Children Can Legally Buy Weapons Used to Kill Wildlife, MPs Warned

Tuesday 3 March, 2026

MPs have been warned that anyone - including children - can legally buy weapons capable of killing wildlife, as a legal loophole allows catapults and slingshots to be sold cheaply and without restriction across England and Wales.

The warning was issued during a Parliamentary briefing hosted by Naturewatch Foundation, which highlighted growing evidence that catapults are being deliberately misused to injure and kill wildlife, damage property and intimidate rural communities. Despite their potential to cause serious harm, catapults remain completely unregulated in England and Wales, with **no minimum age for purchase and no meaningful controls on sale or power.**

Naturewatch Foundation warned MPs that current legislation leaves police and communities powerless to act. Officers are unable to confiscate catapults unless another offence has already been committed, and incidents involving catapults are not recorded as a specific crime. This means the true scale of wildlife harm, antisocial behaviour and community impact is significantly underestimated. The event room in Parliament was kindly sponsored by Max Wilkinson MP.

"These items being sold are not toys and it is not harmless mischief," ***said Jim Clark, Wildlife Crime Campaign Manager at Naturewatch Foundation.*** *"Modern catapults are capable of lethal force. Legislative failure to tackle this issue is costing wildlife their lives, traumatising communities and putting unnecessary pressure on already overstretched police forces. It's a loophole that urgently needs closing."*

Wildlife rescue centres across the UK continue to report rising numbers of injured and killed animals, including swans, birds, hedgehogs, squirrels and domestic pets, many believed to have been deliberately targeted using catapults and crossbows.

At Vale Wildlife Hospital & Rehabilitation Centre, birds accounted for 50 of 53 wildlife shooting victims treated in the years 2023-2025, though the centre warns the true scale is likely far higher, with thousands of cases recorded as "unknown trauma".

Calls for Change

Alongside the Parliamentary briefing, Naturewatch Foundation has launched a public petition calling for catapult sales to be restricted to over-18s, urging both government action and greater responsibility from major retailers.

The petition calls on the Policing Minister, Sarah Jones MP, to support legislation closing the loophole that allows catapults to be sold without restriction, while also pressing retailers to introduce immediate voluntary age checks and remove high-powered catapults from toy and sports categories.

"Retailers have the power to act now, even before the law changes," **Jim Clark added.** *"When a leading retailer continues to sell unregulated weapons to anyone of any age, it enables harm that is entirely preventable."*

Some retailers are taking voluntary steps ahead of legislation. Gumtree, one of the UK's largest marketplaces for local buying and selling, now prohibits the sale of catapults and slingshots on its platform, following campaigning from Naturewatch Foundation.

Andy Harper, CEO of Gumtree, stated: *"Animal cruelty has no place in society, and we are committed to ensuring our platform is not used to facilitate the sale of items that could contribute to such harm.''*

Naturewatch Foundation is campaigning for:

- The introduction of an age restriction of 18+ for purchasing catapults and slingshots
- Exploration of sales controls similar to those used for knives and air weapons
- Prevention of sales of ultra-high-powered devices marketed irresponsibly for "hunting"
- Improvement of crime recording to accurately capture catapult-related offending

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Naturewatch Foundation stressed that catapult misuse is not a niche issue: Wildlife crime linked to catapults is widespread but underreported; damage to livestock, pets, vehicles and property is increasing; wildlife deaths undermine conservation efforts and local tourism and public support for stronger wildlife protection is consistently high.

ENDS

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About Naturewatch Foundation: Naturewatch Foundation is a UK-based animal welfare charity dedicated to ending cruelty and improving the lives of animals through campaigning, education and advocacy. For over 30 years, the charity has led initiatives to tackle illegal and unethical practices, including puppy farming, animal experiments and wildlife crime. By working with policymakers, enforcement agencies and the public, Naturewatch Foundation strives to make the world a kinder place for animals. Visit naturewatch.org to find out more.

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