

Freshwater Species – Mary Scanlon

Hello, my name is Mary Scanlon and I am a former Member of the Scottish Parliament for the Highlands and Islands region. I was also the Nature Champion, or Species Champion as it was then, for the Freshwater Pearl Mussel.

Freshwater pearl mussels are similar in shape to the mussels you may find in the supermarket, but they grow larger and can live as long as 100 years old! They live in clean, fast-flowing rivers and they filter nutrients from the water.

Up to half of the world's threatened freshwater pearl mussels are found in Scottish rivers, but, over the last century, these mussels have sadly been lost from a third of the rivers that used to contain them. This is mostly due to pollution and changes in river structure, which prevent the recovery of populations already devastated by illegal pearl mussel collecting.

Our rivers, lochs, ponds and wetlands are home to a variety of rare and important species, not just the freshwater pearl mussel.

Our rivers are home to iconic fish like Atlantic salmon and trout, as well as otters, critically endangered water voles, water shrews and many bird species, while freshwater lochs provide important habitats for fish, waterfowl, and aquatic plants.

Ponds provide breeding grounds for amphibians, such as frogs and newts, and they attract dragonflies, damselflies, water snails, freshwater shrimp and other water-dwelling invertebrates. They are also home for invertebrates that live in the vegetation growing along the water's edge, such as hoverflies, and temporary ponds support the very rare tadpole shrimp and pond mud snail.

Wetlands are, of course, home to a diverse array of birds. You can easily spot Mallards, Mute swans, Moorhens, and Coots, but keep your eyes peeled for a breath-taking glimpse of the electric-blue Kingfisher, or, in wet meadows, listen out for the redshank, which'll you'll probably hear before you see.