

**Behind closed doors –
how the normalisation
of wild pets is
putting thousands
of species in peril**



Acknowledgements

Project lead: Samara P. El-Haddad, Senior Programs Officer, UK.
If you have any questions, please contact selhaddad@ifaw.org

Contributors: Ilaria Di Silvestre

Content warning: This document contains images of animals in situations where they are being mistreated.

IFAW © 2026 All rights reserved.

Cover photo: © iStock / Kimberrywood

A young sugar glider in a bird cage.

Table of contents

4	Behind closed doors	7	Owners support wild pet protection
4	How the normalisation of wild pets is putting thousands of species in peril	7	Listing pets – positively
4	Introduction	7	Social media driving trade
5	What makes a pet ‘exotic’?	7	Buying wild in the UK
5	Wild animal pet numbers in the UK	8	Illegal exotic pet trader sentenced for unnecessary suffering
6	Untangling the web – UK wildlife laws	8	Profiting from cruelty
6	Closing the legal loopholes	8	Forensic testing fights the trade
6	Tracking the trade – a data mishmash	8	Developing detection databases
6	Dangerously deficient data	9	Ending the trade in wild lives
		9	Behind closed doors – About our research

Behind closed doors

How the normalisation of wild pets is putting thousands of species in peril

Cute, cuddly, and clickable – a wild animal in a home or on our social media feed may look harmless. But what we don't see is the habitat it was taken from, the animals that didn't survive, or the miserable life that many animals spend in captive breeding facilities.

“This trade thrives on misinformation. It presents wild animals as suitable companions while obscuring the true cost to animals, ecosystems, and people.

Global wildlife trafficking is estimated at US\$7–23 billion annually, making it one of the world's largest black markets.”

Samara P. El-Haddad,
Senior Programs Officer UK,
International Fund for
Animal Welfare (IFAW)

Introduction

The ownership of wild animals – commonly known as ‘exotic pets’ – is rising in the UK. During just one month in 2025, the UK's Border Force seized more than 250 endangered species and illegal wildlife products at airports, ports and mail depots across the country. This was part of an international annual operation to combat illegal wildlife smuggling. The numbers seized represented a 73% increase from 2023.

Wild pet demand is largely fuelled by social media posts that have turned wildlife and owners into online celebrities. For example, African grey parrots and serval cats have become Tik Tok stars with huge followings. But the entertaining reels and pictures hide grim truths.

The reptiles, insects, birds, big cats, primates and other species shown on social media have been stripped out of their natural wild homes, or bred, to live in captivity as pets. Many endure great mental and physical suffering in often cruel and unnatural confinement. Self-mutilation, anxiety, aggressive behaviours, injuries from bad handling and housing, and malnutrition are just some of the problems captive wild pets can endure.

Other problems caused by the trade include millions of animals dying during capture and transit; viral and bacterial infections spreading to other animals and people, and ecosystem destruction.

Supporting a cruel and devastating industry

Behind Closed Doors, new research from the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) shows how social media and the UK's patchy legislation are exacerbating the wild pet trade. Social media and celebrity influence were seen as drivers for wild pet ownership by 29% of wild pet owners surveyed. And while 86% of owners acknowledge that some species require licences, 84% of those who know their pet needs a licence do not actually possess one.

Licensing figures for 2023 indicate 400 venomous snakes kept by private owners in the UK – 10 times more than the number of snakes kept in UK zoos.

The research also highlighted that most owners were highly concerned about animals being stripped out of the wild to fuel the pet trade. However, complex UK legal loopholes and the various ‘laundering’ activities by unscrupulous traders allowing animals, that are protected

in their own countries, to be sold here, makes this challenging.

Behind Closed Doors spells out the clear need for legislative change, and for accurate, appropriately categorised data and testing systems to identify wildlife trafficking. It also details how UK wild animal pet owners themselves are keen for legislation and a ‘Positive List’ system of pet ownership to protect wild animals and their environments from harm.

“As we continue to raise the profile of rare and protected species, we are seeing that people who love wildlife, are on occasions unintentionally becoming part of the problem.

We need greater awareness of the legal and illegal trade and how the lines between the two can often be blurred, leading to seemingly innocent people with a love of animals committing crimes.

For wildlife crime to be addressed properly, it needs a collective voice to be heard loud and clear, because wild animals, are of course, voiceless.”

Kevin Lacks-Kelly, Chief
Inspector, Head of National
Wildlife Crime Unit



◀ Chief Inspector Kevin Lacks-Kelly, Head of National Wildlife Crime Unit

What makes a pet 'exotic'?

Exotic pets, also known as wild pets, are any animal of a species non-native to and not domesticated in the country or countries where they are kept as pets. They may be imported – legally or illegally – bred, sold or kept as a pet – for display, amusement and/or companionship.

Wild animal pet numbers in the UK

Between 2014 and 2018, over 3.4 million wild animals were imported into the UK for commercial use – although it is unclear how many were sold into the pet trade.¹ According to *Behind Closed Doors*, wild animal ownership among survey participants was dominated by fish followed by reptiles and birds.

Fish

64%



Reptiles

27%



Birds

16%



Invertebrates

5%



Amphibians

2%



Mammals

1%



Photo: @iStock / Trek13

“Animal welfare and proper documentation should be a top priority for anyone involved in the sale of animals, especially to protect rare and endangered species.”

PC Darren Wilkes, Rural and Wildlife Crime Team, Cannock, Staffordshire

Untangling the web – UK wildlife laws

There is no single Act covering wildlife protection in the UK. Instead, enforcers, traders and owners face a complicated web of statutes, regulations, protections, licensing requirements, prohibitions

and responsibilities. Underpinning the complexity is that UK legislation regarding the welfare of animals once in captivity is separate from that covering the act of taking, trading, or keeping a wild animal.

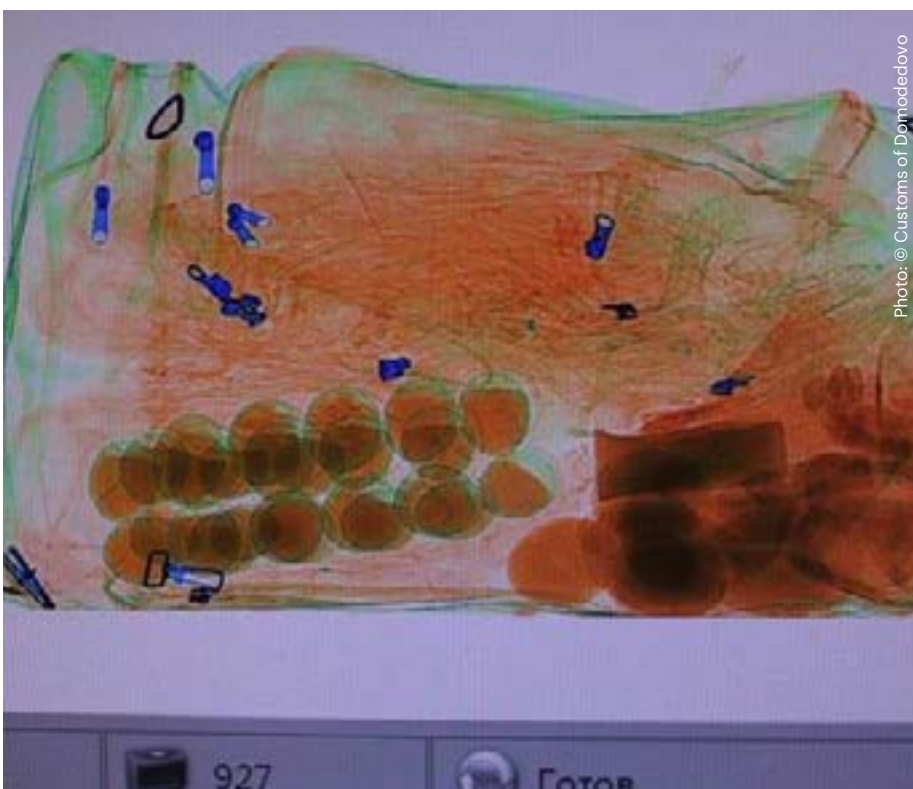
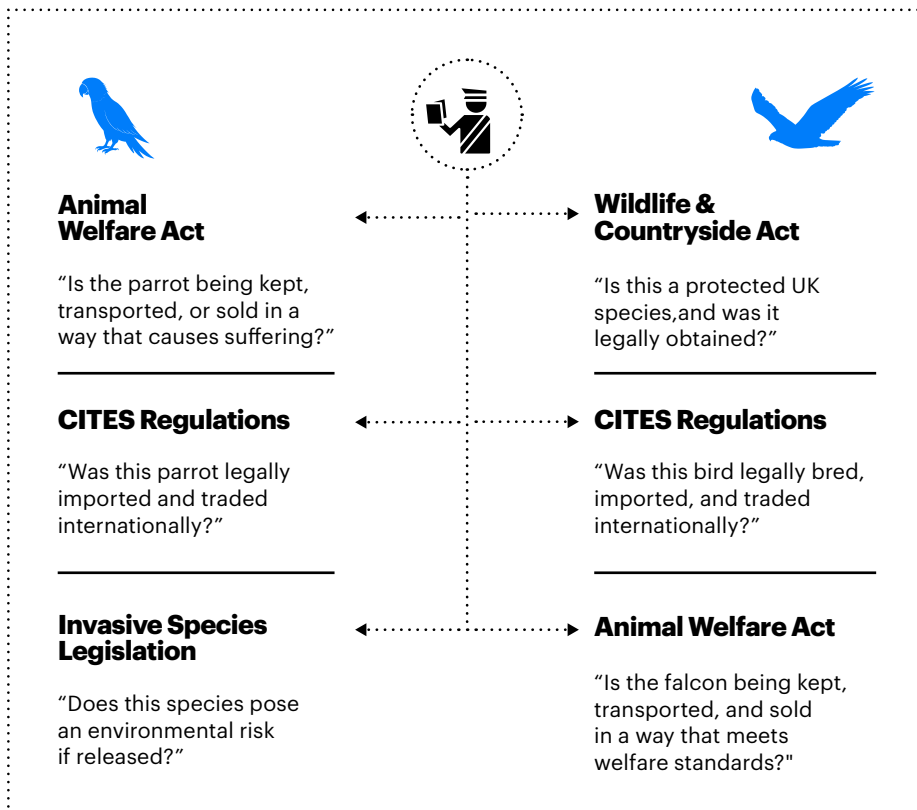
Those traded as wild pets may also be covered by international wildlife law such as the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

UK domestic laws allow a loophole meaning endangered species not listed under CITES but still rare and protected in their own countries can be sold as pets. The Western hognose snake which is endangered in Mexico yet appears in the UK pet trade is an example of this.

And enforcers often find themselves having to use several different laws to address one situation. For example, the Animal Welfare Act, the Wildlife & Countryside Act, CITES regulations, and an Invasive Species Order, would all have to be applied to prosecute for the trading of one endangered wild animal at a pet market.

Closing the legal loopholes

IFAW is calling for an equivalent of the USA's Lacey Act to close the loopholes created by the UK's current confusing tapestry of legislation. The Lacey Act criminalises the import, possession, and sale of wildlife obtained in violation of any foreign law. Together, these measures create clearer lines of legal responsibility, reducing the risk that US domestic markets unintentionally support exploitation of wildlife abroad.



◀ Numerous falcon eggs being illegally trafficked by smugglers, captured at an airport.

Tracking the trade – a data mishmash

Further complicating the protection of wild animals traded and kept in the UK is the lack of a dedicated and comprehensive database showing all wildlife held as pets across the nation. The biggest database relating to pet ownership is kept by the UK Pet Food (UKPF). Its Pet Population Report 2024, indicates a total non-aquatic pet population of 36 million animals² across 17 million households.

Cats and dogs clearly dominate the numbers, but the report also identifies hundreds of thousands of reptiles, amphibians, birds, and other non-traditional pet species kept in domestic settings.

Although the volume of information gathered is impressive, UKPF data categories about species are too broad to get a true indication of the wildlife trade and any trafficking involved. A UK government-backed comprehensive, trade-tracking system is urgently needed.

Dangerously deficient data

Some government figures – although not definitive – are formally kept for wild pets classed as dangerous under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act (DWAA) of 1976. The ‘dangerous’ classification means that under the Act, owners must have a licence issued by their local authority.

The Act was introduced to ensure that when dangerous wild animals are kept in private homes, they are not a risk to the public, and that their welfare is protected. Species listed under the Act include big cats like lynxes and cheetahs, primates such as chimpanzees and baboons, reptiles including alligators, venomous snakes and scorpions.

But according to the *Behind Closed Doors* research, UK licensing laws are not well understood by wild animal owners and so many wild animals kept in UK homes who should be licensed are not.

In total, 86% of owners acknowledged during the research that some species required licences; 84% of those who knew that their pet needed a licence did not actually possess one. And overall, 54% of the 620 wild pet owners surveyed said they didn’t know if their pets either past or present needed a licence.

Official licence numbers for 2023³, showed that more than 2,700 dangerous wild animals were officially licensed for private keeping across Great Britain under the DWAA. Numbers included more than 200 wild cats, 250 primates and 400 venomous snakes.

But given the clear lack of understanding and compliance regarding licensing, the numbers of dangerous wild animals kept are likely to be far higher. The consequences are greater risks to public safety and animal welfare.

Owners support wild pet protection

Most wild animal owners responding to the *Behind Closed Doors* survey believed it was wrong to acquire animals taken directly from the wild. Seventy nine percent said they would be unlikely to adopt or purchase

a pet if they discovered it was wild-caught. Such results suggest a clear consumer preference for captive-bred animals and an ethical community.

However, the captive breeding of wild animals is no solution to ending the suffering of wild pets. Captive-bred wildlife cannot in any way be considered ‘tame’, domestic pets.

"Wild animals play irreplaceable roles in the ecosystems we depend on. Their value lies in keeping our planet functioning and healthy, not in being kept in our homes for novelty or entertainment.

Captive-breeding does not make wildlife domesticated and it contributes to perpetuate a trade that puts animals, people, and nature at risk."

Ilaria Di Silvestre, Director of Policy & Advocacy, Europe, IFAW.



Photo: Julia Cumes / © IFAW

▲ A wild serval in the Maasai Mara. Servals are increasingly sought after as wild pets.

Listing pets – positively

Respondents also expressed clear support for strengthened regulation with 68% of owners supporting UK adoption of a 'Positive List' system. Rather than legislation determining which animals people cannot keep, a Positive List specifies all animal species that people are allowed to buy, sell and keep in their households as pets. List inclusion involves scientifically assessing wild animal species for their ability to thrive in captivity.⁴

Positive Lists are already in place in some EU countries including Belgium. The lists are intended to protect animal welfare, conserve wild species and reduce the risks of diseases and injury caused by animals to people. They are also intended to stop pets becoming 'invasive alien species' which can destroy the balance of delicate ecosystems.

For example, red-eared terrapins were first transported from the USA as pets during the 'Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles' cartoon craze of the 1980s.⁵ Once owners discovered the terrapins could grow from the size of a 50p coin size to that of a dinner plate, many were irresponsibly released into the wild.

Red eared terrapins have big appetites and can decimate native UK pondlife very quickly by eating plants, invertebrates, wildfowl eggs and young waterbirds. They can live up to 40 years in the wild.

Four percent of respondents to the *Behind Closed Doors* survey said they

had considered releasing their wild pet. Reasons given included the food and housing costs – including lighting and heating – veterinary fees, the animal too demanding to care for and the owner's inability to meet its needs.

Properly introduced and supported, Positive Lists should effectively reduce demand for, and regulate the trade in wildlife sold as pets in homes, on the high street, online, and on social media.

Social media driving trade

Behind Closed Doors research found that UK wild pet owners are interested in social media pictures and reels relating to wild animal ownership. And they agree that these can drive decisions in getting a wild pet. Social media and celebrity influence were seen as drivers for getting a wild pet by 29% of this group, particularly by younger owners aged 18–34.

But despite their enjoyment of online content regarding wild animals kept as pets, many owners expressed concerns about its impact of online content. Fifty seven percent of respondents said they believed that liking or sharing content featuring wild animals contributes to their exploitation. A similar proportion (59%) agreed that interacting with this type of content increases demand for keeping wildlife as pets.

Respondents also showed clear concerns about the origins of wild pets – whether they were captive bred or stripped out of the wild. And when viewing social media

posts depicting a wild animal in a domestic setting, 69% reported that they would be likely to question how or where the animal was acquired. Their level of scrutiny increased regarding online advertisements – 73% said they would question the origin of a wild animal shown in an online advertisement.

Although awareness of the negative impacts of social media wild animal pet trade is relatively high among current owners, they are still engaging with it.

Buying wild in the UK

Behind Closed Doors research shows that most respondents (41%) mostly get their wild pets through local or independent pet shops. This is followed by national chain pet stores (19%), and animals rehomed from friends, family members, or neighbours (12%). In contrast, purchases from online marketplaces (2%) and social media platforms (1%) were rare.

However, because of the legal loopholes in the UK, lack of testing and tracking of origins, there is no guarantee that animals bought in pet shops have not been taken from countries where they are rare and protected.

And several recent prosecutions have highlighted the wildlife crimes perpetrated by independent sellers.

▼ Red-eared terrapin.



Photo: © iStock / NHenring

“Cases such as these expose wildlife traders for what they really are: profit-driven criminals who put financial gain above the welfare of the animals that have had the misfortune of coming into their care...”

“Not only were these animals suffering at his hands, but many were endangered and being traded illegally. The trade of wild animals kept as pets doesn’t just harm individual creatures – it puts numerous vulnerable species at risk of extinction.”

Christian Plowman, Wildlife Cybercrime Program Manager, IFAW

A Staffordshire man illegally selling wild animals and causing them unnecessary suffering from his home-based, ‘pet shop,’ was given a 32-month sentence at Stafford Crown Court in February 2026. He was also handed a 10-year disqualification order banning him from trading or keeping animals.

Robert Gillian of Rugeley admitted participating in a fraudulent business as a sole trader, failing to ensure the welfare of animals and offering endangered species for sale without valid certification.

Cannock Chase District Council officers, the police and the RSPCA visited Robert Gillian’s home on two occasions during 2022 and 2023. On the first visit they found 162 animals suffering in squalid conditions.

Issues the officers highlighted in court included mould in the aviaries, dirty water, the decomposing body of a dead guinea pig, a lack of heating, and birds unable to stretch their wings or access food. The second visit showed no improvement. The animals kept by Gillian included four budgerigars, 10 parrots and 13 sugar glider possums.

Profiting from cruelty

Gillian had never held a licence for his business, but traded unlawfully under the name Staffordshire Pets. Analysis of his online activity discovered about

290 adverts for birds, reptiles and dogs. Conservative estimates put his turnover at about £300,000 over six years.

After the second visit by authorities, the animals were taken by Cannock Chase District Council’s environmental health team. They have since been rehomed.

“This case shows how easily wildlife traders can profit from cruelty when the law is riddled with gaps. Enforcement teams work tirelessly, but without the clear legal tools they need. So, investigations take time while animals suffer. Closing these loopholes is essential if we want to stop harm quickly and prevent future cases like this.”

Samara P. El-Haddad, Senior Programs Manager UK, IFAW

Forensic testing fights the trade

Illegal ‘laundering’ where wild-caught animals are falsely declared ‘captive-bred’ is a pervasive and common threat to wild species’ survival. Paperwork, and even captive bred labelling rings on CITES protected birds such as African grey parrots can be forged or tampered with. Such laundering allows wild-caught animals to be imported and sold in the UK.

Forensic testing is the only definitive way to establish wild animal origins. Rapid use forensic tools such as hand-held and non-invasive X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF) devices at ports and borders is a straightforward way to verify the origins of wild animals coming into the UK and disrupt illegal supply chains.

XRF quickly scans and measures the concentration of key minerals such as nickel, iron, calcium, chromium and zinc in an animal’s body. These concentrations can then be compared with typical levels found within animals living wild in their origin countries or those kept in captivity.

Stable Isotope Analysis (SIA) is a more labour intensive and lab-based way of determining animal origins. It depends on testing the carbon, nitrogen and hydrogen in keratinous tissue samples – fur, feathers, scales, from animals. From these, animal diets can be clearly linked to geographic regions from where the animals have been trafficked.

The amount of detail SIA provides is extremely effective evidence when used for high-level wildlife trade prosecutions. Finally, ‘molecular genetics’ – DNA – is the ultimate way of identifying the species being traded and geographically pinpointing trafficking hot spots. Molecular genetic evidence is admissible in international courts and its accuracy can help governments deploy enforcers to wildlife trading chains in specific areas.

Developing detection databases

Forensic testing cannot work in isolation. To effectively detect wildlife crime, every test must link with comprehensive, species-specific reference libraries – databases – to give a positive or negative result. These databases must contain mineral concentrations, isotope and DNA information for both wild and captive populations and relevant regions.

Currently, there's no single, joined up system that holds the wildlife data needed to properly investigate wildlife crime. In the UK, important samples and records already exist, but they're spread across different labs, universities and museums. Most were created for specific research projects, focused on particular species or places.

So while the UK has worldclass biological collections and scientists, there's no national framework that brings this information together in a way law enforcement teams can routinely use.

Globally, the gap is even bigger. Wildlife forensic databases often focus on just one group of animals, cover small regions, or weren't designed for policing. Many of the most biodiverse countries, those most targeted by illegal wildlife trade, don't have accessible or compatible reference data. As a result, investigators often lack the evidence needed to show whether an animal came from the wild or captivity, or where it originated, to support a prosecution.

In short: wildlife crime crosses borders, but the scientific systems needed to fight it don't. Fixing this requires national biobanks, shared standards, and international systems that can work together.

IFAW is supporting reference database development and working with enforcement agencies in the UK to support access to new technologies. Our aim is to ensure forensic tools are fully integrated into national efforts to prevent wildlife laundering and transnational trafficking.

▼ African grey parrot with feathers plucked out in a cage.



Photo: © anonymous

Ending the trade in wild lives

The UK's patchy legal landscape covering the wildlife trade is supporting a cruel legal and illegal industry that causes suffering to millions of animals every year. The wildlife trade is also firmly linked with the devastation of ecosystems globally.

The UK needs to align with UN standards and adopt legislation where wildlife offences are classed as 'serious crimes', punishable by a minimum of four years imprisonment. This will ensure powerful and meaningful support to the conservation efforts of other nations instead of fuelling global biodiversity's decline.

IFAW is calling for the UK government to urgently...

- ▶ **Introduce a UK version of the US Lacey Act** to criminalise the import, possession and sale of wildlife taken in violation of foreign laws. Such legislation would give the UK a powerful mechanism to close current legislative loopholes relating to the wildlife trade. And when coupled with an effective trade-tracking system, it would also allow the UK to powerfully protect global biodiversity to the highest international standards of conservation and animal welfare.
- ▶ **Deploy forensic tools** such as Stable Isotope Analysis (SIA) and X-Ray

Fluorescence (XRF) at ports and borders to verify the origins of specimens and disrupt illegal supply chains. Forensic intelligence, supported by comprehensive national and global species databases, is crucial to protect wild animals from trafficking, safeguard our planet's biodiversity and safeguard people from disease.

- ▶ **Implement regulatory reform** – the development of a Positive List system for wild animal ownership. This will ensure only animals capable of thriving in captivity can be kept as pets.

Members of the public can help end the suffering of wild animals kept as pets by...

- ▶ Refusing to like, comment on or share content online, that shows wild animals kept as pets. Your engagement increases visibility and demand.
- ▶ Never buy a wild animal as a pet, and challenge misinformation when you see it promoted on social media.
- ▶ By supporting stronger wildlife protection laws and helping raise awareness about the harms of the trade with wild animals for the pet market, you play a direct role in reducing demand and keeping wild animals where they belong—in the wild.

Behind Closed Doors – About our research

All survey data relating to UK wild pet owners presented in this report, unless otherwise stated, were collected by YouGov Plc, a leading independent public opinion research company. The analysis was conducted by IFAW.

The research involved an online self-completion questionnaire administered to members of YouGov's UK panel. This comprises more than 3 million individuals who have voluntarily agreed to participate in surveys. Fieldwork took place between 19 November and 1 December 2025.

The final sample consisted of 620 adults currently keeping at least one wild animal as a pet. Respondents from YouGov's UK panel who previously said they owned a wild animal as a pet were invited to take part in the survey panel and screened to ensure they still met this criteria.

For this research, a 'wild animal' was defined as any non-domesticated animal species. The owners of the following species and groups were explicitly excluded from the study: rabbits, guinea pigs, gerbils, domestic fowls, horses/ponies, mice, rats, sheep, goats, and pigs.



▲ Wildlife Officer Abby Smith, from the Department of Land, Water and Planning (DEWLP) with an illegally traded Goldfields Shingleback Lizard (*Tiliqua rugosa rugosa*) that was discovered in a tin can

Endnotes

1. Ethical analysis and critical issues – Exotic pets – Scottish Animal Welfare Commission: interim report – gov.scot
2. UK Pet Food. UK Pet Food Data Report 2024 [Internet]. London: UK Pet Food; 2024. Available from: <https://www.ukpetfood.org/>
3. Born Free Foundation. Dangerous Wild Animals (DWA) map [Internet]. Available from: <https://www.bornfree.org.uk/dwamap/>
4. UNTOLD – “Exotic Pet Trade Exposed” | World Animal Protection UK. Available from: <https://www.worldanimalprotection.org.uk/latest/blogs/untold-exotic-pet-trade-exposed/>
5. Terrapins | Invasive Species | Canal & River Trust. Available from: <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/things-to-do/canal-and-river-wildlife/canal-and-river-invasive-species/terrapins>

International Fund
for Animal Welfare

Behind closed doors –
how the normalisation of wild
pets is putting thousands of
species in peril.

UK Office
Fifth Floor,
81 Southwark Street,
London, SE1 0HX

020 7587 6700
info-uk@ifaw.org

Registered Charity No. 1024806
Registered Company No. 2701278

