

Cumbrian Police Officer receives Naturewatch Foundation Challenge Coin award for outstanding work tackling wildlife crime

Tuesday 24 June, 2025

A dedicated police officer from Cumbria has been recognised for exceptional work tackling wildlife crime. Wildlife Coordinator, Sam O'Key has received a Challenge Coin from animal welfare charity Naturewatch Foundation for her outstanding role in investigating and disrupting criminal operations targeting animal welfare.

At a surprise event on 24th June, Sam was presented with the Challenge Coin by Sarah Carr, the CEO of Naturewatch Foundation alongside Amanda Mckirdy, Rural Crime Team Supervisor. Sam was cited by Jim Clark, who leads the charity's wildlife crime work, for her textbook investigative dedication and steadfast commitment to protecting our ever-persecuted wildlife. Through her meticulous work, she has played an instrumental role in cases that have exposed criminal networks, and her work serves as a benchmark that peers across the country should aspire to. Sam also sits on the national Badger Persecution Priority Delivery Group, which works to offer this vulnerable species the protection it deserves in England and Wales.

Sam O'Key, said:

"Since taking on the role of Wildlife Coordinator for Cumbria Police in 2018 I have worked closely with Naturewatch Foundation to bring those that would harm our wildlife to justice."

"Without the support of Naturewatch Foundation and other partner agencies who work tirelessly to identify these individuals we would not be able to disrupt their illegal activities in the way that we do. Receiving this challenge coin as recognition of the work I have been doing was not only unexpected but quite overwhelming. Thank you to the Naturewatch Foundation team for your support and this recognition"

Sarah Carr, CEO of Naturewatch Foundation, said:

"Naturewatch Foundation launched the Challenge Coin to celebrate the remarkable work of individuals who are determined to improve animal welfare and tackle cruelty. A Challenge Coin is a treasured, sought-after award. My heartfelt thanks to Sam for her amazing work tackling rural and wildlife crime and my congratulations for being the first recipient of one of our Challenge Coins!"

Chief Constable Darren Martland of Cumbria Constabulary said:

"Congratulations to our dedicated Wildlife Crime Officer PC Sam O'Key on receiving the award. This award is a testament to her hard work and determination to tackle wildlife crime, bringing offenders to justice and supporting our partner agencies to protect our wildlife."

Darren Martiland, Chief Constable of Cumbria Police, said:

"Congratulations to our dedicated Wildlife Crime Officer PC Sam O'Key on receiving the award."

"This award is a testament to her hard work and determination to tackle wildlife crime, bringing offenders to justice and supporting our partner agencies to protect our wildlife."

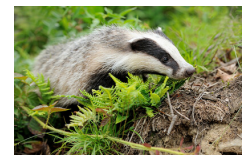
Jim Clark, Campaign Manager at Naturewatch Foundation, said:

"Sam is genuinely a great police officer, and a classic example of a wildlife police officer who cares. When our charity created the Naturewatch Foundation Challenge Coin and it was decided who, and why an individual deserves this recognition, our team quickly came to the same conclusion, that without doubt Sam deserves the first one. Sam is a model of a great wildlife officer and a true advocate for the protection of our wildlife"

Recognising outstanding achievements – Naturewatch Foundation Challenge Coin

The Naturewatch Foundation Challenge Coins are presented to individuals whose work goes above and beyond to support and promote the charity's mission and values, in essence, work that contributes to

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'advancing animal welfare'. A challenge coin is a small coin that features the insignia or emblem of an organisation or group and traditionally, these coins are awarded to service members and law enforcement personnel for exceptional achievements. Using the charity's mission and values and the words inscribed on the coin of 'committed, caring, compassionate and campaigning' as the starting point for evaluation, a maximum of four Naturewatch Foundation Challenge Coin awards are made each year. Sam is receiving the first Naturewatch Foundation Challenge Coin.

Disturbing findings about wildlife crime

In the UK, many wild animals are protected by law, making it illegal to harm or kill them, sell or trade them, or interfere with them, for example, by stealing eggs or destroying their habitats. Wildlife crime is often linked to broader issues, such as organised crime, damage to rural communities, and habitat degradation, making it an important focus for many law enforcement agencies.

Despite the legislation in place, wildlife crime continues to be rife. From barbaric 'blood sports' like badger baiting and hare coursing to deliberate or reckless damage to their environment. From the illegal taking of animals from the wild for the wildlife trade to further cruelty on home soil, such as fox digging, our wildlife continues to be at risk. Naturewatch Foundation is currently campaigning to 'make wildlife crime count' – calling on the UK Home Office to make wildlife crime a 'notifiable' offence.

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