

Crime in the

Lincolnshire Police are working hard to combat the th

WORDS: Judy Theobald PHOTO

LINCOLNSHIRE POLICE Constable Nigel Lound's working day can take him anywhere in the county at any time of the day or night. As the force's wildlife officer, his task is not merely to protect the 'pretty' sides of nature but to help combat vicious cruelty both in this country and abroad and to preserve our very landscape for the future.

Wildlife crime covers everything from picking bluebells to 'badger digging' a horrifying pursuit in which both dogs and badgers end up suffering appalling injuries. Moreover, Nigel said those who indulge in this activity are often involved in many other types of crime which they will also be committing on their visits to the county. The international aspect of Nigel's work involves stopping the import of items made from

endangered species – such as ivory and rhino horn – trades which can also involve great cruelty.

He has been the force's wildlife officer for just over a year but for fourteen years before that was the voluntary wildlife liaison officer. He was born and bred in Lincolnshire, is a keen bird-watcher and has always had a passionate interest in all aspects of the natural world. His job is to bring to the attention of both the police and the public not just the immediate problems of wildlife crime but also the wider picture.

An example of this is hare coursing which he describes as a 'political hot potato'. "The majority of people who take part in this are criminals in other areas who come here for a day's sport.

You can course hares legally and the object is not to kill the hare but to turn it in its tracks. The dogs are marked on their skill in turning the hare.

"However, the illegal coursers don't have permission to be on people's land and will also run their dogs at anything," said Nigel. "Money is made through betting on the dogs and the owners can make £2,000 to £3,000 a day. Unfortunately, the legislation is totally inadequate. We are still using the 1831 Game Act under which people are charged with trespassing in pursuit of game. This only attracts a fine of £300 so it's no deterrent.



e countryside

Thousands of crimes committed against wildlife every year

PHOTOGRAPHS: Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust

There is no power of arrest under this act and once we have spoken to people and told them they will be reported for summons, it's not unusual to see them



Above: The badger is often singled out by vicious criminals

Left: It looks peaceful and idyllic but a huge amount of crime takes place in the county's woods, fields and farmland

doing exactly the same thing, two or three fields away." There were 910 reports of hare coursing between August, 2002 and March, 2003.

Badgers are protected under the Badgers Act but this does not prevent badger digging which is an even more unpleasant crime. Dogs wearing transmitters on their collars are put into the badgers' set. Once the dog has located the badger, the gang dig the set open and then send in four or five other dogs to attack the badger. The practice leads to both the dogs and the badgers suffering horrific injuries in the course of an exercise which is merely to demonstrate the dogs' prowess. This in turn is meant to demonstrate how 'hard' the dog's owner is.

A similar crime is 'lamping' in which strong lights are used to attract the badgers at night and they are then put through a similar ordeal with dogs.

Nigel said many of the dead badgers we see on the road side are not there as the result of traffic accidents but have been the victims of this cruel sport. "People

who commit this crime aren't going to be daft enough to be caught with a dead badger," he explained.

Steps to protect badgers have included setting up the Lincolnshire Badger Group which has 140 members who keep an eye on the badger sets in their area by visiting them every two to three weeks to look for signs of illegal activity.

With the increased popularity of venison, deer poaching has also become a cause for concern. Contrary to our traditional and romantic image of the poacher prowling

the countryside with one or two rabbits or the odd salmon hidden in a sack, modern poachers are very organised. They turn up in gangs and use dogs to kill as many as 100 deer in a night which are then loaded straight onto freezer lorries. "Poachers are very organised; they are in it for the profit," said Nigel. He added that a lot of people commit wildlife crime because they know they can make a lot of money with very little chance of being caught.

One area of wildlife crime which does attract large fines, is damage to Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Lincolnshire has more than 100 of these some of which have been used illegally by quad bikers or scramble cycles. "People intentionally damaging these sites can be fined up to £20,000," said Nigel "It's up to them to get themselves organised and find somewhere they can do it legally."

His job also extends to protecting endangered species. "We're very good at making things extinct in this country – wolves, bears, birds and butterflies." Here legislation is helping and under the new Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 stealing eggs from protected birds carries a six-month prison sen-

tence. The Act also gives powers of search and arrest for certain offences. "Great crested newts, bats and water voles are fully protected," said Nigel.

His battle extends to all areas of the countryside. Under the Farmwatch scheme he has spoken to lots of National Farmers' Union groups and to extend the scope of this initiative, the Farm and Countrywatch scheme is being launched at this year's show.

"Farmwatch was targeted at farmers. We now want everyone in rural areas to be part of this, looking out for their neighbours, looking out for suspicious vehicles, strangers on private property and all work together," he said.

Local intelligence officers will collate sightings which members pass to them and members in return will receive good feedback about results. Anyone living in the country can become involved in the scheme and the more people who become involved, the more successful it will be.

"There is nothing more frustrating for a policeman than to go to a burglary and while making house-to-house inquiries discover that people realised what was happening but didn't report it," said Nigel. "We need to know what is going on and if people see anything they're suspicious or not sure about, they should telephone us straight away."

Much as Nigel loves his native county, his concern does not end with Lincolnshire and its wildlife. "I do a lot of work to enforce the Convention on International Trading in Endangered Species," he explained. He represents Lincolnshire Police in the Partnership Against Wildlife Crime.

"A lot of it is to do with raising awareness. People might not realise that their lovely holiday souvenirs, such as ivory, derivatives from tigers and bears, caviar, etc, come from endangered species. Stopping the demand from the West will help to preserve the animals in their native countries."

Nigel is not alone in his task. Lincolnshire Police has three qualified wildlife liaison officers who have all attended national courses and this number is to be increased by a further two.

If you suspect there is any rural or wildlife crime taking place in your area, please telephone 01522 558684.

"We have a lovely rural county and we owe it to ourselves and society to make sure it stays that way," Nigel said. □

You can visit Nigel in the Conservation Area at the Show.