Newsletter #1: Winter 2017

Species Champions

AMs standing up for threatened and at-risk species

Who are the Assembly's Species Champions?

Adder - Hefin David
Arctic Tern - Hannah Blythyn
Ash Tree - David Melding
Atlantic Puffin - Paul Davies
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
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 - Simon Thomas
Red Squirrel - Darren Millar
Sewin - Elin Jones
Shelduck - Jayne Bryant
Shrill Carder Bee - Steffan Lewis
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

AMs go bird watching with RSPB



Jayne Bryant AM at RSPB's Newport Wetlands, with Tom Dalrymple (Natural Resources Wales) and Owen Jones (Jayne's Assembly office).

It's been a busy summer for RSPB's champions, with five AMs donning wellies and swapping Cardiff Bay for the great outdoors to discuss what they can do to stand up for their species. Vikki Howells, Species Champion for the nightjar, visited Pen Y Cymoedd windfarm. She was lucky enough to spot one of birds, tagged so scientists can track its movements. Jayne Bryant's species, the shelduck, also put in an appearance when she visited RSPB's Newport Wetlands reserve. Jayne heard about how coastal development is threatening the shelduck's estuarine habitats.

The rain didn't deter Paul Davies from his trip to Ramsey Island in September. Paul heard how the team there are using sound recordings to attract puffins back to the island after the successful removal of non-native rats. The seal pup spectacle on the beach was an added bonus! Siân Gwenllian visited two farms in Nant Ffrancon to hear about their work with the twite recovery project. Finally, RSPB's newest champion, Hannah Blythyn, had to wrap up warm for her visit to the Dee Estuary. Unfortunately, it was the wrong time of year to see the Artic tern, which pass through the mouth of the estuary on migration each year, but Hannah took the opportunity to discuss issues threatening the marine ecosystems on which they depend.

Contributors: Jess Chappell, RSPB; Helen Kidwell, Vincent Wildlife Trust; Russel Hobson, Butterfly Conservation Wales; Clare Dinham, Buglife; Liz Smith, WEL.
Photo credits: Jess Chappell, Russel Hobson, Vincent Wildlife Trust, Buglife, Nigel Pugh.

Pine martens make a comeback in mid Wales



One of our rarest and most charismatic mammals is making a comeback in Wales. Pine martens became rare here during the early 20th century, but were still in low numbers in parts of the Cambrian Mountains, Carmarthenshire and Snowdonia. Today, the marten is doing well in Scotland, but in Wales this recovery has not taken place and the population is unlikely to survive without intervention.

Over the past three years, pine martens have been translocated from Scotland to Wales as part of The Vincent Wildlife Trust's Pine Marten Recovery Project. The aim of the project is to restore a healthy pine marten population rural landscape of Wales and England.

In 2016, Simon Thomas AM became the Species Champion for the pine marten and visited the Pine Marten Recovery Project site in mid Wales. Simon experienced radio-tracking some of the 20 pine martens that had been relocated in the first year of the project. Since his visit, a further 31 pine martens have been released and it has been confirmed that pine martens are now successfully breeding in Wales.

The VWT are hugely grateful for the continued support from Simon Thomas and the local community in mid Wales. The translocations may be finished but the spread of the pine marten population will still be monitored through camera traps, hair tubes and scat surveys. If you think you have seen a pine marten in Wales or England please report it via www.vwt.org.uk.

Butterfly spotting with Jane Hutt

It's been a worrying summer for butterflies, as the Big Butterfly Count – run by Butterfly Conservation (BC) – found declines across the UK in three common species of butterflies. Much of this is due to having a wet summer, as they thrive in warmer and sunnier conditions. Happily though, the popular Red Admiral was up by 75% by last year and more than 73,000 were counted in this year's census.



From left to right: Richard Smith, Butterfly Conservation South Wales; Jane Hutt AM; Russel Hobson, Butterfly Conservation Wales.

In July, Jane Hutt got to see the species she champions – the high brown fritillary – on a site visit in the Alun Valley near Ewenny. This is Wales' rarest butterfly which has declined by 96% across the UK since the 1970s. Jane also spotted a dark green fritillary and small pearl-bordered fritillary. She said: "I am proud to be a Species Champion for high brown fritillary and think the project is a great idea as it is very important to raise awareness and support the vital work of volunteers."

BC has spent the last 15 years working to restore areas of the Alun Valley for the butterfly. This involves the regular cutting of bracken and bushes to let in the light and encourage the caterpillars' food plant, violets, to flourish. Every summer, volunteers walk nearly 3 miles a week to count the number of adult butterflies they see. This is essential to check if the conservation work is being successful. Disappointingly, this year's count was the lowest for nearly 5 years, largely down to 2016's weather, but numbers in the valley are still more than double what they were in the late 1990s before conservation work began. The high brown fritillary is one species unlikely to benefit from a broad brush ecosystem restoration approach as it is so rare, with exacting requirements.

Finding fen raft spiders with Caroline Jones



The fen raft spider is Wales' largest spider and one of our rarest. The females can reach up to 23mm in body length (so not including the legs!) and they are semi-aquatic. They use the margins of pools and canals to hunt for prey by sensing vibrations on the water's surface. Not the ideal species for an arachnophobic Species Champion you might think! Whilst loving all wildlife, Caroline Jones was a little apprehensive about being in close proximity to spiders, as are many people. Regardless of this, Caroline was open to learning about the species and agreed to become Species Champion for fen raft spider. Clare Dinham of Buglife Cymru took the opportunity to show Caroline her species back in August of this year. They visited the Tennant Canal in Neath Port Talbot, one of only a handful of sites where the spider can be found. The weather conditions were great on the day and with the help of Jamie Bevan, Senior Reserves Manager (NRW), we were lucky enough to spot several spiders, including two adult females with egg sacs. They're very attentive mothers – they carry their egg sac with them for up to four weeks, dipping it in water to cool it off on hot days. When the young are ready to hatch, the female spider weaves a tent-like nursery web which she guards as the spiderlings grow. Caroline couldn't help but be impressed by these amazing spiders and pledged to champion her species in the Assembly.



From left to right: Caroline Jones, Jamie Bevan, Clare Dinham

A tribute to our Redshank Champion



Wales Environment Link would like to pay tribute to Carl Sargeant, who worked with RSPB as Species Champion for the redshank. In the environment sector, his legacy is incomparable, having brought forward the Planning Act, Environment Act and Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. It is because of the Environment Act that all public authorities now have a biodiversity duty to ensure they maintain and enhance biodiversity, as well promote the resilience of ecosystems. His actions as Minister for Natural Resources will benefit wildlife for generations to come.

Two new fish Champions

WEL is pleased to say that two Wildfish Ambassadors in the Assembly will be 'migrating' over to the Species Champion project.

Elin Jones AM, Champion for the Sewin, and Kirsty Williams, Champion for the Brown Trout, were working with WEL members Afonydd Cymru and Salmon & Trout Conservation Cymru, to raise the profile of freshwater fish that represent significant ecological, cultural and economic values to Wales.

Now that the Species Champion project has been set up, its predecessor Wildfish Ambassadors have agreed to continue alongside the other 34 Species Champions.

These fish are in decline due to a wide variety of factors which are adversely affecting the quality of Wales' freshwaters. In 'Valuing our Freshwaters', WEL members set out actions for reviving our rivers. In 2011, 66% of Wales' rivers, lakes and wetlands did not meet 'Good Ecological Status' required under the EU's Water Framework Directive. It's imperative to restore aquatic ecosystems, particularly as climate change increase the risks of droughts. For more information, read 'Valuing our Freshwaters' here: http://bit.ly/WELFreshwaters

One year of Species Champions celebrated at the Senedd









In June 2017, we brought together over 30 Species Champion AMs that signed up over the last year, to thank them for standing up for vulnerable Welsh wildlife in the Senedd. We even brought two special guests to show the AMs their gratitude: three hedgehogs (one adult and two hoglets) and a very small pipistrelle bat. Many thanks to The Hedgehog Helpline and Wildlife Trusts Wales for bringing them in and a big thank you to Jenny Rathbone AM for sponsoring the event.

WEL produced infographics for each one of our Champions to showcase the different species on Twitter, alongside our comprehensive briefings. All of these can be found on WEL's website: www.waleslink.org/species_champions



Left to right: Hefin David, Steffan Lewis, David Melding, Julie James, Russell George, Vikki Howells, Huw Irranca-Davies, Julie Morgan, Janet Finch-Saunders, Jenny Rathbone, Simon Thomas, Hannah Blythyn, Paul Davies, Elin Jones, Caroline Jones, Darren Millar. Outside the Senedd in June 2017.

From top to bottom: Sam Packer from Woodland Trust with David Melding AM; Huw Irranca-Davies AM with Sharon Thompson from RSPB; Matt Shardlow, Caroline Jones AM & Clare Dinham from Buglife; Mick Antoniw AM with a hoglet brought into the Senedd.

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. AMs - 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, AMs 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.