to prepare tactical and strategic analysis.

It should be noted that an intelligence log is not a detected crime but a tool for police to use to establish a bigger picture of what is happening in a given area. A single incident may generate a number of pieces of intelligence. Intelligence logs cannot be used to (a) directly compare year on year or (b) comment on long term trends, as they are reviewed on a yearly basis and deleted if grounds for inclusion for policing purposes no longer exist. As a result, the number of intelligence logs for any given year decreases over time.

3.7 Notes regarding data on offences by wildlife crime priority area

Some types of wildlife crimes (relating to badgers, bats, trade in endangered species, freshwater pearl mussels, poaching and coursing and raptor persecution) are designated as being "priority areas" for Police Scotland and other stakeholders involved in wildlife crime. Priority areas indicate a specific species or specific area of wildlife crime, whereas the 'classifications' reported under the recorded crime statistics refer to broader, more general categories of crime (e.g. "cruelty to wild animals", "birds, offences involving", "other wildlife offences" etc). Wildlife priority areas and wildlife crime classifications may not always match or align.

Given the interest in these priority areas, it is important to be able to report offences at this level. To enable this, Police Scotland provide further detailed analysis to allow these areas to be separately identified from within the broader crime classifications of recorded crime data. This is done by looking at record-level recorded crime data (“disaggregated data”) which, in addition to the crime classification, includes a “synopsis of crime” for each offence. Using this information, Police Scotland then identify offences which can be identified as relating to specific priority areas. Where the offence does not relate to a priority area (or that cannot be determined), the offence is categorised as “not related to priority area”.

Although data is drawn from the same source (Police Scotland's recorded crime database), there is a **slight difference between the total numbers of records** in the disaggregated data (295) used to report on priority areas and the aggregated data used in the recorded crime section of the report (286). One difference is due to timing - the recorded crime statistics are extracted at the same time every year and are not back-revised following any updates or changes, whereas the priority area figures are drawn from a later snapshot of the ‘live’ system. This means that the total offences noted in the record crime statistics and wildlife crime priority areas, and any sub-totals by crime type, may be slightly different due to the timing differences. Classifications of offences may also be subject to change following further review.

Crime classifications under recorded crime only use one classification for the purposes of reporting, even if other classification or areas of wildlife might also be applicable to that crime. The disaggregated data includes 11 records where the classification of the crime was not one of the wildlife crime classifications used in the recorded crime figures, but Police Scotland had identified a wildlife crime element from the additional detailed information about the offence. These offences nevertheless related to a priority area and so were included in the priority area numbers.

Even where more specific wildlife crime classifications are used, there still may be differences between the total offences recorded by ‘crime classification’ and the total offences by ‘priority area’. For example, in the recorded crime section of the report, there are 10 offences in 2021-22 in the “badgers” category which equates to offences where the crime was recorded in the classification “offences involving badgers”. However, in the priority areas section of the report, there are 13 badger persecution offences in 2021-22. In addition to offences which were recorded in the “offences against badgers” classification, this figures includes some offences involving badgers which were recorded under other, more general, crime classifications (e.g. “cruelty to animals ex dogs incl killing and maiming cattle”), but which nevertheless involved persecution of badgers and therefore were recorded under the ‘badgers’ priority area total.

The most marked difference is seen for “hunting with dogs”. In the priority areas section of the report, “hunting with dogs” (an additional breakdown) includes a considerable number of offences where the recorded crime classification noted in the database was not “hunting with dogs”. Instead, one of the more general classifications (e.g. “other wildlife offences”, “cruelty to wild animals”) was used, but from additional information it was identified that the offence related to hunting with dogs. This contrasts with the recorded crime section of the report, where “hunting

with dogs” data only includes offences where the offence was recorded under the “hunting with dogs” crime classification.

3.8 Comparing data sources: Police Scotland, COPFS and Criminal Proceedings

Information on wildlife crimes, cases, prosecution and penalties is obtained from Police Scotland, COPFS and Criminal Proceedings in Scottish Courts. While the criminal justice IT systems associated with these data sources have common standards in terms of classifying crimes and penalties, care should be taken when comparing the different sets of statistics.

Prosecutions may not happen or be concluded in the same year as a crime was recorded by Police Scotland. Timing is also an issue when comparing COPFS figures (which refer to prosecutions brought in respect of cases reported to COPFS in each financial year) and Criminal Proceedings statistics (which represent only prosecutions commenced and, of those, prosecutions concluded to the point of conviction, in each financial year).

In the Police Scotland recorded crime statistics, a single crime or offence recorded by the police may have more than one perpetrator. By comparison the court statistics measure individuals who are proceeded against, which may be for more than one crime. As outlined above, only the main charge in a prosecution is presented for criminal proceeding statistics. There is the possibility that the crime or offence recorded by Police Scotland may be altered e.g. when Police Scotland submit a report of alleged offending to COPFS, and COPFS may alter the charges during their case marking process, which makes it difficult to track crimes through the criminal justice process.

Additionally, crimes and offences alleged to have been committed by children less than 16 years old are not included in the criminal proceedings statistics as these are representative of activity in the adult courts. Young people are generally processed through the children's hearings system.