

Incidents of confirmed bird of prey poisoning in the UK (2009-23)

March 2024

RSPB Investigations



January 2022, White-tailed Eagle (G408) found poisoned in Dorset. Toxicology tests show that the bird had ingested seven times the lethal dose of the rodenticide Brodifacoum.

The RSPB figures used in this report reflect current data sets (as of 15/3/24). Figures for 2023 are still being finalised which may result in future numbers of confirmed poisoning incidents increasing. For this reason, some data sets are limited to 2009-2022.

It should be noted that these are only cases which are confirmed (via toxicology analysis) and recorded. Therefore, this data reflects only a proportion of the probable number of actual cases involving the illegal poisoning of birds of prey.

Data used in this report has been gathered by the RSPB Investigations team through field work and intelligence gathering and is supplemented by cases reported to the government-run [Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme](#) (WIIS). WIIS conducts toxicology testing across the UK, identifying incidents of pesticide and poisons abuse which involve all forms of wildlife and domestic animals.

From 2009 to 2023 there have been 1500 confirmed incidents of bird of prey persecution in the UK. Of these, over one third have been associated with poisoning involving rodenticides, insecticides, banned chemicals and other toxic substances. These incidents have occurred in

all four countries of the UK with hotspots of poisoning being identified in some regions, where these crimes repeatedly occur. In total, 222 of these incidents occurred in England, 154 in Scotland, 66 in Wales and 60 in Northern Ireland. As previously highlighted these figures represent a fraction of the actual numbers of poisoning incidents as many will have gone unreported, unrecorded and unconfirmed.

At least 483 birds of prey were poisoned, with Common Buzzards and Red Kites being impacted the most, representing 46% and 35% of the total number of birds of prey poisoned respectively. These two species account for 81% of all confirmed bird of prey poisoning incidents in the UK over the last 15 years.



Buzzard poisoned in the Peak District National Park, April 2019, A post-mortem and toxicology tests undertaken by Natural England showed that the buzzard and a partridge found nearby both contained the pesticide Alphachloralose.

These two species represent a greater proportion of these incidents for two main reasons: a significant increase in population numbers in the last two decades, and dietary and feeding preferences.

Once a rare sight in the UK, successful Red Kite reintroduction programs across the UK have boosted the overall numbers of this species with the UK breeding population increasing by 1935% between 1995 and 2020 (BTO Breeding Bird Survey data).

For several years the Common Buzzard has been the most common bird of prey in the UK, growing in range and numbers since the 1980s with breeding population in the UK increasing by 95% (1995-2020) (BTO Breeding Bird Survey Data) likely to be in part as a result of increases in rabbit populations, recovering from the effects of myxomatosis.

Red Kites and Common Buzzards frequently fall victim poisoning because of their dietary preference, with scavenged carrion making up a significant proportion of their diet. These birds mistake poisoned baits as a natural and safe food source and in many instances are found lying on top of or alongside the bait carcass (frequently pheasants, rabbit and partridge) often with the remains of poisoned meat present in their mouth. These scenes illustrate the rapid and fatal effect of some poisons used to target these birds of prey. Evidence has shown that in the case of the Red Kite major poisoning incidents have had serious impacts on population growth in some areas.



Poisoned satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagle (West Sussex, 2021).

A third species which is increasingly falling victim to intentional poisoning is the White-tailed Eagle. As highlighted in the RSPB Birdcrime report 2022 (see page 7.), a new trend is emerging. As this re-introduced species increases in numbers and range, we are seeing a concurrent increase in confirmed White-tailed Eagles poisoning incidents.

Since 2009, there have been 363 confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents where poison has been detected in the victim, 70 involving poison detected in baits, 69 involving poison detected in both a bird of prey and bait and 41 involving the possession of illegal poisons.

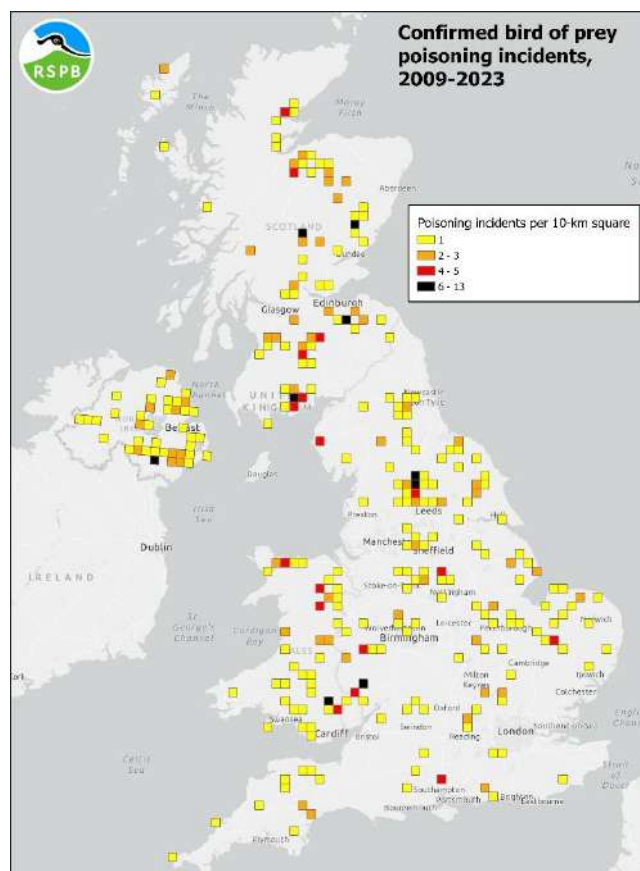
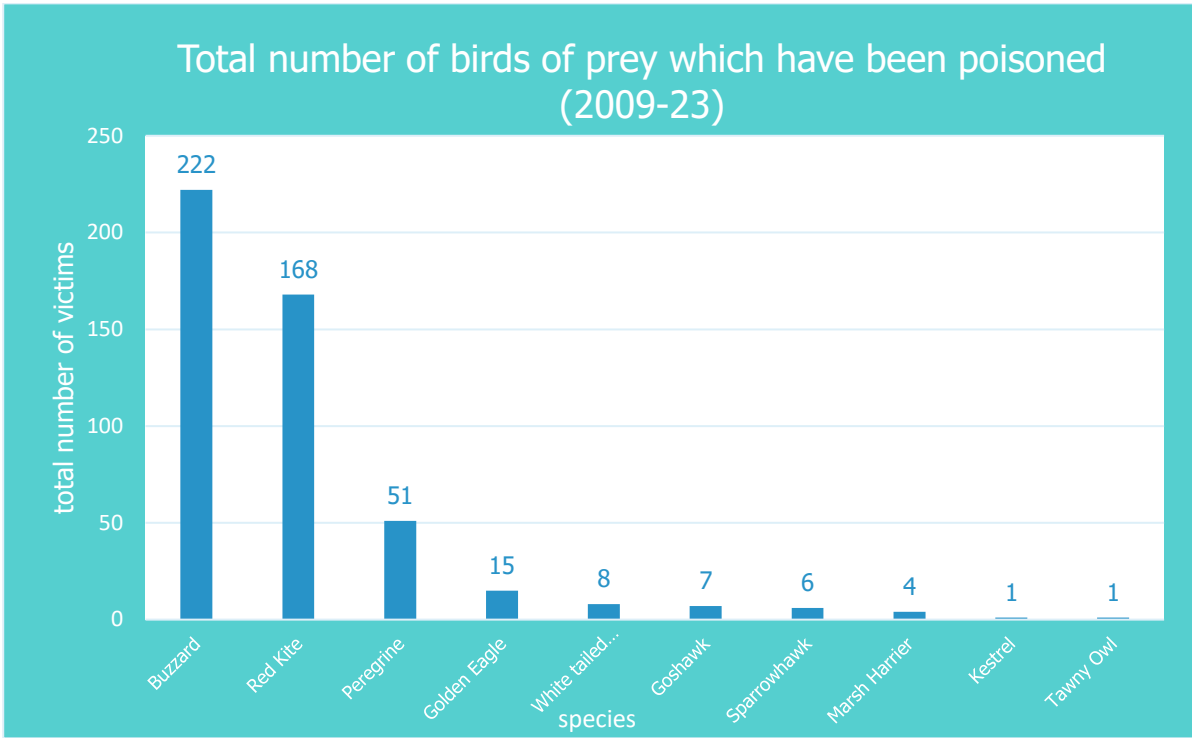
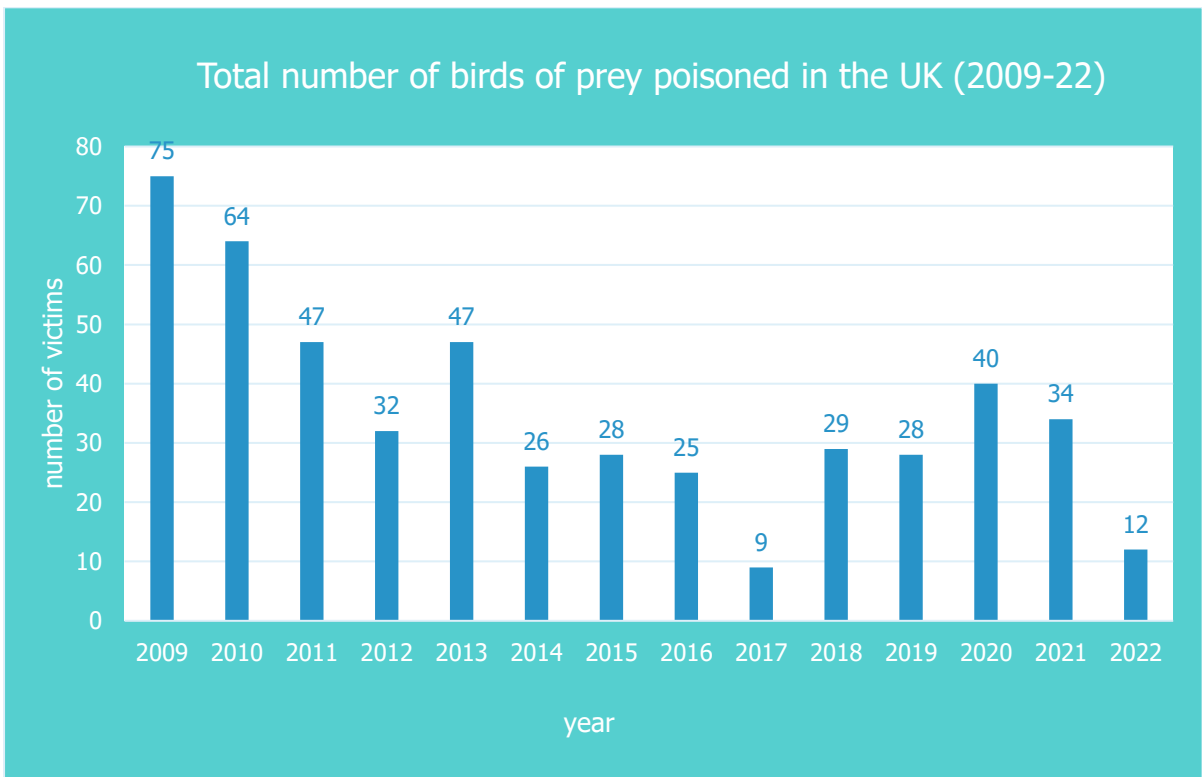


Figure 1. Heat-map of UK where bird of prey poisoning incidents have been confirmed in the UK (2009-2023). Nine incidents have not been included as the exact location of these crimes was not available.

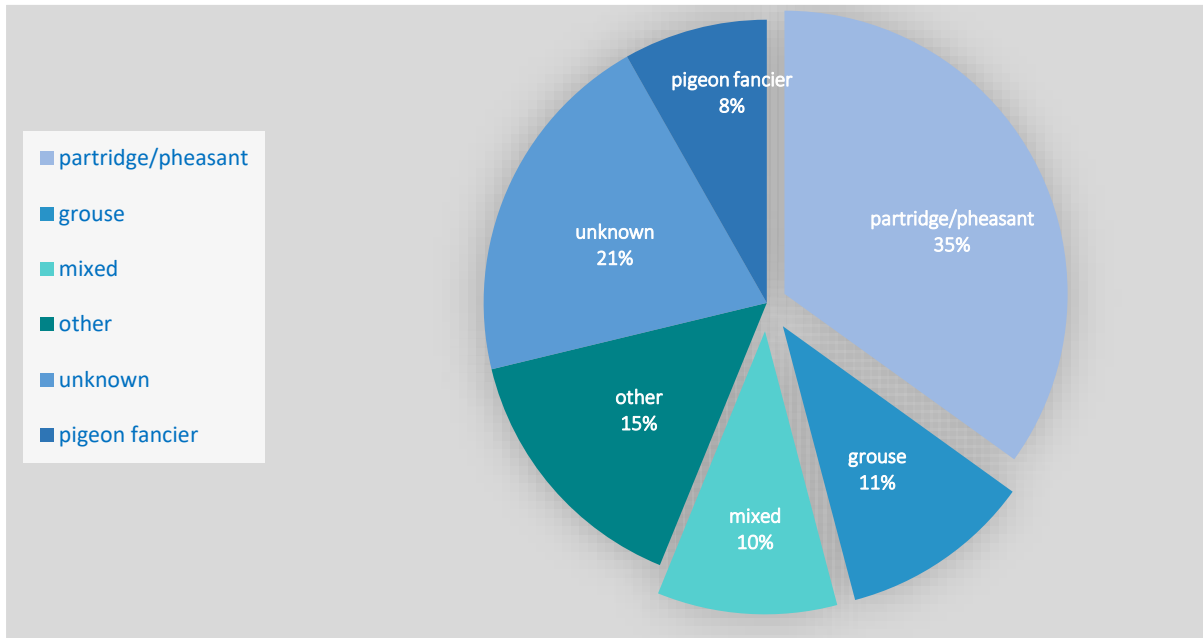


Graph 1: Species breakdown of the total number of birds of prey confirmed as being poisoned in the UK (2009-2022).



Graph 2: Yearly breakdown of the total number birds of prey confirmed to have been poisoned in the UK, 2009-2022.

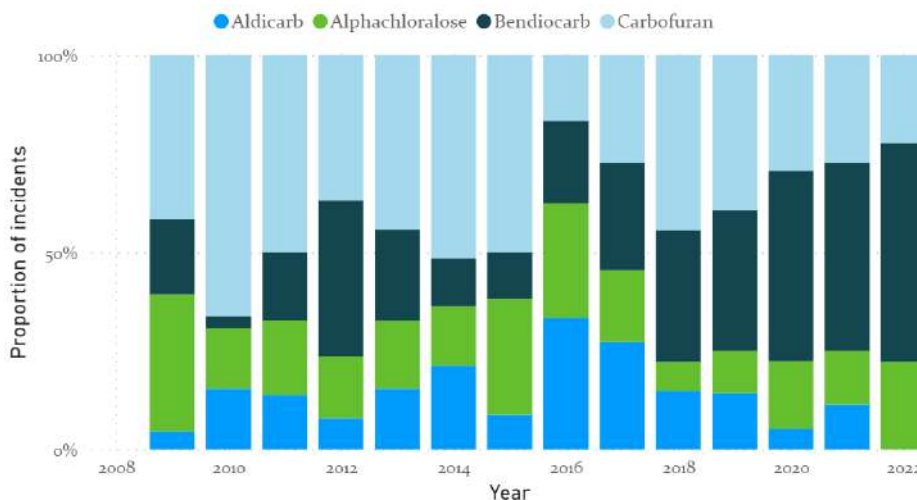
Although the annual total number of bird of prey poisoning incidents fluctuate yearly, it is clear that this method of targeting and intentionally killing birds of prey remains a common practice. In some years where a decline in poisoning is evident, alternative methods of bird of prey persecution have increased. These include both shooting and trapping.



Graph 3: Persecution groups associated with confirmed bird of prey poisoning incidents in the UK (2009-23). 'Partridge/pheasant', 'grouse' and 'mixed' refer to land managed for and/or associated with game bird shooting. 'Mixed' refers to land managed for/connected to all three game bird species. 'Other' refers to incidents where the source of persecution is known but does not fit into any of the specified categories.

In the last 5 years there have been 120 confirmed bird of prey poisoning incidents (2019-2023). 57% of these cases were associated with land managed for gamebird shooting. Gamebirds include Red-legged Partridge, Common Pheasant and Red Grouse.

Bendiocarb is now the most recorded substance in bird of prey poisoning cases, and the favoured substance by those attempting to poison birds of prey.



Graph 4: The four most commonly used illegal pesticides associated with confirmed persecution incidents (2009 – 2022).

Further Reading and Links – poisoned birds of prey:

www.rspb.org.uk/birdcrime

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/gamekeeper-killed-buzzards-and-goshawk-on-pheasant-shoot-in-weeting-norfolk>

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/stopping-illegal-poisoning-just-what-will-it-take>

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/dorset-gamekeeper-sentenced-for-possession-of-shot-buzzards-rodenticides>

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/suffolk-gamekeeper-gets-community-order-for-firearms-and-pesticide-offences-after-buzzard-found-poisoned>

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/how-bad-does-it-have-to-get>

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/one-man-s-poison>

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/buzzard-poisoned-in-peak-district-national-park>

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/police-appeal-for-information-following-suspected-poisoning-at-clee-hill>

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/peregrine-illegally-poisoned-in-barnsley>

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/red-kite-poisoned-in-nidderdale-north-yorkshire>

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/red-kite-shot-and-poisoned-in-nidderdale-worst-area-in-england>

<https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2023/02/16/poisonings/>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-66134319>

Molenaar, F.M., Jaffe, J.E., Carter, I., Barnett, E.A., Shore, R.F., Rowcliffe, J.M., Sainsbury, A.W. (2017) Poisoning of reintroduced red kites (*Milvus Milvus*) in England. *European Journal of Wildlife Research* 63: 94.

<https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-commissioned-report-904-population-modelling-north-scotland-red-kites-relation-cumulative>

Case study – White-tailed Eagles – a pattern of poisoning

(p.24-27, Birdcrime Report 2022)

On 18 October 2021, a member of a shoot was picking up shot birds on an estate in West Sussex. He entered a pheasant pen with his Labrador dog, Duke, who picked up a partially eaten pheasant carcass from the corner of the pen, close to a dead Red Kite. Moments later, Duke started convulsing and foaming at the mouth. Forty minutes later, the dog was dead. Duke was buried the next day and at this point it became apparent that the dog's bed contained dead flies.



Quickly, the dog's owner submitted the bedding for private laboratory testing. Results suggested that Duke had died from Bendiocarb poisoning. Bendiocarb is a highly toxic insecticide. Its acute toxicity has resulted in it being banned for sale as the product Ficam W since June 2020 and only approved now as the less toxic variant Ficam D. Based on HSE data, Bendiocarb has been the most commonly abused pesticide in recent bird of prey poisoning cases.

Duke's owner informed the shoot manager about the confirmed poisoning of his dog and was subsequently paid several thousand pounds by the estate. He also reported the poisoning to the RSPB and police. On 15 October 2021, just three days before Duke was poisoned, G408, a satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagle from the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation and Forestry England reintroduction project, sent back data which suggested it was no longer moving and presumed dead – on the same shooting estate.

Sussex Police based at Midhurst were notified and the RSPB assisted with a land search on the estate. G408's body was eventually found wedged in a tree, very close to where Duke had been poisoned. The eagle was finally sent for toxicology testing by the police two months later, which confirmed it had also died as a result of ingesting Bendiocarb. It is believed the bird carried a bait laced with Bendiocarb into a tree to feed. Once the poison was in its system, it quickly died and was caught in the branches of the tree.

The police investigation was tediously slow and only after a significant intervention by the NWCU was the dog exhumed many months later, when evidentially sound toxicological samples were taken. Testing through WIIS confirmed the presence of Bendiocarb in the dog's body. The laying of any poisoned bait in the open is illegal and indiscriminate, and is a method commonly used by those who wish to deliberately kill birds of prey. The intended target species often depends on the associated land use or activity. On land associated with gamebird releasing and management the most frequent victims are Red Kites and Common Buzzards.

Although White-tailed Eagles are unlikely to be the intended target of these crimes these opportunistic scavengers are as at risk as any other bird of prey, especially in their first year when satellite-tagging data has shown they wander far and wide. This has serious conservation and financial implications for such high-profile reintroduction projects. Although Sussex Police led a formal investigation into the poisoning of the dog and White-tailed Eagle, two years on, no charges have been brought. It is a bitterly disappointing outcome all round. Sadly, the killing of G408 is a historically significant statistic as it is the first confirmed case of the illegal persecution of a White-tailed Eagle in England since these impressive birds were persecuted to extinction in the late 1700s. In addition, G408 is also the first reintroduced White-tailed Eagle to have died as a result of illegal bird of prey persecution in England – a tragic situation.

Unfortunately, G408 is not the last but rather the first of a pattern of recent White-tailed Eagle poisoning cases. As reported extensively in Birdcrime 2021 and the national press, a White-tailed Eagle died in Dorset in January 2022 after ingesting seven times the lethal dose of the rodenticide Brodifacoum. Like the case in West Sussex, which occurred three months previously, police investigations failed to bring any charges, with Dorset Police choosing not to search the estate where the dead eagle was found, despite representation from the NWCU and the RSPB. A month after the Dorset case, another satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagle (G393) died on the Isle of Wight in February 2022.

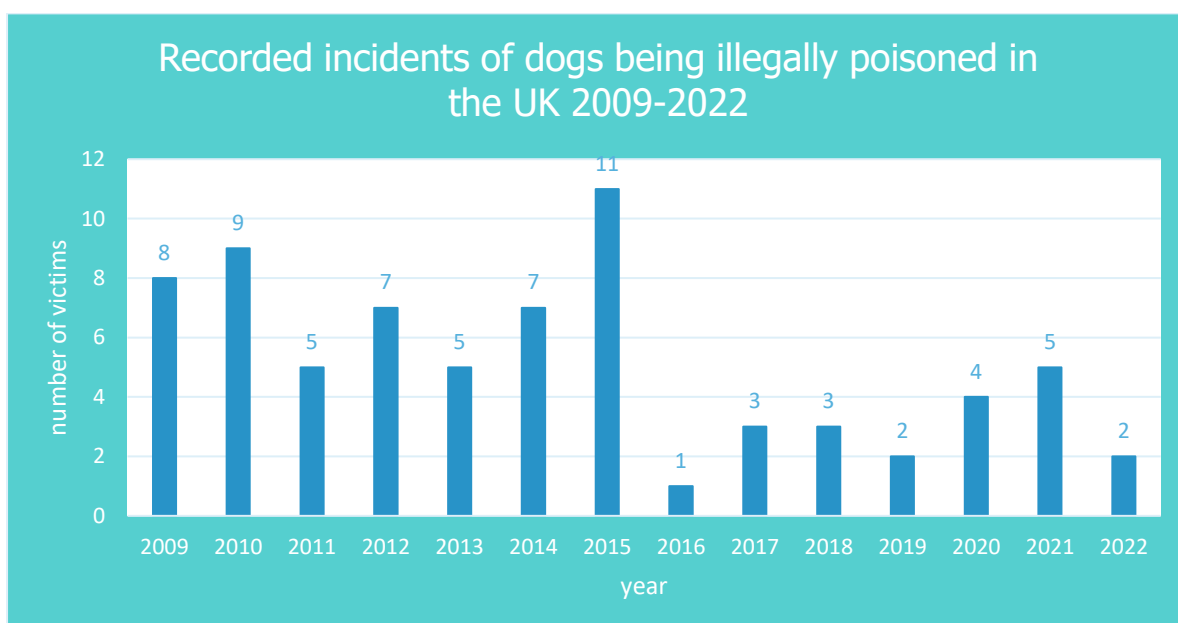
In this case, Hampshire Police responded admirably, recovering the bird and transporting it to a specialist laboratory for testing. Avian Influenza was detected which would normally mean no further testing would be possible, but HSE agreed to a restricted post-mortem being conducted as a special case. The results confirmed that Avian Influenza hadn't caused the eagle's death and although the restricted analysis couldn't definitively establish the cause of death, it did confirm that the bird had been exposed to the rodenticides Brodifacoum and Difenacoum. For more information, read the featured case study on page 29. Finally, on 15 May 2023, in a shocking case in Northern Ireland, two young White-tailed Eagles were found dead, side by side on Northern Ireland's only grouse moor at Glenwherry.

County Antrim. As in the Sussex case, both birds tested positive for the insecticide Bendiocarb. This is possibly the most significant case of bird of prey persecution in Northern Ireland to date. One of the birds was a satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagle, which had been released in August 2022 in Ireland as part of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) re-introduction programme. The second bird was an immature untagged individual, likely to have originated from Scotland or Ireland. It is believed that the birds were foraging together when they ingested the illegally placed poison. Again, despite attempts by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the RSPB offering a £5,000 reward for any information leading to a conviction, there has been no development in this case.

Illegal poisoning of dogs in the UK (2009-2023)

There have been over 50 incidents of dog poisoning in the UK in the last 15 years, involving 72 dogs of which at least 49 have died after being exposed to or consuming poisons. This data has been collected from the WIIS and supplemented by information gathered by the RSPB Investigations team. This is not the absolute total as there will have been several cases which were unreported and/or unrecorded. Poisons include Aldicarb, Brodifacoum, Carbofuran, Difenacoum and Strychnine.

Of the 50 recorded incidents, most have involved dogs ingesting poison after eaten poisoned food or baits in open countryside. Due to the indiscriminate nature of the laying of poisoned baits, dogs frequently become the unintentional victim of these crimes. This method of persecution and its unselective nature put wildlife, pets and people at significant risk.



Graph 5: The total number of dogs poisoned using Wildlife Investigation Incident Scheme (WIIS) and RSPB data (2009 – 2022).

Further Reading and Links – poisoned dog cases in the UK:

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/investigations/posts/two-spaniels-poisoned-by-nidderdale-cocktail-in-bird-of-prey-crime-hotspot>

<https://www.grough.co.uk/magazine/2014/06/30/dogs-death-prompts-fears-of-bird-of-prey-poisoning-in-tanat-valley#>

<https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/uk-news/strychnine-blamed-for-dogs-deaths-1926053>