

RSPB BIRDCRIME REPORT 2018

SUMMARY – KEY STATISTICS

- Within the UK, there were 87 confirmed incidents of bird of prey persecution recorded in 2018, a 28% increase from the previous year when there were 68 confirmed incidents.
- The UK breakdown of incidents in 2018 was as follows:
 - England
67 (77%) confirmed incidents of bird of prey persecution. This is an 22% increase from 2017 when there 55 confirmed incidents.
 - Scotland
12 (14%) confirmed incidents of bird of prey persecution, which is a 140% increase on the previous year's total of 5 confirmed incidents.
 - Wales
5 (6%) confirmed incidents, an increase of 66% from 2017 when there were 3 confirmed incidents against birds of prey.
 - Northern Ireland
3 (3%) confirmed incidents of bird of prey persecution, a reduction of 40% from 2017 when there were 5 confirmed incidents.
- The 87 confirmed incidents included 41 shooting / attempted shooting incidents, a 15% reduction from the previous year when there were 48 confirmed incidents against birds of prey.
- There were 28 confirmed poisoning (pesticide) abuse incidents in 2018, an increase from 2017 when there were 9 confirmed incidents.
- The 16 confirmed trapping incidents involving birds of prey is an increase from the previous year, when there were just 3 confirmed incidents.
- There were 16 bird crime prosecutions in 2018, just two of which were bird of prey related, with only one leading to the conviction of a Gamekeeper.

INTRODUCTION

The Birdcrime Report is published annually by the RSPB as a summary of related offences against birds of prey that have been collated by its investigations team. As in previous years, its report for 2018, which was published on 28 August 2019, is a lobbying and fundraising tool driven by the RSPB's politically driven campaign to see driven grouse shooting licensed.

The RSPB states in its 2018 Report that 'many birds of prey are being illegally killed, particularly in upland areas of the UK as a result of conflict with driven grouse shooting'. Of the 87 confirmed incidents reported in 2018, 45 were in counties unassociated with grouse shooting, and of the 42 incidents that occurred in those counties where grouse shooting does occur, it would appear that only 5 have been directly linked to grouse moors. The claim that 'raptors are being systematically and illegally eradicated from these landscapes' is unsubstantiated.

Although the purpose of the Report is to summarise known offences against birds of prey, the RSPB is also using it to further its wider lobbying efforts by claiming that the management of grouse moors is affecting other wildlife, and the wider environment. Its statement that it is a landscape that has been created 'to purely benefit red grouse' is disingenuous, as is the claim that 'intensive grouse moor management, such as burning, is damaging important habitats, and contributing to climate change'. More than 70% of England's upland Sites of Special Scientific Interest are managed grouse moors, and over 40% are also designated as Special Protection Areas for rare birds and Special Areas of Conservation for rare vegetation under European wildlife directives; thanks to that management.

The management undertaken benefits not just red grouse, but also many other species of ground nesting birds that share this moorland habitat. These include species of the highest conservation concern, such as black grouse, lapwing, skylark, curlew, grey partridge, and merlin - whose numbers have doubled on grouse moors in the last 20 years, compared to elsewhere where they have more than halved. Research has shown that where moors are managed by gamekeepers, ground nesting birds such as curlew and lapwing are 3.5 times more likely to raise a chick to fledging. A survey of upland breeding birds in parts of England and Scotland also found that the densities of golden plover, curlew, redshank and lapwing were up to five times greater on managed grouse moors compared to unmanaged moorland.

The RSPB's claim that that '72% of 58 hen harriers satellite tagged in a government study were killed, or most likely killed, on or near grouse moors (2007 – 2017)' is also unsubstantiated. Whilst that study found that four birds showed evidence of illegal killing, 38 had 'simply disappeared'. It is known from Natural England's (NE) initial findings of its hen harrier tracking programme published in 2014, that the last transmissions from 11 of those hen harriers tagged by NE since 2007 was well away from any grouse moor. The last transmission of five of those eleven birds was on the Isle of Man, two were in Brittany, one in Normandy, one in Shropshire, one in Lincolnshire, and one in Dorset.

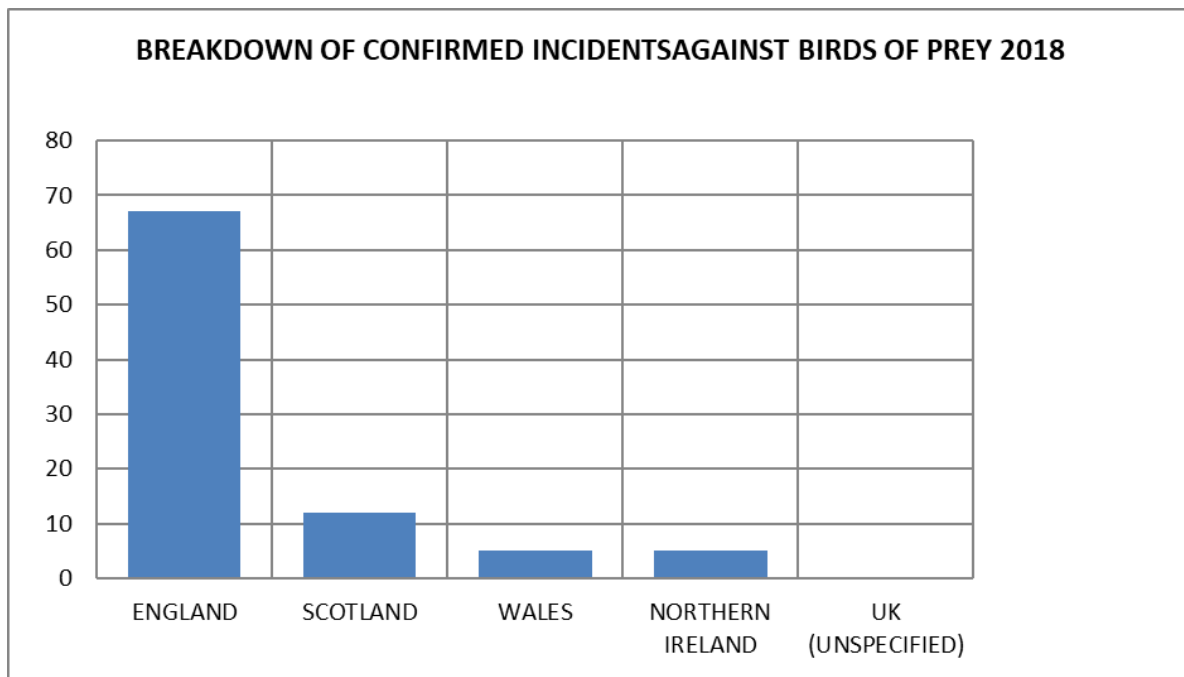
When it published its initial findings, NE said it was important to recognise that tracking data did not usually enable it to determine the circumstances that have led to loss of signal, nor what has happened to the bird. The fact that birds can travel up to 48 hours after their last signal also makes it very difficult to draw hard and fast conclusions about what may have happened to the birds when their signals cease transmission. Ultimately, only recovery of carcasses and forensic analysis can establish that; something that the RSPB would appear to have chosen to ignore.

The RSPB is also claiming that ‘in areas of the eastern Scottish Highlands the mountain hare population has plummeted by 99% since the 1950’s due to unregulated culling, again due to a perceived threat to grouse stocks’. However, research by the GWCT published in 2019 has demonstrated that mountain hare numbers are most widespread in north-eastern Scotland on managed grouse moors, where their numbers can be up to 35 times higher than areas where grouse are not shot. Early work from other studies conducted by the GWCT indicate range contraction in south-west Scotland and on estates with no grouse shooting interest, compared to range increases in north-east Scotland on estates managed for grouse shooting.

For the fourth year running, the RSPB’s Birdcrime Report includes a chart showing the occupations / interests of those individuals convicted of raptor persecution related offences since 1990, highlighting that between 1990 and 2018 there have been 180 convictions of which 121 (67%) were Gamekeepers. However, taking the 10 year period from 2009 – 2018, their own reports show that just 34 Gamekeepers have been convicted of an offence. The inclusion of this chart therefore remains intentionally misleading, the figures being distorted in order to imply that this remains a significant problem. In doing so, the RSPB is intentionally damaging its relationship with an industry with which it should be actively looking at working in partnership.

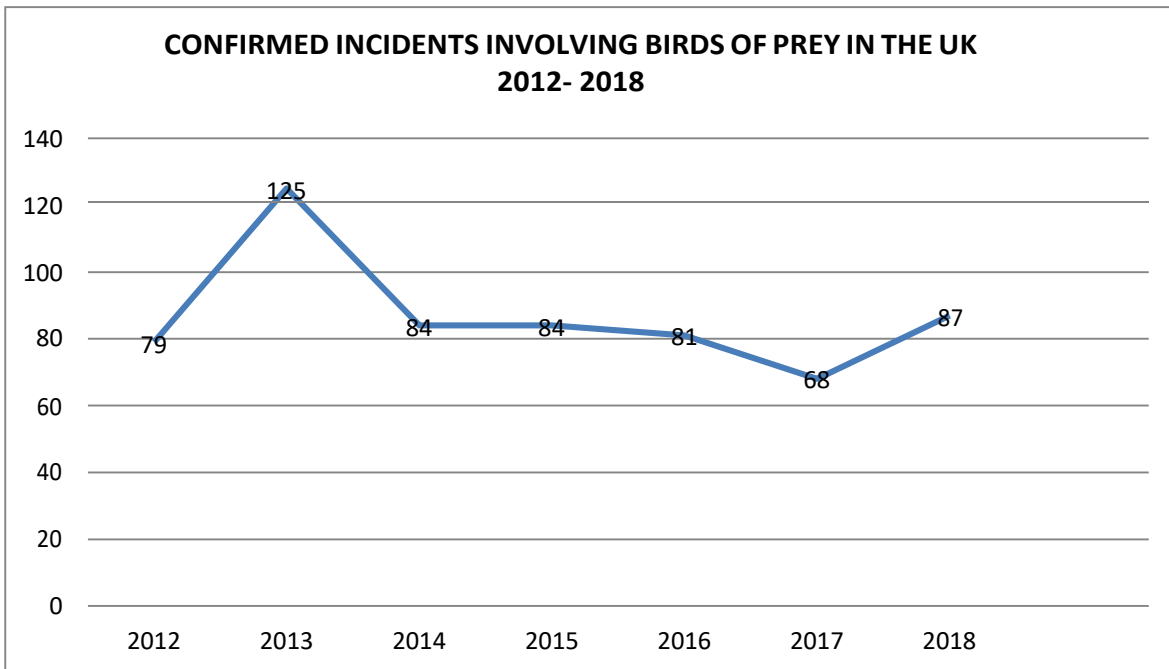
CONFIRMED INCIDENTS REPORTED TO THE RSPB

In 2018, there were 87 confirmed incidents of bird of prey persecution. Of these, 67 cases were confirmed in England (77%), 12 in Scotland (14%), 5 in Wales (6%), and 3 in Northern Ireland (3%).



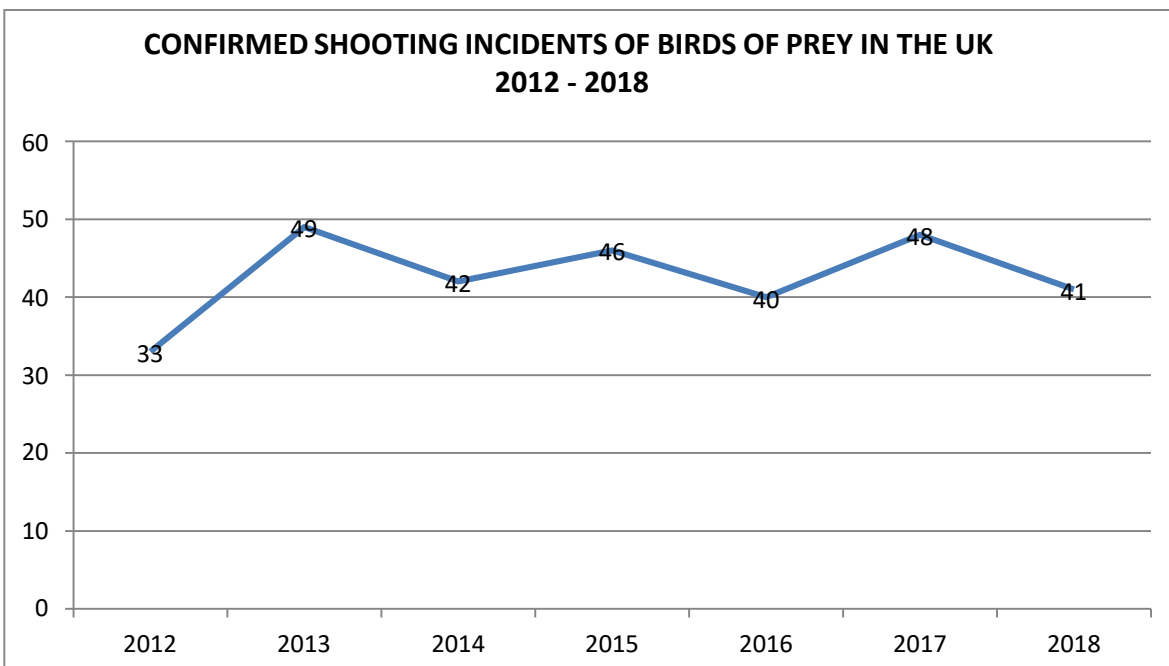
CONFIRMED INCIDENTS INVOLVING BIRDS OF PREY IN THE UK

The figure of 87 confirmed incidents of illegal persecution against birds of prey in 2018 is the second highest since 2012, but in line with the previous six-year average.



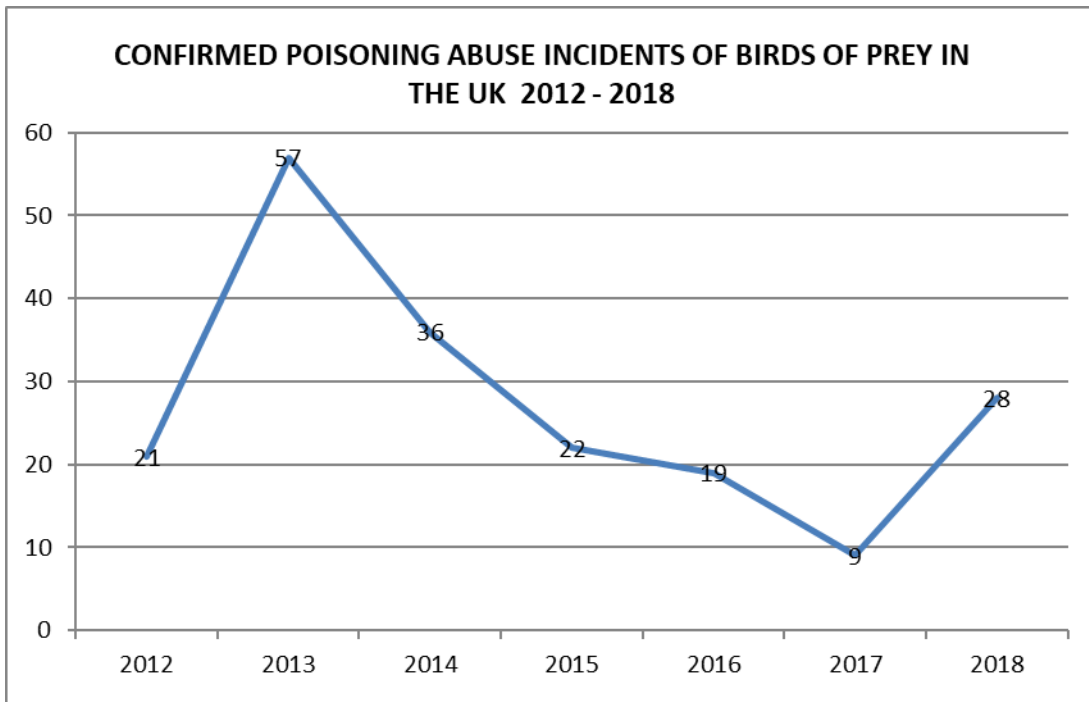
SHOOTING INCIDENTS

RSPB data shows that shooting remains the most common way of killing birds of prey, with 41 confirmed shooting / attempted shooting incidents in 2018. This is the third lowest number since 2012, and of those 41 confirmed incidents, half occurred in counties where no grouse shooting takes place.



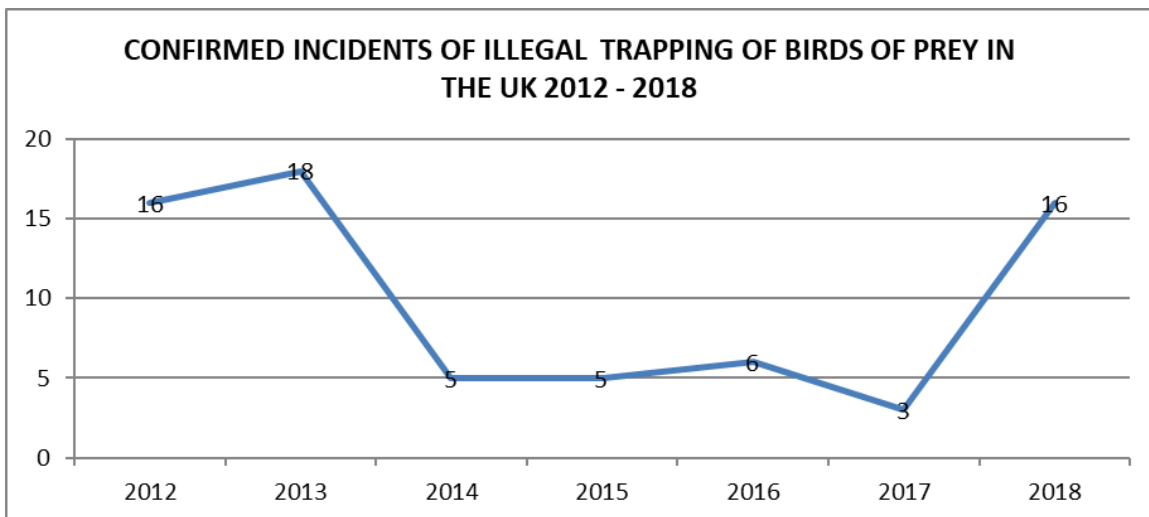
POISON ABUSE INCIDENTS

There were 28 confirmed poisoning incidents involving raptors in 2018, a figure that is significantly higher than in recent years, but in line with the previous six year average. Of those 28 confirmed incidents, half occurred in counties associated with grouse shooting.



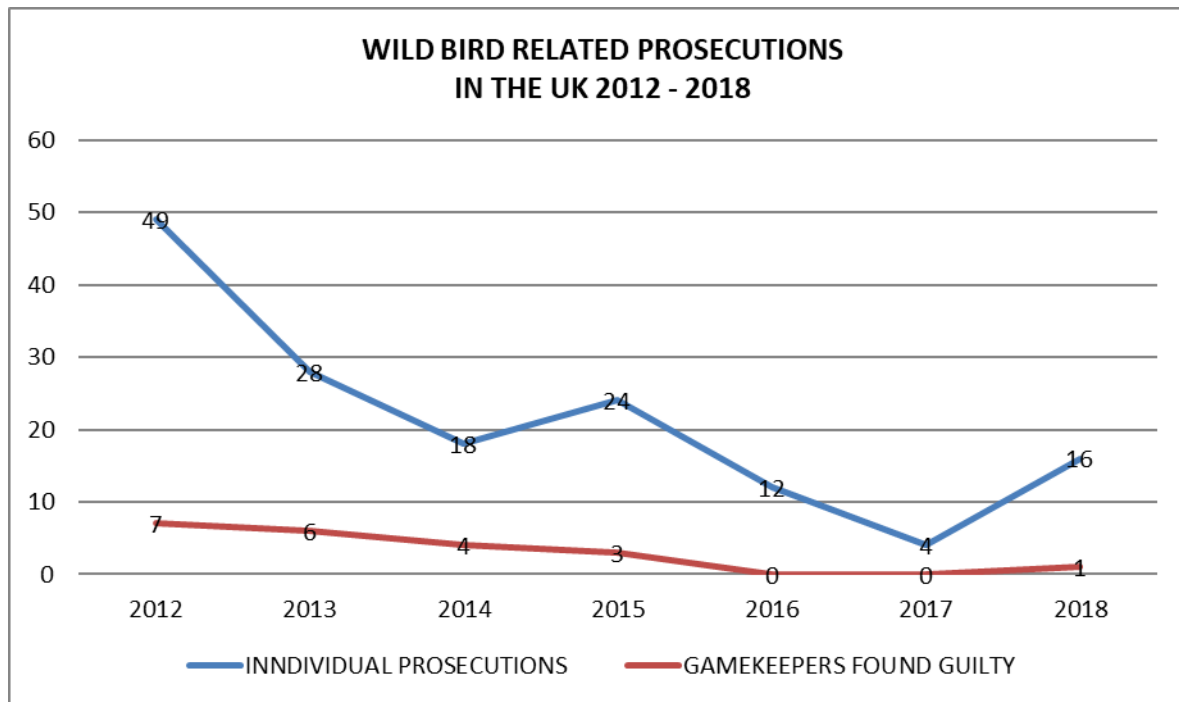
ILLEGAL TRAPPING

There were 16 confirmed incidents of illegal trapping in 2018, a figure that is significantly higher than in recent years. Almost two thirds of the incidents (10) occurred in counties where there is no grouse shooting.



WILD BIRD RELATED PROSECUTIONS

There were 16 bird crime prosecutions in 2018, just two of which were bird of prey related, with only one leading to the conviction of a Gamekeeper



CONCLUSION

The RSPB's 2018 Birdcrime report shows a disappointing increase in all but shooting incidents of bird of prey related persecution, with those for trapping and poisoning incidents being notable. However, despite the RSPB's attempts to make out otherwise, these are not offences that are taking place predominantly in the uplands, as half of all the shooting and poisoning incidents, and almost two thirds of the trapping incidents, occurred in counties totally un-associated with grouse shooting. But unfortunately, the report has become little more than a lobbying and fundraising tool driven by the RSPB's politically driven campaign to see driven grouse shooting licensed, with some of the claims made within it being either unsubstantiated, or intentionally misleading.