



Nature Champions

Winter Newsletter 2026



MSPs' species eating one another, MSPs eating their own species, the race for the Golden Eagle, cross-party encounters with unfortunate Ash trees, binocular mishaps and, of course, the defence of Scotland's road verges - the [Nature Champions Debate](#) had it all.

After five years of getting to know and raising awareness of their species and habitats, it was fantastic to hear Members speaking so passionately about their experiences as Nature Champions. The debate was humorous and celebratory, yet it was also filled with important moments of Champions advocating for their species and habitats, raising awareness of the threats that they face, as well as the fundamental importance of a healthy natural environment. It was particularly moving to hear stories of MSPs raising awareness of their species and habitats with friends and family, as well as the intentions of those who will be standing down to continue championing Scotland's wildlife after they are no longer in Parliament. We are very grateful to **John Mason MSP** for securing the debate and to each of the fourteen Nature Champions who were able to take part.

Since the previous edition of the Nature Champions newsletter, Parliament has passed the **Natural Environment Bill**. Nature recovery is now no longer just a policy aspiration, but a legal responsibility. However, as LINK wrote [in our most recent blog](#), this landmark moment for nature in Scotland must now be translated into delivery.

In this Nature Champions newsletter - the penultimate of this Parliament(!) - we're focusing on priorities for the next Parliament. Alongside highlighting some of the Nature Champions activity from the past few months, this issue features articles from LINK members spotlighting key areas of action that relate to species and habitats featured in Nature Champions. **The Scottish Wildlife Trust** highlight the need to protect and restore Scotland's riparian woodlands; **RSPB Scotland** stress the importance of funding nature friendly farming if we are to hear the call of the corncrake for much longer; and finally, the **Royal Zoological Society of Scotland** discuss how amending domestic pet cat ownership laws could improve the fortunes of the Scottish Wildcat. We also feature **LINK's 2026 Manifesto for Nature** and what we believe should be the key priorities for the next Scottish Parliament.

Our next and final newsletter for this session will look back at some of the Nature Champions highlights of the past session. If you have any that you'd like to share, then we would be grateful if you would consider [filling in our feedback form](#) to share these and to help us improve the initiative for the next Parliament.

Thank you, as ever, for being a voice for Scotland's threatened species and habitats in the Scottish Parliament.

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Nature Champions Activity



Click the image above to hear the full Nature Champions Initiative debate, featuring contributions from **John Mason MSP** (Kestrel), **David Torrance MSP** (Seagrass), **Douglas Ross MSP** (Bottlenose Dolphin), **Sarah Boyack MSP** (Large Heath Butterfly), **Ariane Burgess MSP** (Eurasian Beaver & Aspen), **Beatrice Wishart MSP** (Orca), **Colin Beattie MSP** (Rivers), **Alexander Burnett MSP** (Red Squirrel), **Christine Grahame MSP** (Golden Eagle), **Edward Mountain MSP** (Atlantic Salmon), **Fulton MacGregor MSP** (Great Crested Newt), **Lorna Slater MSP** (Northern Damselselfly), **Finlay Carson MSP** (Native Oyster Beds), **Graham Simpson MSP** (Bilberry Bumblebee & Ash), **Mercedes Villalba MSP** (Road Verges), and presided over by **Liam McArthur MSP** (Scottish Primrose).

Beavers for Bugs!

In November, **Ariane Burgess MSP**, Nature Champion for the Eurasian Beaver and the Aspen, asked the Scottish Government, about financial incentives for landowners given recent research from the University of Stirling on the positive benefits of beaver-created wetlands on pollinator numbers.

Irreplaceable Habitats

Roz McCall MSP, Nature Champion for the Northern Brown Argus, asked the Scottish Government about risks that afforestation poses to species-rich grasslands and nationally important species, and whether it will take steps to protect species-rich grasslands by recognising them as irreplaceable habitats within Scots law.

The Importance of Marine Conservation

Beatrice Wishart MSP, Champion for the Orca, lodged a Motion highlighting the international importance of Scotland's seas for seabirds and marine species but that many of these species are in serious decline. The Motion expressed hope that consultation on fisheries management measures aren't further delayed.

Manifesto for Nature



Scotland's natural environment is globally significant.

Our country is a special place: home to iconic wildlife and internationally important habitats, like Scotland's rainforest and the vast peat bogs of the Flow Country. This natural heritage is precious and unique, with globally threatened plants and wildlife.

But nature in Scotland is in trouble. Scotland has suffered from a high level of historic nature loss and we face even greater threats today, with 1 in 9 species at risk of national extinction. Climate change poses unprecedented threats to our natural environment. But restoring nature can help us in the fight against spiralling emissions and will help us adapt to warming that is already happening.

People in Scotland want action to help nature:

- **Three quarters of people** in Scotland say they worry about the environment.
- **8 out of 10 people** in Scotland have noticed the impact of climate change, nature loss or pollution in their local area.
- **7 out of 10 people** living in rural Scotland believe the Scottish Government should do more to make farming and fishing environmentally sustainable.

(Source: Diffley Partnership 2024)

The next Scottish Parliament must have a focus on nature and ensure we deliver progress towards our legal environmental targets – with political commitment, action at scale, and sufficient funding all key.

Scottish Environment LINK has published a manifesto for nature supported by 34 of our member organisations. You can [read the full manifesto here](#).

Image © Scottish Environment LINK

Protecting Scotland's riparian woodlands



Riparian woodlands are the green arteries of our ecosystem. Lining our rivers, burns, and lochs, these biologically rich areas support thousands of plant, invertebrate and mammal species, as well as mitigating drought impacts, alleviating flood risk, purifying water and storing carbon. This makes them essential for climate resilience and adaptation.

However, after years of neglect, riparian woodlands are at risk. In 2015-16, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency found that **56% of the vegetation on Scotland's river network was in poor condition**.

In recognition of this, the Riverwoods partnership was created, bringing together likeminded individuals and organisations to protect these habitats.

[The Blueprint Project](#) currently sits at the core of Riverwoods activities and will run in its delivery phase until June 2028. The 3.5 million project aims to develop a practical blueprint for riparian woodland

restoration and creation and is being led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust, with support from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, thanks to National Lottery players.

To date, the Blueprint Project has:

1. Planted 59,455 trees across 67ha in 3 river catchments. By 2028, 150ha of riparian woodland will be restored
2. Funded the creation of 11 river woodland development plans through the Riverwoods Development Grant. Given the high demand, future support for this scheme could enable a further 300km of restoration opportunities
3. Engaged catchment communities in practical woodland restoration through citizen science, storytelling, and volunteering
4. Created a Digital Centre of Excellence equipped with tools and live information, including a project register and best practice guidance, to support restoration activity to 2028 and beyond.

We are also working to ensure the ecological importance of riparian woodlands is recognised across Scottish Government, and that the required policies, regulation and funding mechanisms are in place to enable restoration at pace and scale.

Visit riverwoods.org.uk for more.

Scottish Wildlife Trust

Image © Scottish Wildlife Trust

Corncrake Calling



[Corncrakes](#) are a much-loved farmland bird, a little bigger than a blackbird but seldom seen, with a distinctive rasping “crex-crex” call. They used to be widespread throughout Britain and Ireland. Their numbers have declined over time due to changes in farming such as the switch from hay to silage and earlier grass cutting. Today, **almost all surviving Corncrakes that come to the British Isles live on the west coast of Scotland and the west of Ireland** where the kind of farming and crofting that suits them can still be found. Corncrakes need tall vegetation in spring and autumn to feel safe from predators, and the field needs to be cut or mown later than usual and in a different pattern, so that the chicks can escape before they’re able to fly.

Many farmers and crofters want to help Corncrakes, which are part of the landscape and culture of the west of Scotland. They need support to manage their fields to cover the costs of creating Corncrake habitat and the reduced yields from late cutting of hay and silage. RSPB Scotland has worked with farmers and crofters alongside the wider community through the [Corncrake Calling](#) project, which was funded through the National Lottery Heritage Fund between 2020 and 2024. Scottish Government funding has also been available to help Corncrakes through the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS), allowing farmers and crofters do more for Corncrake and other nature. However, this Scheme needs increased funding in future years alongside a simpler application process to secure the long-term future of birds such as the Corncrake and Scotland’s wildlife more widely.

When it comes to Corncrakes, we have done the research, we know some of the solutions and they are working where local farmers and crofters are supported to put them in place. Now we need a bigger and more reliable funding pot so that farmers and crofters in all areas with Corncrakes can take up this work. That’s why we’re calling on the next Scottish Government to **increase funding for Nature Friendly Farming** to 25% of the overall farming spend at the start of the next Parliament, rising to 75% by the end.

We’re very grateful to **Kaukab Stewart MSP**, who has been an enthusiastic champion of Corncrakes in this Parliament, and we look forward to a bright future for the Nature Champions scheme.

RSPB Scotland

Image © David Palmer / RSPB-images.com

Mandatory Microchipping



The European wildcat (*Felis silvestris*) is under threat from interbreeding with domestic cats in Scotland. Wildcats and domestic cats are different species; however, they can breed with each other and produce fertile [hybridised offspring](#).

[Saving Wildcats](#), a partnership led by the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, has been [restoring wildcats](#) by breeding and releasing them into the Cairngorms National Park. 46 wildcats have been released into the wild since 2023, with kittens born to released females for two years in a row.

However, **the threat from domestic cats remains significant**. Saving Wildcats operates a [trap, neuter, vaccinate and return program](#) (TNR) in the project's area, neutering 132 feral domestic cats in partnership with Cats Protection since 2020.

TNVR is complicated because identifying an unowned cat is an incredibly time-consuming process. Establishing an owner requires knocking on doors of nearby households, dropping leaflets across villages and posting on local social media groups.

If an owner does not come forward, we start trapping. Once trapped, we scan for a microchip. If there is not one, we then observe whether the cat's behaviour aligns with that of a pet or a feral cat. If everything indicates it is an unowned cat we can neuter, vaccinate and return the individual to where it was found, but this process is often fraught with complications. The work of Saving Wildcats and other organisations that conduct TNR would be much simpler if the Scottish Government followed England and Wales and made microchipping mandatory for pet cats.

Mandatory microchipping would benefit both wildcats and pet cats - it would reduce the likelihood of cats being abandoned and allow lost cats to be reunited with owners. Scotland should follow the example set by England and strengthen pet cat ownership laws.

Image © Saving Wildcats / RZSS



Scottish Environment LINK would like to thank Nature Champions 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 50 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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