



92% of the UK public believe protecting wildlife through legislation is important¹. But too often our wildlife laws are weak, outdated and needlessly complex.

What are the issues with our current wildlife laws?

- Some of our wildlife laws **date back to the early 1800s!** Many of these laws contain loopholes, inconsistencies and contradictions and are not fit for purpose today.
- Our wildlife laws are **spread across dozens of statutes**. This complicated patchwork of laws can be extremely difficult for enforcers to navigate, hampering their ability to secure successful prosecutions where crimes have been committed against wildlife.
- Even where a species is protected under law, **criminal activity sometimes persists with relative impunity**. The elements of some offences can be difficult to prove, meaning convictions are almost never secured. For example, the requirement to prove *intent* to inflict suffering can frustrate convictions under the Wild Mammals Protection Act 1996
- Many of the **species considered, by some, as ‘pests’ face inconsistent levels of welfare protection**. While some are covered by general licences there is often little oversight of how these animals are killed and others fall outside of any controls.
- Wildlife protection is a devolved matter, and **laws across the different countries of the UK have gradually diverged with some stronger in some countries than others**. This postcode lottery leaves many animals without the protection they deserve.
- Where individuals are convicted, the **available penalties are often too lenient**. For example those convicted of causing unnecessary suffering under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 could face a custodial sentence of up to five years, while the maximum sentence for similar offences under wildlife laws is six months.

Some of the main pieces of wildlife law

Night Poaching Act 1828
Game Act 1831
Poaching Prevention Act 1862
Ground Game Act 1880
Hare Preservation Act 1892
Destructive Imported Animals Act 1932
Prevention of Damage by Rabbits Act 1939
Pests Act 1954
Conservation of Seals Act 1970
Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (amended)
Deer Act 1991
Protection of Badgers Act 1992
Spring Traps Approval Order 1995
Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996
Conservation of Seals (England) Order 1999
Hunting Act 2004
Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017
Humane Trapping Standards (England and Wales) Regulations 2019

How are weak laws harming wildlife?

There are countless tragic consequences of inadequate wildlife laws, including:

- **Snares:** Banned in Scotland and Wales, these cruel devices remain legal in England and cause wild animals and pets, who are often caught indiscriminately, to suffer. Animals can suffer serious injury, including deep wounds caused by wire, or die from strangulation as they attempt to free themselves when caught by the neck.

¹RSPCA's 2024 Kindness Index <https://www.rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/latest/kindnessindex/annual/report2024>

- **Hare coursing and shooting:** When chased by packs of dogs, hares suffer extreme stress, running for their lives to the point of complete exhaustion and collapse. Hare coursing was banned in 2004 and although additional protection was introduced in 2022, successful prosecutions are still rare and penalties are minimal. The extremely outdated Hares Preservation Act 1892 means that hares can also be shot year round, including when pregnant or nursing their dependent young.
- **Badger baiting:** Despite this 'sport' being banned in 1835 badgers are still being dug out of their setts and thrown to dogs to be ripped apart. Badger diggers do so with relative impunity, because it can be extremely challenging to successfully prosecute under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992, (for instance, it must be proven that a badger sett was active) and penalties are minimal. On top of the horrific suffering endured by the badgers, the dogs are sometimes bitten so severely they suffer significant permanent injuries.
- **Pigeons, magpies** and other birds are being trapped, wounded and shot inhumanely by the public under 'general licences' (often due to lack of enforcement of a requirement that killing is a last resort) , simply because they are labelled as pest species. Other successful but invasive species, such as **grey squirrels**, are being caught with no licensing requirement, which has led to them being killed in inhumane ways, including being drowned.
- **No welfare protection for 'vermin':** despite being recognised as sentient, outdated 1950s 'Pests' legislation means that spring traps for mice, rats and moles are not required to be tested for humaneness. This means that it is legal to make and sell weak spring traps that effectively squeeze the animals to death, rather than killing them outright.

What needs to change?

In 2015 the Law Commission reviewed wildlife law and recommended a major overhaul and a new single statute. Picking this up, we are calling on the UK Government to conduct a full review of wildlife law with a view to **consolidating and updating this complex collection of statutes into one Wildlife Act with animal welfare placed at the heart of it**. In addition to delivering much-needed clarity for enforcers, this Act could:

1. Strengthen penalties for crimes against wildlife, in line with sentences for other animal welfare offences
2. Introduce new ethical principles for licensing of wildlife management, centred on the precautionary principle
3. Ban both the use *and* sale of cruel traps, including glue traps and wire snares, to bring England in line with Scotland and Wales
4. Better protect wildlife from development where it threatens animals' habitats
5. Ensure offences cover circumstances where wildlife is harmed by reckless or negligent behaviour.

We're also asking the Government to:

1. Make wildlife crimes notifiable and recordable, to improve analysis and prevention
2. Increase funding to help tackle wildlife crime, including the National Wildlife Crime Unit, ensuring that training on wildlife law is available to all enforcers.

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