A Green Future for Species?

Earlier this year the Government published its long awaited 25 Year Plan, “A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment”. This aims to achieve thriving plants and wildlife, with a list of actions including targets for protected sites and the wider countryside, increasing woodland cover and preventing human induced extinctions. However, the plan lacks any specific programme for species recovery and, while it contains exciting ambitions, we urge MPs to press for clear, measurable and ambitious targets for our wildlife.

We invite Species Champions to a round table meeting with the Environment Minister and bittern champion, Dr. Thérèse Coffey, on Tuesday 6 March, 1145 – 1230, to discuss the 25 Year Plan and species conservation. An invitation accompanies this newsletter.

In the last 6 months, six MPs have joined the project: James Cartlidge (Turtle Dove), Damien Moore (Natterjack Toad), Layla Moran (Skylark), Tim Loughton (Yellowhammer), Debbie Abrahams (Dunlin) and John Glen (Pheasant’s-eye). We welcome the new Species Champions and hope they will have the chance to see their species in the coming months.

Making our Farms more Friendly for Wildlife

It is no surprise that most species championed by MPs have a link to farmland as agriculture occupies 70% of the UK’s land area and intensive farming methods are the single biggest threat to biodiversity. The UK’s post Brexit agriculture policy is a vital opportunity to focus on restoring our natural capital, while supporting production that is sustainable, innovative and humane.

Michael Gove’s speech to the Oxford Farming Conference in January signalled his intention for farmers to be paid public money for public goods. This means the end of the Basic Payment Scheme and its replacement with a system that pays for a range of public goods, principal among them environmental enhancement. Details will be set out in a Command Paper later in the spring and the proposals will be subject to consultation.

The Species Champions partner organisations welcome the new policy direction and we’re calling for it to be adequately funded and swiftly implemented. A recent report by the RSPB, The Wildlife Trusts and the National Trust estimated that, of the £3bn currently spent on agriculture each year, £2.3bn must be invested in land management that also looks after nature. As many farmland species are already in steep decline, transition to this new policy needs to begin without delay.

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MPs standing up for our most threatened wildlife
Urban Butterfly Indicator

Public recording of species is vital for scientific research. Butterfly recording initiatives range from those targeted at beginners (Big Butterfly Count) to experts (weekly UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme transects).

UKBMS data was used to compare trends for 28 species in urban and countryside environments. Butterflies were found to be declining more rapidly in urban areas (69% decline in abundance) than in the countryside (~45%). The Small Copper (championed by Alison McGovern) declined much more dramatically in towns and cities (~75%) than in the countryside (~23%).

Urban parks, gardens and brownfield sites and farms act as important refuges for butterflies and other wildlife but in recent years these areas have come under increasing pressure from development, habitat loss and climate change. This study has increased the awareness of the plight of our urban butterflies and shows the value of citizen science data in helping to shape policy and future conservation strategies.

Want more information?
For more information on the Species Champions project visit our microsite at: www.buglife.org.uk/specieschampions

Government’s Clean Air Strategy must take action to protect wildlife

Lichens have long been used as an indicator of clean air, but air pollution is now one of the greatest threats to native wildlife. Nitrogen emitted from transport, farming and industry is deposited into nature, acting as a fertiliser.

Most of our wildflowers cannot cope with such rich conditions, with huge knock-on effects for the bees, butterflies and other species that depend upon them. As a result, nitrogen-loving plants such as nettles, cow parsley and hemlock now dominate field margins, road verges, woodlands and grasslands. At least 96% of the area of sensitive habitats in England already has excessive nitrogen levels.

The Government’s 2018 Clean Air Strategy must set out clear actions and funding to cut ammonia emissions from farming and to protect our wildlife from this ‘invisible’ threat.