

Now French probe poisoned tycoon

FRENCH police are now investigating the suspicious death of a Russian whistleblower who collapsed and died at his Surrey estate after allegedly meeting his assassin in Paris.

Alexander Perepilichny, who sought asylum in the UK in 2010, was found dead outside his Weybridge mansion after going for a run on November 10, 2012.

Surrey Police initially ruled out foul play, but it recently emerged that his body had traces of a rare poison used by Russian and Chinese assassins.

French magistrates have now sent officers to investigate two five-star hotels in Paris where

By Robert Verkaik

Perepilichny, 44, is believed to have met a Russian contact in the days before his death.

According to Russian news agency RosBalt, the tycoon had been assisting Moscow police by providing the names of corrupt officials whose fortunes he had helped to invest. It also linked a Chechen hitman to the investigation.

Valid Lurakhmaev, whose whereabouts are not known, is on Russia's most wanted list and is said to have had a large file on Perepilichny at his Moscow home, which was raided in 2012. Lurakhmaev



VICTIM: Alexander Perepilichny

was also known to be a frequent visitor to France.

Surrey Police are under pressure to say why they ruled out murder in Perepilichny's death. A spokesman said: 'The matter was handed over to the coroner in June 2013 after a police investigation. Following the hearing, the coroner has asked for some additional work to be carried out to seek clarification on some areas.'

The full inquest is due to take place in September.

Botham:

By Jo Knowsley

SIR Ian Botham has threatened legal action against the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, claiming the 126-year-old organisation has accused him of illegally killing birds of prey.

Lawyers for the England cricket legend sent a stern letter to the charity after comments it made on the BBC last week about him. Sir Ian, who fronts You Forgot The Birds – a grassroots campaign by farmers and conservationists who want to force RSPB reform – says the claims are completely untrue.

'I was more than a little annoyed when the RSPB accused me on the BBC of illegally killing birds of prey,' he writes in today's Mail on Sunday. 'Have they heard of the law of libel? I don't take kindly to being lied about and my lawyers – who make me look like a pussycat – have written to the RSPB.'

Six months ago in The Mail on Sunday, Sir Ian launched a sweeping attack on the leadership of the RSPB, saying it was a 'dictatorship' that had betrayed bird lovers and the species it was meant to save.

In the past couple of weeks the 59-year-old has renewed his battle against the charity, in particular fighting its demands for the licensing of grouse moors.

And today, Sir Ian lands a further body blow on the RSPB, arguing that things have got worse rather than better.

He says the Advertising Standards Authority has written to his campaign pointing out it has forced the RSPB to withdraw 'misleading' advertising claims, including a statement that 90 per cent of its £128million income 'goes directly to conservation work'.

'This means that the regulator considers a claim was not just "deceptive" but also caused people to make decisions they would not otherwise have made,' Sir Ian says. And he urges the 1.1million people who have donated to the RSPB to consider demanding their money back. 'If a bank had mis-sold in this way we wouldn't put up with it,' he writes. 'So why should we with a charity?'

Sir Ian also launches another stinging attack on the charity's 'bunkered leadership', which he claims hampers its grassroots conservation work.

The RSPB would not win the respect of the countryside, he adds, until it stops 'constantly slurring gamekeepers as criminals' – 'They do this because it gives them a class war propaganda line against "shooting toffs" to help whip up donations.'

'The real conservationists within the RSPB appreciate that gamekeepers provide the best conditions for many of Britain's most endangered birds. They understand how ground-nesting birds thrive where heather abounds and gamekeepers are giving them 24-hour protection from marauding foxes.'

'Would you choose to raise a family in lawless Kabul or in peaceful Chipping Norton?'

'The RSPB's bosses think that they can go around "teaching" the countryside without first gaining its respect. Change is only going to happen when regulators force the RSPB's leaders to focus on helping birds instead of lecturing others.'

Last night the RSPB confirmed that it had received a letter from lawyers acting on behalf of Sir Ian's campaign.

A spokesman for the charity said: 'Our lawyers have responded and the matter is now in their hands. With that in mind, we do not wish to comment further.'

EVERY failing leader has their symbol. It is the iconic blunder that sums up their flaws. For Mike Clarke, chief executive of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, it is 100,000 tree stumps. A week ago his RSPB confessed that it had illegally cut down these trees due to an 'administrative error' that could cost the charity £9million in fines.

In addition to that price tag there are now 100,000 fewer homes for birds and a lot more CO₂ in the atmosphere, so it wasn't a great day for nature. This head office incompetence is infuriating for the dedicated RSPB staff whose hands-on work gets overshadowed.

My message to Mr Clarke is that it is time for him to consider his position.

For tree-felling was not the RSPB's only collision with the law last week. On a personal level I was more than a little annoyed when the charity accused me on the BBC of illegally killing birds of prey. Have they heard of the law of libel? I don't take kindly to being lied about and my lawyers – who make me look like a pussycat – have written to the RSPB.

Much more importantly, the Advertising Standards Authority wrote to my You Forgot The Birds campaign saying it had forced the RSPB to withdraw two advertising claims which were 'misleading' in that they wrongly claimed the RSPB was spending 90 per cent of its income on 'conservation'. The reality

'I don't take kindly to being lied about'

is that it is much, much less – closer to 26 per cent.

'Misleading' is an important word for the ASA. It means that the regulator considers a claim was not just 'deceptive' but also caused people to make decisions they would not otherwise have made.

Now I am pleased the ASA has been decisive and that it believes that, following these changes, the RSPB's advertising 'is no longer misleading'. But what about the 1.1million people who have donated money to the RSPB under the previous misleading claims? If a bank had mis-sold in this way we wouldn't put up with it. So why should we with a charity?

For this reason I am inviting Mail on Sunday readers who have donated to the RSPB to email me at beefy@youforgotthebirds.com if they would like me to help them claim their money back.

The ASA is not the only regulator worried about the RSPB's leadership. The Charity Commission has told me that its chairman called in Mr Clarke for a discussion. I don't know what kind of fire was breathed down his neck, but I could imagine it was along the lines of 'stop upsetting so many bird lovers and focus on the hard work of giving nature a home'.

The RSPB's grassroots conservation work can only function well when it has good working relations in the rural areas. Yet over recent months its bunkered leadership have seemed intent on alienating the entire countryside.

They've upset bird lovers ranging from pigeon fanciers and falconers to songbird enthusiasts and farmers, along with my friends on the grouse moors. Gerry Francis, the former England football captain who represents pigeon racing, knows, like me, that leadership authority has to be earned. Yet the RSPB's bosses think that they can go around 'teaching' the countryside without

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