



Nature Champions

Winter Newsletter 2023-24



Image © Sandra Graham

Welcome to the winter edition of the Nature Champions Newsletter! We hope that you have had a restful winter recess and that you were able to spend some time in nature over the break.

A particularly warm welcome to the two newest MSP Nature Champions, **Stephen Kerr MSP** (Common Glow-worm) and **John Swinney MSP** (Atlantic Salmon)!

2023 was a bumper year for Nature Champions, with 26 MSPs attending site visits relating to their species and 11 new MSPs becoming Nature Champions, taking the current total to **92 MSP Nature Champions** championing 96 species and habitats in this Parliamentary Session!

This year also saw the Nature Champions 10th anniversary exhibition, *A Voice for Nature*, which took place outside the Scottish Parliament from 28th August – 22nd September 2023. This free exhibition highlighted to the public how past and present MSPs have been working with local communities and conservation organisations through the Nature Champions initiative. It was fantastic to be able to include the voices of 23 MSPs in the designs, so that MSPs became a literal ‘voice for nature’ in the exhibition itself!

In this Nature Champions Newsletter, you can catch up on all of the Nature Champions activity from the past few months - from motions to site visits - as well as hear a bit more about what some Scottish Environment LINK members have been up to. We also highlight the recipient of the **MSP Nature Champion of the Year 2023** award and feature articles from Scottish Environment LINK members discussing the latest national seabird census, **Seabirds Count**, and the case for protecting **Coul Links**.

As we move swiftly into 2024, we want to thank you, as always, for your support and for being the voice for Scotland's threatened species and habitats in the Scottish Parliament.

Andrew Marks
Nature Champions Coordinator



Nature Champions in Parliament



Click the image above to hear Audrey Nicoll MSP, Nature Champion for the Freshwater Pearl Mussel, share how being a Nature Champion has encouraged her to engage more with nature restoration.

Woodlands & Wellbeing

Sandesh Gulhane MSP, Nature Champion for Paths, lodged a Motion congratulating Malls Mire Community Woodland and Local Nature Reserve on being shortlisted in the Health and Wellbeing category at RSPB Scotland's Nature of Scotland Awards. Malls Mire is connected by a network of accessible paths that run throughout the site.

Return of the Oysters!

In October, **Finlay Carson MSP**, Nature Champion for Native Oyster Beds, lodged a Motion acknowledging the historic return of native oysters to the Firth of Forth, after an absence of 100 years. Restoration Forth is a multi-year conservation partnership which aims to restore seagrass and oyster reef habitats in the Firth of Forth.

Atlantic Oakwoods

Monica Lennon MSP, Nature Champion for the Oak, asked the Scottish Government about forestry and Scotland's rainforest, enquiring what proportion of plantations are on ancient woodland sites and what its plans are for restoration with zones for natural colonisation. Atlantic Oakwoods form an integral part of Scotland's temperate rainforest.

SRSG in Parliament

In October, **John Mason MSP**, Nature Champion for the Kestrel, hosted a Parliamentary Reception with the Scottish Raptor Study Group (SRSG), which allowed MSPs to discuss the upcoming Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill and how the legislation will affect the conservation and protection of Scotland's birds of prey.

Woodland Restoration

In November, **Monica Lennon MSP**, Nature Champion for the Oak, raised three Parliamentary Questions in which she asked the Scottish Government what plans are in place to increase the amount of high conservation value forest and the level of invasive rhododendron clearance in Forestry and Land Scotland sites.

Seabird Census

Karen Adam MSP, Nature Champion for the Fulmar, lodged a Motion welcoming the publication of the latest Seabird Census across Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The census provides evidence on the status and trends in seabird populations. You can read more about the census in the article below.

Peregrine vs. Curlew

Jim Fairlie MSP, Nature Champion for the Curlew, noted his initial desire to champion the Peregrine (championed by **Bob Doris MSP**) when discussing the Wildlife Management and Muirburn Bill; however, Mr Fairlie noted that Peregrines are indeed also urban dwellers and he is delighted to champion "the most iconic of moorland birds"!

Nature Restoration Fund

In November, **Audrey Nicoll MSP**, Nature Champion for the Freshwater Pearl Mussel, mentioned in a debate about the Nature Restoration Fund how being a Nature Champion had allowed her to better appreciate the importance of nature restoration projects. She then highlighted the Beltie Burn restoration, which she had visited earlier in the summer.

Our Native Woodlands

Ariane Burgess MSP, Nature Champion for the Eurasian Beaver and Aspen, lodged a Motion celebrating Scotland's Native Woodlands. In particular, Ms Burgess highlighted the protection of Scotland's Caledonian Pinewoods and Atlantic Rainforest, and commended landowners, environmental groups and community groups for their efforts.

MSP Nature Champion of the Year 2023!



We are profoundly grateful for the commitment that all Nature Champions have brought to their roles over the past year, and we are frequently moved by the passion and interest that MSPs show for their species and habitats.

Some MSP Nature Champions go the extra mile in their roles and we have been very keen to celebrate and recognise the phenomenal contributions that these Nature Champions have made to the protection and recovery of their species and habitats.

Scottish Environment LINK's 'MSP Nature Champion of the Year' award is given to an MSP on the basis of their personal investment to their species or habitat, their public awareness-raising efforts, and their broader advocacy impact.

This year, we received nine nominations and the choice was very difficult. Three MSPs particularly shone this year for their hard work, energy and commitment to their roles as Nature Champions, and the judges particularly wanted to highly commend **Ariane Burgess MSP** and **Colin Smyth MSP**.

However, after much deliberation, Scottish Environment LINK decided to award the MSP Nature Champion of the Year title to **Jackie Dunbar MSP**.

Jackie Dunbar MSP is the Nature Champion for the Sea Trout, working with both the John Muir Trust and the Scottish Wildlife Trust. Over 2023, Jackie Dunbar has been a committed and passionate Nature Champion for the Sea Trout alongside her Scottish Environment LINK Member hosts.

You can find out more about Jackie Dunbar's work over 2023 as the Nature Champion for the Sea Trout, as well as the previous recipients of the award, [on our website](#).

Seabird census reveals catastrophic declines in 70% of Scotland's seabird species



The latest national seabird census - [Seabirds Count](#) – published in November, revealed that 70% of the seabird species which commonly breed in Scotland are in decline. The census offers the most comprehensive survey to date of the health of seabirds in 20 years with iconic species such as Puffins, Kittiwakes and Guillemots showing decreases. Only three species (Gannets, Great Skua and European Storm Petrels) showed an increase in Scotland and of these, Gannets and Great Skuas are likely to have declined since the census data was collected before the severe outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) hit Scottish breeding colonies in 2022 and 2023. RSPB and partners are assessing the full impact of HPAI, and more details will be released this year.

Climate change impacts, invasive predators, and lack of food are identified as some of the main drivers of these devastating losses. They also provide a stark wake-up call to the severity of Scotland's nature and climate emergency and the vital need to tackle both hand in hand.

As the home of 51% of UK seabirds, many of global or European importance, Scotland has a huge responsibility to do what can be done to turn things around for these amazing species. RSPB Scotland, alongside LINK partners, are calling for urgent and ambitious actions, packaged framed within a robust Scottish Seabird Conservation Strategy. These need to be strong, ambitious, time-bound measures to address pressures facing our seabirds and adequately resourced to enable the essential science and research needed to support.

Nature Champions for seabirds and sandeels play a vital role in highlighting and supporting key actions to help our seabirds and the wider marine environment. These actions can be viewed [here](#). Now, we call upon all of them to speak up on behalf of their species.

Oscar Aller-Rojas

Marine Policy Officer, RSPB Scotland

Image © Sandra Graham

Coul Links is under threat again.



The fate of one of Scotland's important and last remaining undeveloped dune systems, home to a variety of rare species, now lies in the hands of Scottish Ministers after Highland Council's North Planning Applications Committee voted to grant permission for an 18-hole golf course development on the nationally and internationally protected site for nature.

The site holds one of the largest colonies of Northern Brown Argus in the UK, as well as other scarce and threatened species including Small Blue, Portland Moth and Black Isle Groundling; a micro-moth that is only known in the UK from a handful of sites around the Moray Firth. Coul Links is the only known habitat for Fonseca's seed fly, one of Scotland's rarest species at risk of global extinction, and full of a myriad of other wildlife including Purple Milk-vetch, lesser butterfly orchid, Dunlin, Wigeon, rare lichens and waxcap fungi.

Councillors voted (by eight in favour, six against) at their planning meeting on the 6th December to allow the plans by developer C4C on Coul Links, near Embo in East Sutherland. This was against the advice of Highland Council's own planning officers and in the face of almost 750 objections – more than double the number of supporting comments. The extent of concern was reflected in the number of nature charities that objected, including those we are working with as part of the Save Coul Links Conservation Coalition, Buglife, Butterfly Conservation Scotland, Marine Conservation Society, National trust for Scotland, RSPB Scotland and Scottish Wildlife Trust. Critically, statutory consultee NatureScot, Scottish Government's own advisers on nature also objected. In their report, planning officers agreed with NatureScot that the proposal will result in significant adverse impacts on the protected sand dune feature at Coul Links, with consequent adverse impacts on species. They also stated that the proposal cannot be considered nationally significant in terms of the economic benefit to the area. Their recommendation for refusal centred on the impacts of the proposal on protected sites and its inability to comply with biodiversity enhancement requirements.

This is the second time in five years that this wonderful, protected site has been threatened by a large-scale golf course development. A previous application was supported by Highland Council in 2018 despite a recommendation for refusal by its own planning officers. It was ultimately refused permission by Scottish Ministers in early 2020 following a long Public Inquiry . Ministers agreed with the Reporters that that the economic benefits of the plans did not outweigh the serious harm to nature that would be caused. Ministers accepted the Reporters conclusions that the proposed golf course development would have the potential to have a significant adverse impact on the important insect life at Coul Links and that the application site contained an unusually rich assemblage of butterflies and moths.

We are therefore, extremely disappointed and very concerned by Highland Council's decision and, along with our partners in the Conservation Coalition, are calling on Scottish Ministers to step in to save Coul Links from development.

Dr Tom Prescott
Senior Conservation Officer for Scotland, Butterfly Conservation

Image by Julian Paren, CC BY-SA 2.0, [<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=76944482>]

Nature Champions Site Visits!



Photo: ARC/Twitter

Gardening for the Future

Sharon Dowey MSP, Nature Champion for Gardens & Designed Landscapes, visited Threave Garden and Nature Reserve in October alongside her Nature Champions hosts, National Trust for Scotland and Amphibian and Reptile Conservation. Sharon was able to hear more about gardening for biodiversity and met some of Threave's garden trainees who are working towards their RHS Level 2 Qualifications.



Photo: Rebecca Miller/NTS

Living on the Edge

In November, **Paul McLennan MSP**, Nature Champion for Maritime Cliffs & Slopes, joined National Trust for Scotland staff at St Abb's Head National Nature Reserve. The site is home to internationally important numbers of Guillemots and nationally important numbers of Kittiwakes and Razorbills. Paul and the team discussed offshore wind projects and were able to spot some Grey Seal pups on the day!

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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