

LIFE project's investigation leads to landmark wildlife crime case



Photo: Life Under Griffon Wings

10 January 2018 The anti-poison dog unit created by the **Life Under Griffon Wings** project has collected vital evidence for a court case in Sardinia (Italy).

The case involves a farmer who spread poisoned baits around his livestock pastures to kill predators, such as foxes and martens. However, instead, the victims were domestic dogs and cats, ravens, and a wild boar. If left in the field, the carcasses of poisoned animals remain a threat to other creatures in the food chain, including scavenging vultures.

The Life Under Griffon Wings project is implementing best practices to protect griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) in Sardinia. As a key action, the project team created an anti-poison dog unit at the start of 2016.

They trained King, a German shepherd dog, to detect poison baits in the field. This is the first time that the unit's activities have led to an indictment, and it will be the first case of this type to be prosecuted in Sardinia.

Trail of evidence

The Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale della Sardegna carried out the toxicological analyses of animal carcasses and baits, to identify the poisonous substances used in the baits. To prepare the case, the anti-poison dog unit and enforcement agents of the Corpo Forestale e di Vigilanza Ambientale, together with coordinating beneficiary the University of Sassari, worked in close collaboration with the Prosecutor's Office of the Province of Sassari.

In addition to the field and bait evidence that implicated the farmer, the investigation also involved the more usual range of investigative methods, such as police searches and testimonies from witnesses.

According to the Life Under Griffon Wings team: "The result of this investigation serves to remind people that animal poisoning is a crime which is severely punishable by the current law. But most importantly, the use of poison in the countryside is useless to eliminate the predator problem and causes a long chain of deaths to many innocent animals."

Protecting vultures



Photo: Life Under Griffon Wings

Sardinia's population of protected griffon vulture is concentrated in two Natura 2000 network sites on the coast of north-west Sardinia. These are the most important breeding sites for griffon vulture in Italy, and the wider Mediterranean area.

The Life Under Griffon Wings project aims to decrease vulture mortality due to poisoning. It is also increasing the availability of food in foraging areas, enhancing population viability via restocking, improving a wildlife rescue centre and promoting eco-tourism. For further information, see the **project's website**.

As well as being a major threat to vultures, the setting of poison baits is a risk to biodiversity in general and to human health. The LIFE programme has funded the creation of anti-poison dog units through

a series of projects, such as **VENENO NO**,

HELICON, **PannonEagle Life**, **LIFE WOLFALPS** and **LIFE Rupis**, in Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Portugal, Spain and other countries. Evidence collected by these dog units has led to an increase in the number of prosecutions for illegal poisoning in the EU.

You can read all about the success of these, and other projects addressing the problem of illegal poisoning, in the upcoming LIFE focus publication 'LIFE and Wildlife Crime'.

Thermal census scouts out agricultural pests in laser fence project



Photo: LIFE Laser Fence

09 January 2018 **LIFE Laser Fence** is investigating whether an innovative laser technology called Agrilaser can deter agricultural pests. The project team has completed the first trial of a prototype that emits an unsettling array of laser beams. They are now testing how effectively this so-called laser fence keeps rabbits and other hungry mammals out of fields and orchards.

The laser fence is based on technology developed for bird deterrence, says project manager Dr Martin Sharp, of coordinating beneficiary Liverpool John Moores University in the UK. "The business of our Dutch partner Bird Control Group is to provide these systems to keep birds away from places they are not welcome, like airports and food processing factories," he said. "The idea of using them as a ground animal deterrent is something that has not been tested before."

As part of the project, IRIS, a Spanish company specialising in remote sensing, flew drones fitted with visible, multispectral and thermal imaging equipment to identify animals and assess plant biomass at sites with laser fencing. Camera traps and CCTV were also deployed.

IRIS and Liverpool John Moores University are currently processing large amounts of information from trial farms in the UK, the Netherlands and Spain. The project team plans to have a strong portfolio of data for all the target pest species and plant types by mid-2018.

Focusing on mammals

Dr Sharp explains that one of the main thrusts of the project is to deter rodents. This could reduce rodenticide use, and damage to fodder and cash crops, with benefits all along food chains. The project team will notably start work on rats in 2018, deploying lasers near grain silos.

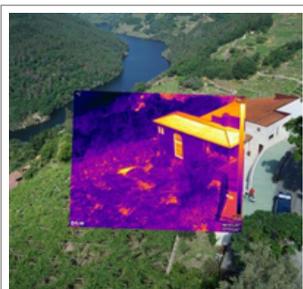


Photo: LIFE Laser Fence

“Most of the past year’s work has been based around rabbits, which reduce the quality of grassland as a feedstock for cattle,” said Dr Sharp. “We are about to start field trials in Germany looking at wild boar, which can be very disruptive and damaging to crops.”

Another target species is the European badger (*Meles meles*), a particularly pressing issue in the UK given its disputed link with the transmission of Bovine Tuberculosis to cattle. Dr Sharp describes the a laser fence that could help exclude badgers from fields with cattle as a very positive potential outcome.

Lights, Action

To study the responses of the target animals to laser light, the **LIFE Laser Fence** team fires laser beams from either a hand-held device or from an automated turret.

The Laser Fence system is a portable tool that provides a continuous projection of bright laser light over a predetermined path. It can be fitted at different heights, depending on the target species and the control area to cover. At night it operates using less power, because the beam does not need to be as bright.