

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

Executive Summary

A young sugar glider in a bird cage. © iStock / Kimberrywood

Wild animal – or ‘exotic pet’ ownership – appears to be 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 represent a 73% increase from 2023. Species seized included snakes, spiders and rare birds.

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

Demand is largely fuelled by social media which can quickly create wild pet stars. African grey parrots and serval cats are just two examples of wild pets with huge TikTok and

Instagram followings. But hidden from the entertaining feeds is the great mental and physical suffering wild animals kept as pets can endure. This can involve self-mutilation, anxiety, aggressive behaviours, injuries from bad handling and housing, and malnutrition. Other wildlife trade-associated problems include millions of animals dying during capture and transit; viral and bacterial infections spreading to other animals and people, and ecosystem destruction.

## Supporting global cruelty – wild animal ownership and UK law

Founded in 1969 to end the inhumane *Behind closed doors*, new research from the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), gives critical insights

into wild pet ownership in the UK. The research also powerfully shows how social media, patchy UK legislation, inadequate forensic testing to detect wild animal ‘laundering’, and inadequate ownership recording systems and databases exacerbate the trade. These problems result in animals protected in their own countries being sold in the UK.

A sample of 620 UK wild pet owners participated in the *Behind closed doors* research via YouGov Plc; IFAW conducted the analysis.

**ifaw**<sup>™</sup>



African grey parrot with feathers plucked out in a cage.

## Wild pet ownership in the UK – key findings

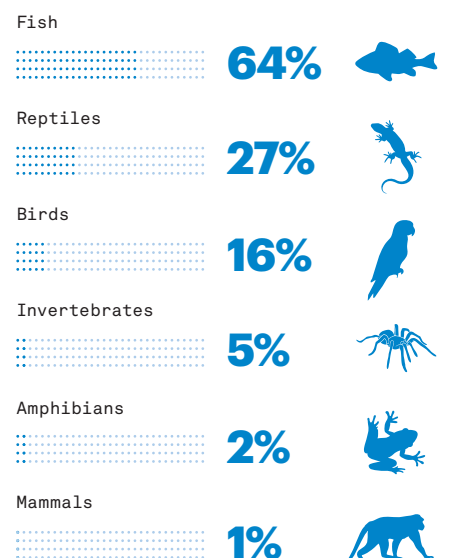
- ▶ **Licensing requirements for wild animals are misunderstood** by most owners – 54% of the 620 wild pet owners surveyed said they didn't know if their pets either past or present needed a licence. Worryingly, 84% of those who knew that their pet needed a licence did not actually possess one.
- ▶ **Most owners worry about owning wild-caught animals;** 79% of respondents said they would be very unlikely or likely to adopt or purchase a wild-caught pet.
- ▶ **There is strong support among owners (68%) for better regulations and a 'Positive List' system.** Positive Lists are already in place in some EU countries including Belgium. The system involves protecting animal welfare by scientifically assessing wild animal species for their ability

to thrive in captivity. It then specifically identifies all animal species that people are allowed to buy, sell and keep in their households as pets. Positive Lists are also designed to conserve wild species, protect people from disease and injury, and save local ecosystems from wild pet animals that could become 'invasive alien species'.

- ▶ **Social media and celebrity influence are considered drivers for wild pet ownership** by 29% of wild pet owners. And 57% of respondents said they believed that liking or sharing content featuring wild animals contributes to their exploitation.
- ▶ **Most respondents (41%) 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%).

## >3.4 million

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





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.

## How UK laws fail wildlife protection

UK laws protecting wildlife are a complex and unwieldy patchwork that makes enforcement difficult for authorities. Behind closed doors highlights loopholes and shows how enforcers may have to use several different laws to address one situation. For example, prosecution for the illegal trading of one wild animal at a pet market could involve the Animal Welfare Act, the Wildlife and Countryside Act, international regulations and an Invasive Species Order.

Furthermore, UK domestic laws currently allow endangered species, unlisted under the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), but protected in their own countries, to be sold as pets. The Western hognose snake endangered in Mexico and traded in the UK exemplifies this.

Illegal laundering, where wild-caught animals are falsely declared captive-bred, is a common and pervasive threat to species survival. Forging of paperwork and even captive bred labelling rings on CITES protected species are common methods of disguise. Detecting this criminality is difficult in the UK because forensic testing tools and access to them at ports and borders is limited.

### 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. Coupled with an effective trade-tracking system, this new legislation would also allow the UK to protect global biodiversity to the highest international standards of conservation and animal welfare.

► **Deploy forensic tools** such as X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF) and Stable Isotope Analysis (SIA) at ports and borders to verify the origins of wild animals and disrupt illegal supply chains.

► **Implement regulatory reform** — a Positive List system for pet animal ownership. This will ensure only animals capable of thriving in captivity and that pose no danger to people or local environments can be kept as pets.

**We must ensure that UK homes do not become the final destination for the world's most vulnerable wildlife**

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