



Nature Champions

Winter Newsletter 2024-25



Above: Representatives from Scottish Badgers collecting the MSP Nature Champion of the Year award on behalf of Colin Smyth MSP. © Scottish Environment LINK

Welcome to the winter edition of the Nature Champions Newsletter! We hope that you had an enjoyable festive period and a happy Hogmanay.

Just before the winter recess, LINK was grateful to be joined by a number of Nature Champions and their hosts at Scottish Environment LINK's Festive Reception in Edinburgh. At this reception we celebrated another busy year of activity within the LINK network and we also awarded the coveted **MSP Nature Champion of the Year** award!

This year, the panel decided to present the award to **Colin Smyth MSP**, Nature Champion for the Badger with Scottish Badgers. Colin has been a consistent advocate for badgers in Scotland and he played a crucial role in advocating for Parliament's historic snaring ban last year. Alongside Colin, **Audrey Nicoll MSP** was specially commended for her contributions in 2024 as the Nature Champion for the Freshwater Pearl Mussel with Buglife Scotland. You can find out more about the award and its previous recipients [here](#).

2025 is set to be a critical year for nature. The upcoming Natural Environment Bill in particular will present a game-changing moment for biodiversity and allow the Scottish Government to set legally binding targets to halt and reverse nature's decline. These targets will help to mainstream the protection and enhancement of the natural environment, holding current and future governments to account to deliver for nature and future generations.

This year also marks the last full year of the Nature Champions initiative before the next Parliament! We hope that you are able to make the most of being a Nature Champion in 2025 and get to experience the conservation of Scotland's threatened and iconic species and habitats on the ground with your LINK host members.

If you're in need of any inspiration, this newsletter highlights some of the fantastic Nature Champions activity from the past few months. We also share a bit more from Scottish Environment LINK members about their current work. In this issue, you can read about **'The Blue Carbon Mapping Project'**, as well as Keep Scotland Beautiful's **Spring Clean Scotland** campaign. British

Dragonfly Society's Danièle Muir also highlights two of Scotland's **rarest damselfly and dragonfly species**, along with some of the threats they're facing.

Thank you, as always, for your support and for being the voice for Scotland's threatened species and habitats in the Scottish Parliament.

Andy Marks

Parliamentary Officer, Scottish Environment LINK

Nature Champions in Parliament



In October, **Audrey Nicoll MSP**, Nature Champion for the Freshwater Pearl Mussel, led a Member's Business Debate on Invasive Non-native Species in Scotland. As part of the debate, Audrey highlighted her Nature Champions role, as did fellow Nature Champion, **Alexander Burnett MSP**, who raised his role as the Red Squirrel champion. Watch the full debate above.

RSPB Birdcrime Report

In November, **John Mason MSP**, Nature Champion for the Kestrel, lodged a Motion highlighting continued concern around illegal bird of prey persecution in Scotland and the UK. According to the RSPB's Birdcrime 2023 report, the equivalent of one bird of prey was illegally killed or injured every four days over the last 15 years.

South of Scotland Eagles

Nature Champion for the Golden Eagle, **Christine Grahame MSP**, congratulated the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project (SSGEP) on being chosen as one of 30 good causes highlighted as part of the National Lottery's 30th birthday celebrations, the only environmental or conservation project highlighted.

Native Woodlands

Ariane Burgess MSP, Nature Champion for both the Beaver and Aspen, asked the Scottish Government about its aim to regenerate native woodlands and reduce the browsing impacts from deer and sheep. Ariane also asked about the new Register of Ancient Woodlands and how it can best help protect these irreplaceable sites.

Paying Tribute to Eddie Palmer

In December, **Colin Smyth MSP**, Nature Champion for the Badger, lodged a Motion in tribute to Eddie Palmer, wildlife campaigner and chair of Scottish Badgers, who sadly died on 5 November 2024. Eddie was a driving force in the conservation and protection of badgers and his kindness and passion will be greatly missed by all.



Rhododendron & Rainforests

Monica Lennon MSP, Nature Champion for the Oak, asked the Scottish Government how the Scottish Biodiversity Delivery Plan 2024-2030 protects Scotland's rainforest and native woodlands and how it will mitigate the spread of rhododendron ponticum - an invasive non-native species threatening these key sites for biodiversity.

Bird ringing

In January, **Mark Ruskell MSP**, Nature Champion for the White-tailed Eagle and the Moss Carder Bee, asked the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with relevant stakeholders about varying the licence conditions for bird ringing to require prior landowner notification.

Protecting Ash

Nature Champion for the Ash and the Bilberry Bumblebee, **Graham Simpson MSP**, asked the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is helping to tackle ash dieback. Scottish Forestry estimates up to 50-75% of all ash trees in Scotland will be killed by the fungal disease in the next twenty years.

100,000th Oyster!

Finlay Carson MSP, Nature Champion for Native Oyster Beds, lodged a Motion congratulating the Dornoch Environmental Enhancement Project (DEEP) on planting the 100,000th oyster in the Dornoch Firth. The project was started in 2014 by the Glenmorangie distillery, the Marine Conservation Society and Heriot-Watt University.

National Register of Ancient Woodlands

Bill Kidd MSP, Nature Champion for Ancient Woodlands, submitted a Motion to acknowledge the 15,000 hectares of new trees that were planted in Scotland in 2024 - almost three quarters of the UK's mainland tree planting. Bill also highlighted the importance of a new National Register of Ancient Woodlands.

Species-rich Grasslands

Nature Champion for the Scottish Primrose, **Liam McArthur MSP**, asked the Scottish Government about actions in the Scottish Biodiversity Delivery Plan that are specifically targeted to restore and manage species-rich grasslands. Species-rich grasslands support a range of rare plants, bees, butterflies, moths and more.



The Blue Carbon Mapping Project



A landmark report providing the first estimate of carbon stored in UK seabed habitats (known as blue carbon), including in Marine Protected Areas, was published on the 19th of September 2024. The report is part of [The Blue Carbon Mapping Project](#), completed by the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) on behalf of WWF-UK, The Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB. This is a hugely important piece of research for Scotland, especially with Scotland's seas covering the largest sea-surface of all UK nations.

Scotland is host to amazing habitats that capture and store carbon, known as blue carbon, which include seabed sediments (made of mud, silt and sand), seagrass meadows, saltmarshes and kelp forests. The report revealed that our seas have huge potential for storing and locking up carbon - with an estimated 152 million tonnes of organic carbon stored in Scotland's marine habitats, 99% of this in seabed sediments. Moreover, Scotland's seabed habitats could capture up to 9.5 million tonnes of

organic carbon every year – over four times the amount sequestered by Scottish forests – 2.07 million tonnes. Areas designated for marine protection cover 37% of Scotland's seas and these contain approximately 50% of the total organic carbon, showcasing how vital these sites are for climate mitigation as well as biodiversity.

However, Scotland's marine environment is currently facing threats from multiple human activities that physically disturb the seabed, including bottom trawling, aggregate dredging, anchoring and developments at sea and in coastal regions.

RSPB Scotland, WWF Scotland, and The Scottish Wildlife Trust are urging the Scottish Government to take all opportunities to protect these vital blue carbon stores through effective spatial management that will enhance recovery and protection of the seabed and allow them to play a pivotal role in climate mitigation.

Caitlin Paul
Marine Policy Officer, RSPB Scotland

Image © RSPB (rspb-images.com)

Spring Clean Scotland!



This spring, Keep Scotland Beautiful are running their annual Spring Clean - Scotland's biggest litter picking event! This year, Keep Scotland Beautiful aims to beat its 2024 total of 45,000 participants and inspire more than 50,000 people to work together to tackle the country's litter emergency.

Spring Clean takes place from 21 March - 21 April, and people from all over Scotland are being encouraged to get involved, build community links and make a positive impact on the streets, parks, rivers and beaches we all care about.

Keep Scotland Beautiful's latest report, [How clean are our streets?](#), revealed that 72% of all sites surveyed were littered. And the 2024 [Scottish Litter Survey](#) highlighted that 87% of people agree litter is a problem in Scotland.

For young people across the country who want to get involved, the litter league will be returning this year, beginning the week before on 17 March and running until 21 April. Schools nurseries and other youth groups across the country are encouraged to take part and compete for Spring Clean glory.

Last year, businesses big and small across the country took part in Spring Clean and are once again being encouraged to get involved and organise litter picks and support their communities and employees who are passionate about keeping Scotland Beautiful.

Visit [our website](#) to find out more about Spring Clean Scotland and how to get involved!

Do you know your damselflies from your dragonflies?



The British Dragonfly Society now has two Nature Champions in Scottish Parliament: Evelyn Tweed MSP is the Nature Champion for the Azure Hawker dragonfly and Lorna Slater MSP is champion for the Northern Damselfly.

These are very special species and found only in Scotland in the UK.

Azure Hawkers are found in shallow bog pools in the Highlands from Loch Tay north and westwards. The males have blue eyes and blue spots, while the females come in two colour forms – blue or brown. Until recently there was a population at Silver Flowes in Dumfries and Galloway, but despite repeated surveys, they haven't been found here for a number of years.

The blue and black male Northern Damselfly has an 'ace of spades' at the top of the abdomen, while the female is pea green and black. These rare damselflies are found in shallow, sedge-lined pools and lochans in three main areas close to the Cairngorms – North Perthshire, Deeside and Strathspey.

Both of these extraordinary species are threatened by the impacts of the climate emergency. The bog pool habitat of both is increasingly at risk of drying out with hotter spring temperatures and more erratic rainfall.

Another lesser-known issue affecting Odonata is insecticides from pet flea treatments that washes off dogs as they swim in ponds. These harmful insecticides are banned for agricultural use, but still widely used as pet flea treatments. These treatments negatively impact and can kill the freshwater invertebrates living in that pond – a vital part of the aquatic food chain. The British Dragonfly Society recommends that pets are kept out of the water, especially in the first weeks after treatment.

Want to learn more about Scotland's dragonflies and damselflies? [Visit our website](#) and discover a range of identification guides. You can also get involved with one of our visits as part of [#DragonflyWeek25](#), this year taking place from 5th-13th July 2025.

Nature Champions Activity!



Photo: Scottish Badgers

A snare-free country

Colin Smyth MSP joined Scottish Badgers outside the Scottish Parliament to celebrate Scotland's snaring ban, which came into force on 25th November. A ban on the use of snares was passed by the Scottish Parliament in March 2024 as part of the Wildlife Management & Muirburn (Scotland) Act. Scottish Badgers has been campaigning for a snaring ban for decades with other conservation and animal welfare organisations.



Photo: Graham Simpson/X

Celebrating Scotland's Rainforest

Just before the winter recess, **Graham Simpson MSP** sponsored a reception with the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest - a partnership of organisations that are committed to collaborative action for the benefit of the rainforest. The reception highlighted some of the successes in the restoration and expansion of Scotland's Rainforest, the people and communities involved, and discussed next steps.



Photo: Scottish Environment LINK

Festive Reception 2024

To mark the end of a very busy year for LINK members and celebrate the achievements of Nature Champions, LINK was delighted to be joined by **Graham Simpson MSP, Audrey Nicoll MSP, Ariane Burgess MSP** and (remotely) **Colin Smyth MSP**. At the reception, LINK highlighted the importance of Nature Champions in helping to give a voice for nature at a time when 1 in 9 species are at risk of national extinction.



Photo: Kelvin Thomson/X

Counting Red Kites

Early in the new year, **Meghan Gallacher MSP**, Nature Champion for the Red Kite, joined colleagues from the Scottish Raptor Study Group at Argaty Red Kites for a coordinated winter count. Some thirty roosting birds were counted on the day. Close to national extinction in the early twentieth century, the UK is now home to 1/5 of the world's Red Kites, making it one of the UK's most successful conservation stories.

Scottish Environment LINK would like to thank each Nature Champion for your support and for being the voice for Scotland's threatened species and habitats in the Scottish Parliament.



Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 40 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

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