Cyswllt Amgylchedd Cymru | Wales Environment Link

# Species Champions

Standing up for nature in the Senedd

## COP 16: Marking progress or a cop-out for nature and climate?

**By Liz Smith, Wales Environment Link**

It's that time of year again, where the UN meets for COP 16 (in Colombia this time), its conference for nature. This is the first since the Global Biodiversity Framework was agreed in Canada at the end of 2022, where the UK signed up to protecting 30% of land and sea by 2030, as well as cutting in half harmful chemicals like pesticides and excessive nutrients, and ending subsidies that harm nature, whilst scaling up positive incentives that can restore it. We've written an open letter to Welsh Government, marking progress on the key policy interventions we can take in Wales to make our contribution.



Whilst we look forward to the much overdue Nature Positive Bill, it's still not expected to be introduced until halfway through 2025, making passing it before the Senedd election a very close call. For a Bill that finally fills the governance gap, left behind since leaving the EU, and enshrines those nature targets in law, we wish this had been prioritised more highly in the legislative programme. However, we continue to work with Welsh Ministers and the Senedd in every form we can, whether that be the Biodiversity Deep Dive groups, keeping Species Champions briefed, or giving evidence to committees (as we did recently, with their inquiry into nature loss). But we do find ourselves repeating ourselves and not quite seeing the scale or pace that we need.

If we get to 2050, and we have to explain to our children and grandchildren why the climate is so difficult, why our food doesn't grow as well as it used to, or what on earth these magical creatures called elephant hawk-moths were… we will be regretting not taking this as seriously as other crises that have faced us.

### Who are the Champions?

Atlantic Puffin - Paul Davies
Basking Shark - Luke Fletcher
Black Oil Beetle - Rebecca Evans
Bottlenose Dolphin - Joyce Watson
Butterfly Orchids - Carolyn Thomas
Chough - Rhun ap Iorwerth
Clearwing Moth - Mabon ap Gwynfor
Common Dolphin - Sam Rowlands
Common Toad - Jeremy Miles
Curlew - Mark Isherwood
Dormouse - Peredur Owen Griffiths
European Eel - Dawn Bowden
Fen Raft Spider - Sioned Williams
Great Crested Newt - Heledd Fychan
Grey Seal - Sam Kurtz
Harbour Porpoise - Janet Finch-Saunders
Hedgehog - Lee Waters
High Brown Fritillary - Jane Hutt
Lesser Horseshoe Bat - Lesley Griffiths
Little Tern - Hannah Blythyn
Native Oyster - Julie James
Nightjar - Vikki Howells
Pearl-bordered Fritillary - Russell George
Pine Marten - Eluned Morgan
Pink Sea Fan - Jane Dodds
Red Squirrel - Darren Millar

# Bats on the brink

By Lil McDermaid, Bat Conservation Trust




Out of the 11 mammals in the UK at risk of extinction, 4 of them are bat species. They face the entwined threats of their insects food source dwindling; unfriendly development practices; and loss of nature positive habitat.

In June 2024, the Bat Conservation Trust published their first manifesto, outlining the policy action needed to support their recovery - you can see the five key asks above. In the lead up to the publication, it was shared with various politicians across political parties and the UK. The aim of this work is to shape BCT's advocacy over the next few years, especially between now and when a number of nature targets will either be achieved or missed in 2030.

If you are interested in finding out more or helping to push for these outcomes, you can read the full manifesto here and get in touch with Lil McDermaid, BCT's Species Advocacy and Policy Officer at LMcDermaid@bats.org.uk.

## Who are the Champions?

Salmon - Huw Irranca-Davies
Sand Eel - Llŷr Gruffydd
Seagrass - Joel James
Sewin - Cefin Campbell
Shelduck - Jayne Bryant
Shrill Carder Bee - Delyth Jewell
Small Blue Butterfly - Mike Hedges
Starling - Vaughan Gething
Swift - Jenny Rathbone
Twite - Sian Gwenllian
Water Vole - John Griffiths
Waxcap Mushroom - Julie Morgan
White Tailed Eagle - Alun Davies
Yellow Mayfly - Natasha Asghar
Yellowhammer - Laura Anne Jones

## How else can I support bats?

Other than through vital policy maker discussions, you can adopt a bat or get in touch with your nearest bat group and ask how you can help!



*Photo: Pipistrelle bat, © Hugh Clark, BCT*

# Great British Beach Clean 2024

**By Elise Lavender, Marine Conservation Society**

Another September, another successful Great British Beach Clean week! We've had data rolling in from Llandudno to Barry, and it wouldn't be possible without our fantastic volunteers.

Not only does this event see a significant reduction in marine litter (in 2023, we removed 849kg of litter from Welsh beaches) but the in-depth survey allows us to collect specific data on what litter is affecting our marine environment and thus support key environmental policies. As we continue to analyse our beaches, we can track relevant trends to reveal the efficiency of bans, charges or other legislative procedures.

We also had the pleasure of welcoming Rhun ap Iorwerth, Leader of Plaid Cymru, to our Lligwy beach clean in Anglesey this year.

Unfortunately, the bins on this beach were removed and it seems to already be showing in our results. Whilst plastic fragments and packaging far outnumbered other litter types, our volunteers on the day found an alarming amount of glass bottles, bagged dog faeces and even a four-kilo metal fire grate!

We found a whopping 16 glass bottles on this clean compared with 6 metal drinks cans. This certainly outlines one of the reasons why we need a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) in Wales which is inclusive of glass, to help reduce the amount of litter on our beaches and ensure that marine life can flourish without unnecessary hazards.

Our volunteers also found 11 wet wipes whilst cleaning Lligwy beach, accounting for around 5% of all litter found on the day. Considering this alongside last year's data (which showed wet wipes were present on 61% of Welsh beaches surveyed), it highlights the need for the Welsh Government to follow through on their intention for a ban on plastic-containing wet wipes by June 2026.

This is just a small insight into some of the data we're finding, and our Beachwatch team are working tirelessly to analyse all the Great British Beach Clean data from across the UK. The State of Beaches report will be out next year with full and detailed results from across 2024.



*Photo: Volunteers with Rhun ap Iorwerth MS at Lligwy beach*

# Saving our salmon: how long have we got?

## Are we watching the extinction of a flagship species of Welsh rivers?

**By Chris Mills, Afonydd Cymru**



The salmon is symbolic of clean, cool waters and a healthy environment, but they have a complicated life history. They start off in freshwater but, after one or two years, migrate to sea where they feed and grow at a rate that would never be possible in freshwater. Hence salmon of up to 68 ½ pounds have been caught in Welsh rivers. Salmon migrate thousands of miles to their sea feeding grounds, some travelling as far as Greenland. When they are ready to spawn, they manage to find their way back to the very rivers where they were born and after laying their eggs, often in the upper reaches of our rivers, the cycle starts all over again. It is almost inconceivable to think that we could allow this miracle of nature to come to an end.

During the last decade, salmon stocks have fallen to historically low levels and if this trend continues, it is predicted that salmon could become extinct in at least some Welsh rivers within the next 20 years. Last year, Atlantic Salmon were reclassified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature to 'Endangered' in Great Britain. The latest salmon stock assessment for 2023, which has just been published, reports the lowest catches* since consistent records began in the 1970s and a 70% decline over the last 10 years. Furthermore, all 23 principal salmon rivers in Wales are classified as being at risk of failing to meet threshold breeding levels necessary to sustain the populations.

The initial decline of salmon numbers was attributed to climate change impacts at sea. However more recently, the decline in their survival cannot be accounted for purely in terms of marine survival. It appears that freshwater survival has also reduced possibly by up to 40%. So, what has changed? Salmon survival in freshwater has always been impacted by pollution, predation, and barriers to up and downstream migration. What has changed is again most probably down to climate change. Higher river water temperatures in both summer and winter, and higher and lower water flows , can affect both adult and juvenile salmon. Recent devastating winter floods are also more than capable of destroying salmon redds; cavities within the gravel where salmon eggs are deposited.



Afonydd Cymru - the umbrella body for the 6 Welsh River Trusts - is working on the ground across Wales to safeguard rivers from many of the factors that reduce salmon survival. We are also collaborating with Natural Resources Wales to try and pinpoint what might be the most crucial issues to tackle. However, time is not on our side so if we are to halt the decline in salmon survival and prevent the extinction of the Atlantic salmon in Wales we need to act with far greater urgency. Wild salmon, once an abundant food source, is now a conservation species and sadly part of the nature emergency. We are grateful for the Deputy First Minister's - Huw Irranca-Davies - continued personal interest and support, both as WEL's Salmon Species Champion and Cabinet Secretary responsible for fisheries. *Since 2020, all salmon caught by net or rod must be released.

# Rosy Saxifrage reintroduced to the wild in Wales, after a 62-year absence

**By Lizzie Wilberforce, Plantlife Cymru**

Rosy Saxifrage, a diminutive but attractive plant with loosely tufted leaves and delicate white flowers, has been returned to Wales.



*Photo: Rosy Saxifrage flower, © Llyr Hughes*

In 1962, Rosy Saxifrage - *Saxifraga rosacea subsp. rosacea* - slipped into extinction in Wales. Its loss is thought to have been the result of long-term negative influences on its small and vulnerable population in Eryri: historic over-collection by Victorian plant enthusiasts, and more modern atmospheric nitrogen pollution which favours other, more competitive plants.

Fortunately, the species was kept going in cultivation, with botanists carefully tending plants descended from the original Eryri population, preserving their lineage.

In 2024, through the work of the Natur am Byth programme, Plantlife have been able to reintroduce the species back to the wild. The successful reintroduction was led by Plantlife's botanist Robbie Blackhall-Miles, Project Officer for the Tlysau Mynydd Eryri project, which is working to secure the futures of some of our rarest alpine plants and invertebrates in Wales.

The outplanting took place on land cared for by the National Trust and in the coming years, botanists will conduct surveys to establish places where it will be best to reintroduce the species fully to the wild. Hopefully soon, it'll be back in Eyri's calcium-rich rock ledges and crevices, where it belongs.

This reintroduction is a huge moment for the Natur am Byth programme and for the conservation of some of our most special arctic alpine plants.

You can follow the work of the Tlysau Mynydd Eryri project on Instagram (nab_tlysaueryri) and Natur am Byth on X (@NaturAmByth).



*Photo: Robbie Blackhall-Miles with the plant, © Llyr Hughes*

*Natur am Byth unites nine environmental charities and Natural Resources Wales to deliver the country's largest natural heritage and outreach programme to save species from extinction and reconnect people to nature. It is funded by £4.1 million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund with more funding from the Welsh Government, the Landfill Disposal Tax Community Scheme, Natural Resources Wales, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Arts Council of Wales, Banister Trust, Animal Friends Insurance and other generous donors.*

# Supporting the High Brown Fritillary in a Butterfly Emergency

**By Alan Sumnall, Dot Williams & Andrew Rowe, Butterfly Conservation**

September saw the completion of the first year of 'Natur am Byth' in Wales. This £8m 4-year initiative has brought together 10 organisations from across Wales to deliver the country's largest natural heritage and outreach programme to save Wales' most threatened species. Butterfly Conservation are leading the project to save the High Brown Fritillary (the UK's most endangered butterfly), focused on the Vale of Glamorgan as its last site in Wales.



*Photo: The High Brown Fritillary butterfly © Alan Sumnall*

Jane Hutt, its Species Champion, has been giving us her ongoing support, particularly raising awareness of the species and the importance of recording and taking action. This support couldn't come at a more critical time. Butterfly Conservation has just declared a national 'Butterfly Emergency' and are asking people to sign our open letter. Results of this summer's Big Butterfly Count have shown a marked and scary decline in numbers. In total, just over 935,000 butterflies and day-flying moths were recorded across the UK from 12 July - 4 August, down almost 600,000 from 2023. In Wales, just over 40,500 target butterflies and day-flying moths were recorded across Wales, down by more than 35% on 2023. The average number counted was the lowest in the history of the count. The top five species recorded in Wales were Meadow Brown, Large White, Gatekeeper, Small White and Ringlet. In total, 85% of species counted in Wales showed a decline, with the Red Admiral showing the greatest country level decline (-86%). All the results can be seen here.

The Vale of Glamorgan site is one of the best areas in Wales to see a wide range of butterflies – but even here, there are so much less than there should be. During a sunny July site visit, Jane helped with her own contribution to the Big Butterfly Count. 20 individuals of eight species were recorded. This compared favourably to the overall national picture, where participants spotted just seven butterflies on average per 15 minutes. But it's a mixed picture; overall data from the site shows it has been one of the worst years for the High Brown Fritillary too. These figures are alarming because butterflies are a key indicator species; when they are in trouble, we know that the wider environment is in trouble too. That's why getting the message out to people is so important and why we value Jane's support and involvement so greatly.

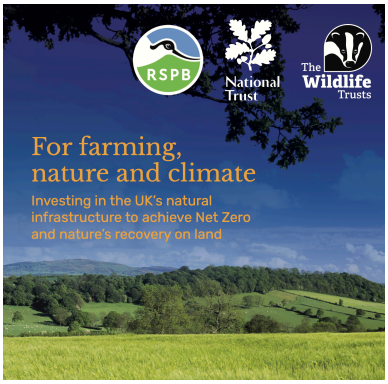


*Photos: Jane Hutt with Dot Williams and Andrea Rowe, Butterfly Conservation & Natur am Byth staff*

# The scale of need to support sustainable farming

## Updated report calculating the costs of future-proof farming systems

Last month, Wales Environment Link updated our Pathways to 2030 report - our costed proposals for nature-based solutions that can meet our biodiversity targets - with costings to take into account inflation and, most topically, fuller figures for sustainable farming. Our previous report iteration set out 2023 figures and sustainable land management costs for nature friendly farming. Thanks to RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts and the National Trust revising their costs in their helpful report - 'For Farming, Nature & Climate' - we have now calculated sustainable farming costs for meeting both nature targets and net zero in Wales.




As WWF Cymru has set out, farming accounts for 14% of Welsh carbon emissions, actually rising in the last decade between 2010 and 2020.

Farmers are stewards of our land and can make a huge difference for storing carbon and restoring nature. Without their help, we will not be able to meet either our nature or net zero targets, as 80% of Welsh land is managed for agriculture. This urgency and need for a step change must be taken into account as final decisions are made on the Sustainable Farming Scheme. We're pleased that our members have been involved in the Ministerial Roundtable and Carbon Sequestration work, and we look forward to announcements later this year on the way forward for several elements of the scheme.

# Natur am Byth

We've highlighted a couple of Natur am Byth projects in this newsletter and wanted to signpost to more information here.

Thanks to the funders below, it ensures - at least until September 2027 - that there's vital species-specific restoration work happening in Wales.

Cyfoeth Naturiol Cymru Natural Resources Wales
Llywodraeth Cymru Welsh Government
Cynllun Cymunedau y Dreth Gwarediadau Tirlenwi WCVA CGGC Landfill Disposals Tax Communities Scheme
Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
Cyngor Celfyddydau Cymru Arts Council of Wales



## WHAT IS THE SPECIES CHAMPION PROJECT?

Wales Environment Link works with our individual eNGO members to recruit Senedd Members as Species Champions, to sponsor at-risk wildlife. The species has to be usually found in their constituency and considered more 'at-risk' than average. By signing up to be a Champion, MSs can learn about the species and what needs to be done to halt their decline. The members currently involved are: RSPB, Wildlife Trusts Wales, Afonydd Cymru, Buglife, Bumblebee Conservation Trust, Plantlife, Bat Conservation Trust, Butterfly Conservation, Amphibian & Reptile Conservation and Marine Conservation Society. You can catch up on previous newsletters running since 2017 on this link here.