



A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

The Met's Wildlife Crime Unit has long been hot on the heels of crimes against animals. Meet the borough-based officers helping to protect the capital's creatures...

Poaching, the destruction of animal habitats, random acts of cruelty and the illegal importing of endangered animals. This is not a story from *Emmerdale* or the depths of the countryside. Wildlife crime is also a growing concern in the capital.

Rare species such as peregrine falcons, dormice and stag beetles are all resident in the capital, as are bats, badgers, swans and hedgehogs.

THE LOCAL LEVEL

Wild animals are protected by law and, despite what many people think, it is the Met and not the RSPCA that is responsible for the policing of those laws.

While the Met has long had a dedicated Wildlife Crime Unit in place to tackle these issues, it now also has borough-based wildlife crime officers.

PC Vee Goomany is the borough wildlife officer for Greenwich. He juggles his wildlife crime work alongside his other duties as a PC. If one of his

colleagues gets information about wildlife crime PC Goomany is the first port of call. "I can investigate incidents, co-ordinate a response with other agencies, such as the RSPCA, wildlife charities or local authorities, and make arrests where a crime has been committed," he says.

Often, reports of crime will come in from members of the public. PC Goomany recalls a recent incident where a woman contacted her local station because her neighbour had been trapping and drowning squirrels to protect a beech tree in his garden. PC Goomany explains: "After securing evidence, a conditional caution was given where the man involved agreed to stop killing the squirrels and to make a donation to a local wildlife charity."

THE CLAWS ARE OUT

PC Goomany says it's varied work. Laws protecting wildlife do not just safeguard animals, but the places they live. "Whether it's builders, tree surgeons or demolition teams, it is an offence to

The collecting of wild bird eggs has been illegal, since 1954. Since 1982 it has also been an offence even to possess their eggs.

Britain's rarest species are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981. Most, like the pine marten and wildcat, do not live in the London area, but others do. All species of bats are specially protected.

DID YOU KNOW?

intentionally destroy, damage or take the nest of a wild bird, and in the case of some of the rarer species it is also an offence to disturb the birds in the nest," he says.

All badger setts and bat-roosting sites are protected by law and cannot be disturbed without a licence issued by English Nature. This also applies to sites used by other protected species such as water voles, great crested newts and dormice, all of which live in London. Badger baiting – betting on the outcome of vicious fights between the animal and dogs – has been illegal since 1835, yet it is estimated that 10,000 badgers are killed in this way every year.

PC Goomany spends time scouring local internet sites for evidence about the illegal capture and sale of rare species. He also patrols Greenwich Park as part of his wide range of duties, including preventing acts of cruelty to local wildlife.

Other work is even more unusual. It is an offence to deliberately release any non-native species into the wild, yet some people who are fed up with their

Going wild: the Met's PC Goomany on wildlife crime patrol in Greenwich

pets do discard them. Deer from South East Asia, ring-necked parakeets from India, and red-eared terrapins and bullfrogs from the US have been found in London. In 2000 the Met and London Zoo even caught a lynx which was roaming free in North London.

HOW TO GET IN TOUCH

At the moment, PC Goomany spends around a day a week dealing with wildlife crime, and he wants to encourage officers and staff who have any queries about wildlife crime issues in Greenwich to contact him. He says: "If officers are vigilant about wildlife crime in their area, and pass the information to the right person, we can have a real impact on protecting wildlife from the inevitable consequences of sharing the environment with humans." [T](#)

TO FIND OUT WHO YOUR BOROUGH'S WILDLIFE CRIME OFFICER IS, CONTACT THE WILDLIFE CRIME UNIT ON 020 7230 8888

MEET... CAROLINE BEDFORD

PCSO and wildlife crime officer, Merton

Keen to spread the word about wildlife crime, PCSO Caroline Bedford has taken to setting up shop at London Wildcare, a wildlife treatment centre, to show what wildlife officers do.

Armed with exhibits including snakeskin handbags, sea horses used in Chinese medicine and wild cat skin, all seized from within London, she aims to raise awareness about wildlife crime. "We hand out

leaflets and encourage people to come forward with information," she says.

From her last visit, she picked up information about youths shooting at squirrels with air guns and concerns about bird poisoning. She adds: "Having allocated time for my wildlife crime work means I can build relations with other agencies to help protect London's animals and prevent crime."



THE WILDLIFE CRIME UNIT

Not every borough will have a designated wildlife crime officer, but the Met's dedicated Wildlife Crime Unit (WCU) does work across all London boroughs.

The unit comprises a small team of specialist officers and staff who have been appointed for their expertise and experience in wildlife matters. They deal not only with local, borough-based wildlife crime but also national and international problems that can have an impact upon London.

Part of the Specialist Crime Directorate, the WCU also shares intelligence with the National Wildlife Crime Unit and conducts joint operations with the UK Border Agency relating to the illegal trade in endangered species.

"The poaching and smuggling trade that is leading to the near extinction of some of the world's greatest animals is a global problem," says Sergeant Ian Knox, who heads up the unit. "Without demand for these products, there would be no poaching."