Cyswllt Amgylchedd Cymru | Wales Environment Link

Newsletter #4: Spring 2021

Species Champions

Members of the Senedd standing up for threatened and at-risk species

Could 2021 be the year we save threatened species across the world?

The elusive adder, the charismatic puffin and the humble dormouse are all iconic species for Wales and WEL is hugely grateful for to all Species Champions for standing up for Welsh wildlife. But the natural world knows no borders and, clearly, our wildlife here in Wales is part of an interconnected global ecosystem. So if we are to protect our iconic species effectively, we need Governments across the world to agree to stand up for wildlife. That is precisely what we hope will happen at the Conference on the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) at Kunming in China, currently planned for this autumn.

We hope that this conference will be for biodiversity what the Paris Agreement is for the global climate. Whilst any national government can act to protect wildlife within its own borders, things are only likely to change at an international level if the world's most powerful governments all make commitments to act, backed up by undertakings on monitoring, evaluation, reporting and verification.

That's what we hope will happen at Kunming and the UK Government is keen to play a key role; but if this is to happen, **they will need to show that all four nations committed to the sorts of targets that they want others to adopt.** WEL believes that if we are serious about protecting threatened wildlife in Wales, we need to support the principal of a global target to restore biodiversity in domestic law.

The good news is that the Welsh Government has already, along with the Scottish Government, signed up to the 'Edinburgh Declaration', which makes clear the readiness of many so-called subnational governments to play a full part in the global action to protect and enhance biodiversity. **What's more, Lesley Griffiths has spoken positively about the idea of setting statutory biodiversity targets in the Senedd. So watch this space.** WEL thanks all its Species Champions for consistently highlighting nature's plight and we ask all MSs from all parties to consider supporting statutory nature targets for Welsh nature.

Who are the Senedd's Species Champions?

Adder - Hefin David
Arctic Tern - Hannah Blythyn
Ash Tree - David Melding
Atlantic Puffin - Paul Davies
Atlantic Salmon - David Rees
Bilberry Bee - Leanne Wood
Black Oil Beetle - Rebecca Evans
Bottlenose Dolphin - Joyce Watson
Brown Trout - Kirsty Williams
Chough - Rhun ap Iorwerth
Common Toad - Jeremy Miles
Curlew - Mark Isherwood
Dormouse - Llŷr Gruffydd
European Eel - Dawn Bowden
Fen Raft Spider - Caroline Jones
Freshwater Pearl Mussel - Nick Ramsay
Greater Horseshoe - Angela Burns
Grey Seal - Dai Lloyd
Harbour Porpoise - Janet Finch-Saunders
Hedgehog - Lee Waters
High Brown Fritillary - Jane Hutt
Honeycomb Worm - Siân Gwenllian
Lapwing - Huw Irranca-Davies
Lesser Horseshoe Bat - Suzy Davies
Native Oyster - Julie James
Nightjar - Vikki Howells
Pearl-bordered Fritillary - Russell George
Pine Marten - Eluned Morgan
Red Squirrel - Darren Millar
Redshank - Jack Sargeant
Sewin - Elin Jones
Shelduck - Jayne Bryant
Shrill Carder Bee - Delyth Jewell
Small Blue Butterfly - Mike Hedges
Sphagnum Moss - Alun Davies
Swift - Jenny Rathbone
Twite - Siân Gwenllian
Water Vole - John Griffiths
Waxcap Mushroom - Julie Morgan
Welsh Daffodil - Vaughan Gething
Yellowhammer - Andrew RT Davies

Contributors: Rory Francis, WEL; Emily Williams, RSPB; Billie-Jade Thomas, MCS; Kate Rees, National Trust; Jenny Hawley, Plantlife.
Photo credits: Tree - Liz Smith; Bat - Dulcie Fairweather; GBBC volunteers - MCS; PPE litter - Natasha Ewins; Snowdon river - National Trust & Natural Resources Wales.







Why Wales needs a Seabird Recovery Strategy

Wales is responsible for significant populations of seabirds: we hold more than half the world's Manx shearwaters and the fourth largest gannet colony in the world! Some populations of seabirds found here, such as the Atlantic puffin, are also increasing after historic declines, even after facing potential global extinction. **Wales clearly has a pivotal role to play in seabird conservation.**

Whilst some species are doing better here than elsewhere, the overall picture is worrisome. Some seabird species have experienced severe declines here, including breeding kittiwakes which have dropped 35% since 1986. There are also other seabirds (little tern and sandwich tern) restricted to a single colony in Wales. A recent evaluation of progress shows that, across the UK, **governments have made the least progress on conserving seabirds** (as compared to progress on protecting other aspects of the marine ecosystem).

Seabirds face numerous dangers. These include climate change impacts; entanglement in plastic and fishing gear; disturbance; predators at breeding sites; poorly sited marine development; and loss of habitat. Going forward, many of these threats are likely to increase. For example, development (such as renewable energy) is likely to grow significantly in Welsh waters. This needs to be carefully planned for to ensure sensitive areas for seabirds and other wildlife are protected. A marine development plan would be one way to do this. However, action is also needed to address the current status of seabirds and to boost their resilience, as well as to prevent further declines.

It is clear that we will need wide-ranging and urgent action if we are to halt declines in seabirds. **We believe a Welsh Seabird Recovery Strategy, with an associated and funded action plan, is needed to focus efforts and ensure we boost their resilience,** in the face of ever-increasing threats. We thank all our seabird Champions for working with us and we hope can support this idea.

Check out CAT's new bat!

In December, the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) were surprised to find a greater horseshoe bat hibernating in a disused heater control room; they couldn't be more welcome! Read more about the discovery here.

One of the lesser horseshoe bats already happily in hibernation at the Centre.



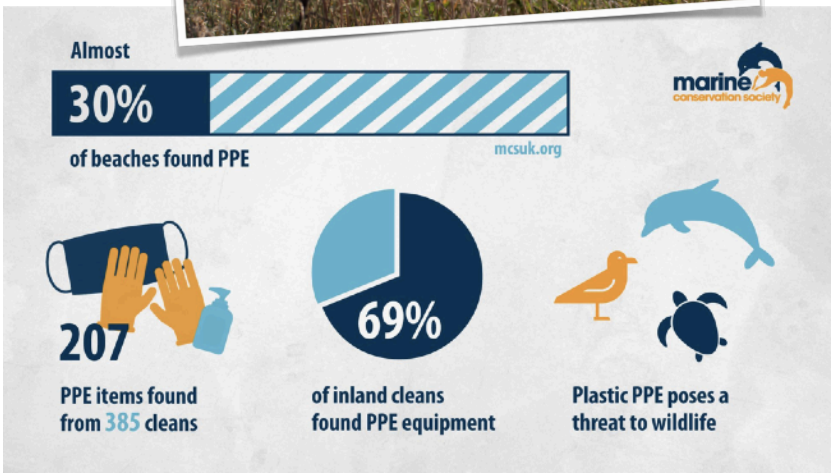
PPE among problem plastic items found on Welsh shores during MCS's Great British Beach Clean



Despite the ongoing challenges of Covid-19, the Marine Conservation Society's Great British Beach Clean (GBBC) went ahead in the autumn, showcasing the persistent impact of single-use plastic on our shores.

The results of the GBBC were published towards the end of 2020, showing that an average of 237.5 items of litter were found per 100m of Welsh coastline. The most common items found on our beaches included: miscellaneous plastic and polystyrene pieces; string; bottle caps and lids; sweet, crisp and sandwich packets; and cigarette stubs. Worryingly, PPE litter – such as disposable face masks and gloves – was also present on almost 30% of the beaches cleaned during the UK-wide event.

Thanks to the work of 143 volunteers, over 3,000m of Welsh beaches were cleared and surveyed during 32 events as part of the charity's first week-long clean. Mark Drakeford, Janet Finch-Saunders and Llŷr Gruffydd MS were among those who participated in the annual citizen science project and we're very grateful for their support. Volunteers were asked to record items of PPE for the first time, with a concerning number of items found.



Lizzie Prior, GBBC Coordinator, said: *"Like many other single-use items, disposable face masks and gloves pose a threat to wildlife on land and at sea. Marine animals could mistake face masks and gloves for prey, filling their stomachs with materials which will not break down and could prove to be fatal. Animals also risk being tangled in the straps of face masks, with seabirds' feet pictured recently being wrapped in the elastic strings."*



The GBBC is supported by players of the People's Postcode Lottery and has been running for more than 27 years. This year's event was adapted to ensure the safety of all involved in light of the pandemic, with smaller cleans replacing mass events.

Restoring a river in the shadow of Snowdon

River restoration work has been taking place in Snowdonia as part of the Upper Conwy Catchment Project to create a cleaner, healthier and more resilient environment. The latest phase of the catchment-scale project between the National Trust and Natural Resources Wales has focused on Nant y Gwryd, a river flanked by Wales' highest peak, Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon).



In September, work began to re-profile the steep banks and re-position some large boulders in a previously modified section of the river so that it flows naturally and to help improve habitats for wildlife.

Changes are already visible, with the river shifting from a straight glide (like a canal) to developing sections of pools (deep water) and riffles (fast flowing areas), with gravel shoals forming around the boulders. This creates a greater variety of features within the river and improves the habitat for spawning fish, such as brown trout and birds such as kingfisher, common sandpiper and dipper.

Next steps?



The next stage will involve a local contractor fencing off the riverside and planting trees along the riverbank, creating a wildlife corridor. This will also help slow the flow of surface water into the river and stabilise the riverbank.

As the trees grow, they will cast shade over the river, providing cover for fish and birds, as well as helping to regulate water temperature.

For more information on the project, please visit our website here.

Before and after the restoration





Clean air for Wales' wildlife

Air pollution is now one of the primary causes of wildlife loss and environmental degradation in Wales. The Clean Air White Paper, open for consultation until 7th April, is a unique opportunity to cut air pollution for nature, as well as for people's health and the climate. However, we think the current proposals need to be significantly strengthened to set legally-binding targets, to tackle ammonia emissions from farming and to protect and restore Wales's extraordinary habitats and species.

Unprecedented concentrations of reactive nitrogen have built up in the atmosphere, mainly due to ammonia emissions (NH_3) from intensive farming practices and nitrogen oxide (NO_x) emissions from combustion (in transport, industry and other sources). Reactive nitrogen in the air can be deposited close to its source or can travel long distances; this is impacting Wales' wildlife habitats from coastal sand dunes to the tops of our mountains. Ammonia emissions also contribute to the formation of particulate matter, which damages people's health, and are closely linked to emissions of nitrous oxide and methane, both greenhouse gases.

In Wales, 88% of sensitive wildlife habitat has higher nitrogen levels than it can tolerate, upsetting the delicate balance of the ecosystem. A few vigorous plant species (such as nettles and brambles) thrive, but more than two-thirds of wildflowers, as well as many rare and endangered lichen and fungi, are unable to survive in high nitrogen conditions. In extreme cases, concentrated ammonia emissions are causing spectacular lichens such as eyelashes treebeard to be coated in algal slime.

While NO_x emissions are declining, ammonia emissions have risen in recent years. Farming is by far the main source of ammonia emissions – 91% in 2017 – but only an estimated 5% of farm emissions are directly regulated. To date, the Welsh Government has relied largely on voluntary action by farmers to cut emissions, but the lack of progress show that this approach has failed. Robust new legislation through the Clean Air Bill is needed to tackle this issue effectively.

Plantlife calls on Members of the Senedd to support a Clean Air Bill which requires the Welsh Government to:

- to set air quality targets for all major pollutants, including ammonia and nitrogen oxides; the White Paper proposes only "Powers to set air quality targets, including for $PM_{2.5}$"
- to set targets for reducing nitrogen deposition to Wales's sensitive wildlife habitats
- to introduce regulation to cut ammonia emissions from agriculture and other sources; this should be integrated with the Control of Agricultural Pollution Regulations 2021, which focus on reducing water pollution, as well as measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

For further information, visit here and to discuss the Clean Air White Paper, please contact jenny.hawley@plantlife.org.uk



The delicate eyelash treebeard lichen

What is Wales Environment Link's Species Champion project?

The Convention on Biological Diversity is an international agreement to conserve our wildlife with a target to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2020. Wales' approach to the sustainable management of natural resources through the ecosystem approach - as embedded in the Environment Act - necessitates protecting species from habitat loss, pollution and harmful developments. Species Champions are organised by WEL and our sister Links in the rest of the UK. Members of the Senedd - alongside MPs, MSPs and MLAs - are asked to lend political support to the protection of threatened wildlife. By signing up to be a Species Champion, MSs can learn from WEL members about the species, go on site visits to see where they're found in their constituency and learn about what needs to be done to halt their decline. The WEL members below are the ones who are directly involved with the project.