

Sharp rise in cruelty to animals

By James Erlichman

THE RSPCA is demanding tougher sentencing from magistrates in an attempt to halt a sharp rise in cruelty offences. Cruelty convictions rose by 10 per cent, exceeding 3,000 for the first time last year. But magistrates issued 10 per cent fewer banning orders preventing offenders from keeping animals.

"This is a trend we do not like," said Richard Davies, the society's chief officer. "We do not see ourselves as a punitive organisation, but it is particularly frustrating when defendants walk away following conviction with little or no constraints on abusing animals again. Worse still, they can even be reunited with animals they have already abused."

The society published a dossier of the worst cases, including a foal with deep nose wounds from a head collar which became embedded as the animal grew, and a puppy with similar injuries caused by a collar which cut into its flesh.

Unemployed people were the most frequent offenders (584), followed by housewives (213) and farmers and farm workers (93). Convictions for cruelty to birds rose most sharply, followed by those for cruelty against cats. But convictions involving farm animals fell. The biggest decline, despite the wave of recent atrocities, involved horses where convictions fell from 172 in 1991 to 81 last year.

Only half of those convicted by magistrates were banned from keeping animals. Court bans lasted

for four years on average.

Caerphilly magistrates imposed youth detention on a gang of children who hacked off the legs and tail of a cat before tossing it on a bonfire, but they failed to ban them from keeping animals.

The RSPCA wants an automatic 10-20 year ban on conviction for injuries and neglect and a life ban for causing death to any animal. The society is backing its campaign with national advertising and will be meeting shortly with the Magistrates' Association.

Most cases come under the 1911 Protection of Animals Act, which gives magistrates power to fine offenders up to £5,000 and send them to prison for six months. But of 1,456 convicted defendants last year, only 40 were jailed.

Lambs' legs are 'cut off in womb'

THE front legs of live lambs are being routinely cut off in the womb to protect the lives of their more valuable mothers in difficult births.

The illegal practice has been revealed by a distressed farm stockman, who maintains that amputations on farms are widespread, driven by relentless supermarket demands for cheaper meat.

Several veterinary sources have confirmed his story, and say the practice is increasing. One estimate is that this year more than 50,000 lambs will be killed in this way.

The stockman, who works in the West Country, and cannot be identified, said: "The stress of having to reach in with a knife and cut off the live lamb's legs is terrible, but I have no choice if I am going to save the ewe."

Lambs most at risk are those born singly to lowland ewes, which have been bred small to consume less food, but also to have twins or triplets. Multiple births put great stress on the ewe but are usually safe. Danger arises when the intensive farming techniques fail and a ewe conceives and carries only a single lamb. Without competition in the womb, it often grows too large and ultimately gets stuck in the narrow birth canal.

Some stockmen prefer a knife to sever the legs at the joint. Others use a wire that works like a fretsaw. The legs are amputated because they usually appear first, and removing them at the shoulder creates space for the head to be pulled through.

David Henderson, president of the

Sheep Veterinary Society, condemned the practice, known as embryotomy. "If the lamb has grown too big to remove it, the ewe should be taken to a veterinarian to perform a caesarian."

Few farmers do this because the price of sheep meat has fallen steadily in real terms over the last 10 years while vets' fees have risen. The ewe and lamb together are worth only £50, less than a vet would charge for the operation.

In addition, hormone treatments are used routinely to regulate pregnancies so births occur more closely together. This brings costs down, but a single stockman with 1,000 ewes may have to oversee up to 100 births a day, giving him little time for special treatment for any animal.

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