

How to spot Persecution of Wildlife and What to do

RSPB have produced two reports recently called Peak Malpractice, which highlight the possible illegal persecution of wildlife in the Peak District. It is believed that such persecution has occurred in many areas of the Peak District including land owned by the National Trust. Gathering enough evidence for criminal prosecutions is extremely difficult, but we can help. I was recently involved in a wildlife protection incident and it wasn't clear to me what I should have done at the time and afterwards.

I will try to summarise the advice I received from the Police and RSPB, but before that I would like to stress that almost all the "wildlife management" activities that you are likely to see in the Peak District are legal and legitimate including the use of guns and traps. But there are boundaries that might be crossed which mean the law has been broken.

The Police and RSPB do want to know about anybody carrying guns near a known nest site of a protected bird – in our area mainly birds of prey such as Peregrines and Goshawks and Ravens and possibly the Hen Harrier. Deliberately disturbing protected species is illegal. The Police will take action if such incidents are reported, even if no shots were fired. Disturbance can involve merely being too near to nest sites, bird watchers sometimes inadvertently disturb birds by getting too close. In the past, use of off road motorcycles or quad bikes on moorland areas near breeding birds has been a tactic used to disturb / disrupt breeding activity.

In short if you witness any activity which to you seems unusual or suspicious both the Police and the RSPB want to know.

Derbyshire Police have dedicated wildlife crime officers, who will want you to give as much detail as possible of any incident, firstly of what happened, then other details such as the registration number of any vehicles and very detailed descriptions of any persons involved. Carry a mobile and report the incident straight away (if you can get a signal). Digital photos or pencil and paper to record other details are also useful.

You may also see several types of trap, most commonly a crow trap, which is the size of a greenhouse, made of wire mesh. These might be baited with a dead hare or with a live bird from the crow family (not Raven). These traps should have food and water in them. They can be legally used to trap Jackdaw, Crow, Rook, Magpie or Jay. If a Raven or bird of prey is seen in one of these traps it should be released, but you yourself may not be able to do this as the traps in this area are usually padlocked. If a live pigeon is seen in a crow trap, it is likely that the trap is being used to lure birds of prey, which is illegal. In this case report the grid reference of the trap to the Police and / or the RSPB who will probably look to secure evidence to support a prosecution.

Another commonly used trap in this area is a spring trap or fen trap, which looks like a mousetrap. These are usually found crossing waterways, on a silver birch log and covered in a wire mesh tunnel. If the trap is covered it is legal. Uncovered traps are sometimes seen on top of a wooden pole, where they are being used to illegally trap birds of prey. Wire snares are legal for trapping rabbits or foxes, as long as the traps are checked every 24 hours. Snares are illegal if used to trap a badger.

You may see Birds or animals contaminated with a pesticide or poison and left as bait – This is illegal. If you suspect poisoning do not touch the dead bird/animal. Poisons used tend to be commonly available, but in high concentrations and can be absorbed through the skin. Certain pesticides are toxic by inhalation so it is advisable to approach from up wind. A sign of poisoning is a dead bird next to a dead animal or the animal being in an unlikely situation, such as the top of a wall or summit of a hill. Another sign is a ring of dead flies around the poisoned animal. Report the grid reference to The Police and RSPB as soon as possible. Natural England run a scheme to identify poisons used and prosecutions can result from this analysis.

The National Trust owns Kinder and large areas of Bleaklow and Ladybower, generally around the inner edge of the watershed. The one recent case of a gamekeeper being prosecuted did occur on National Trust land, but the situation regarding the National Trust and shooting is complex. The National Trust acquired this land as the result of a bequest and the land came with shooting rights attached, which are in place until 2015. This means that the shooting tenants have rights to manage the heather and use any legal grouse moor management. This situation is very unusual for the National Trust – the high peak is the only upland estate owned by the Trust with shooting rights attached. Obviously the National Trust does have some influence and there is an agreement that gamekeepers will not shoot or harm Arctic Hares – I find it shocking that Arctic Hares have no legal protection whatsoever. So if you see any signs of Arctic Hares having been shot or poisoned, or a dog being used to hunt them, report this to National Trust management as soon as possible.

All of the things I've described happen in this area, but if you keep to the main paths and routes, you would never know. As fellrunners we go to out of the way places at odd times of day. We are ideally placed to help stamp out this type of illegal activity. Read RSPB's Peak Malpractice reports for more examples.

- At all times consider your personal safety, particularly if you decide to challenge the behaviour of any individual.
- If you speak to Estate Staff ask which estate they belong to and who is their shooting tenant / land agent. There is no harm in asking for names – although you may be refused.
- REMEMBER if there is a vehicle involved, get the registration number.
- If you find poison bait and / or what you believe may be an illegal trap, don't touch it, record a grid reference and description (and digital photograph if possible) and report it to the Police.

Bob Berzins

Contact Numbers:

Derbyshire Police Switchboard 0845 123 33 33 (ask for wildlife liaison officer)

Wildlife Liaison Officer direct line (Sergeant Darren Belfield) 01773 572 669

RSPB main office 01767 680 551

RSPB Investigations Officer 07803 241 452