

October 2022

# Wildlife Crime in North Yorkshire

## Report Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide an assurance to the Police, Fire and Crime Panel that the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner is sufficiently holding the Chief Constable to account for the delivery of an effective police service, specifically in relation to rural crime prosecutions.

## Background

North Yorkshire is a largely rural area, and tackling rural crime is an important issue of focus for North Yorkshire Police. People who live in isolated rural areas can feel particularly vulnerable, which makes it extremely important that the police tackle rural crime, and the fear of crime, effectively.

The term 'Rural Crime' can mean any type of crime that occurs in a rural area, for example:

- Crimes involving farm equipment and livestock
- Crimes against small rural businesses
- Wildlife crime, such as the taking or illegal trapping of animals or birds
- Theft and damage on heritage sites and buildings
- Tourism crime, including offences committed on holiday sites and damage to beauty spots
- Serious and organised crime: remote locations can be attractive for organised crime groups
- Road safety offences, which affect the quality of life for rural residents.

'Wildlife Crime' can be defined as: *any action which contravenes current legislation governing the protection of wild animals and plants in the UK. This includes:*

- Poaching
- Hare coursing
- Illegal badger persecution including baiting, shooting, snaring, lamping, poisoning and the interference of badger sets
- Bat persecution
- Bird of prey persecution through poisoning, trapping, shooting, disturbance of nest and/or theft of chicks, egg theft / collection
- The trade in ivory, tortoises, and other protected species covered by CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) including caviar, traditional Chinese medicines, and orchids, and the non-registration of certain birds and animals that require licensing through DEFRA/Animal and Plant Health Agency if kept in captivity or sold.

The remit of wildlife crime does not include incidents involving domestic animals such as dogs (other than dogs being used to hunt mammals), cats, rabbits, etc and does not include wild animals that have been involved in road traffic accidents.

Some wildlife crime is also associated with wider criminality and is perpetrated by Serious and Organised Crime Groups.

Hare coursing has been illegal since 2005 along with poaching. In January 2022, the Government made a number of amendments into the Police, Crime Courts and Sentencing Bill (Police Bill) which introduced tougher sentencing and improved police powers to tackle the practice of chasing hares with dogs.

Wildlife crime has been identified as being an important issue to communities and emerged as a key theme following the public consultation for the statutory Police and Crime Plan for North Yorkshire.

## North Yorkshire Police Rural Task Force

North Yorkshire Police has a dedicated Rural Taskforce (RTF) and 41 Police Wildlife Crime Officers (WCOs). The RTF is one of the largest dedicated teams of its kind in the country.

WCOs have specialist knowledge and experience about rural and wildlife crime, enabling them to conduct investigations, plan and execute proactive operations, develop intelligence and promote crime prevention.

In November 2021 a new RTF operating model was introduced, enabling the team to focus on those offenders considered to be causing the 'highest harm' within specific communities. The model also enables the RTF to closely align with wider specialist teams to proactively deliver targeted intelligence led rural operations whilst also broadening the geographical reach of the RTF.

The RTF, which is available seven days per week, support Neighbourhood Policing Teams and Response Teams with crime reports and investigations and it also manages the majority of reported wildlife crime.

## Poaching

Poaching is a national rural and wildlife crime priority and the number one rural wildlife crime priority in North Yorkshire. The impact of poaching as a crime are vast and can include not only emotional distress, but damage to land and livelihoods. This crime is closely followed as a priority by the killing of birds of prey in North Yorkshire.

Historically there have been challenges experienced across Forces at a national level, in understanding police data in relation to poaching, due to the previous method of recording of incidents/crime, which used seven different 'incident codes'.

Over the past two-years, North Yorkshire Police has operated Operation Figaro which uses problem solving oriented responses to tackle poaching. These include Crime Prevention Warnings (CPWs), and Crime Prevention Notices (CPNs).

As an outcome of this activity, **crimes of poaching have been reduced by 32%** from poaching season (September to April) in 2021/22 when compared to 2020/21 as follows:

|                  | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul |
|------------------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| <b>2020-2021</b> | 142  | 227 | 202 | 162 | 143 | 81  | 93  | 43  | 50  | 12  | 20  |
| <b>2021-2022</b> | 141  | 176 | 114 | 92  | 92  | 86  | 25  | 16  | 15  | 14  | 26  |

## Activity and outcomes

### North Yorkshire Police

Notable policing activity includes:

- Proactive correspondence issued to all individuals in receipt of CPWs and CPNs, reminding them of the conditions contained within their warnings and notices
- Successful conviction for a poaching offender who has been operating at a national level
- Creation and implementation of an e-learning package on poaching, which is now mandatory for all front-line officers and those staff working in the Force Control Room
- Delivery of Wildlife Crime Officer (WCO) training in the Force Control Room alongside the introduction of new processes within that environment to enable more efficient and appropriate responses
- Additional drone capability for RTF
- Training of additional officers in the use of off-road motorcycles
- Development of a coordinated approach to tackling criminals as part of Operation Galileo which is the national proactive poaching patrol operation
- Contribution to Operation Seabird which focuses on the protection of marine wildlife on the East Coast
- Working in partnership with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the National Wildlife Crime Unit in response to the killing of birds of prey
- Securing Crimestoppers funding for specific campaign on 'poaching' and 'killing of birds of prey
- Working with local media to communicate about the work of, and outcomes generated by, the RTF
- Contributing to the development of a regional approach to CPWs and CPNs
- Implementation of WhatsApp groups to connect with rural communities. This was initially used as a six-month trial with Helmsley Mobile Rural Watch in December 2018. By the summer of 2019 the RTF started to expand its use across the county. It gradually grew impetus over the course of the next 12 months with new groups being added
- Preparation towards a new Wildlife and Rural Crime Strategy.

In terms of criminal justice outcomes for poaching, since the introduction of the Op Figaro process in early 2021, RTF activity has resulted in:

- 241 individuals have received warning letters
- 41 have received Criminal Behaviour Warnings (CBW's)
- 5 have now been issued Criminal Behaviour Notices
- 1 has been issued a Criminal Behaviour Order.

### Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner

Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner activity has included:

- Addressing delegates about rural crime at the Yorkshire Post Conference in 2022
- Lobbying for fairer funding because Forces in predominantly rural areas receive nearly a quarter less funding per head of population than those covering urban areas
- Working with the Government and decision makers to raise awareness about rural communities and their specific needs
- Working with the Criminal Justice System to raise awareness about rural communities and the impact of rural crime to individuals, families and businesses
- Securing nearly £720,000 from the national safer streets fund to help improve the safety of rural homes and farms
- Securing nearly £90,000 to help tackle stalking and harassment within rural communities.