

Meeting Notes- Wildlife Group Meeting 11 February (14.00pm-16.00pm) via Teams

Attendees – Juliet Caldwell (LINK), Bruce Wilson (SWT), Dan Paris (LINK), Andy Marks (LINK), Ailis Watt (RSPB Scotland), Jeff Waddell (NTS), Nonie Coulthard (SWBG), Claudia Gebhart (Bat Conservation Trust), Rebecca Lewis (Buglife), Frances Winder (Butterfly Conservation), Gus Jones (BSCG), Shreoshi Das (Buglife), Nicole Baxter (SWBG), Eric Baird (Scottish Countryside Rangers Association), Claudia Bell (RZSS), Julia Leino (ERCS)

Chaired by – Bruce Wilson (SWT)

Apologies – Paul Walton (RSPB Scotland)

Summary of Actions 11 February Wildlife Group meeting

| Action No. | Action | To be actioned by | Status |
|------------|---|-------------------|--------|
| 1. | Update the 30x30 group on details of the Nature30 panel. | Juliet | |
| 2. | Chase Brian Eardley (SG) and Ben Ross (NS) for a 30x30 meeting. | Ailis | Done |

1. General updates

a. Acceptance of Previous Minutes & Review of Actions

Minutes accepted. Actions from previous minutes were all completed.

2. Nature Champions

The Nature Champions debate is scheduled for the afternoon of 11 February and a strong turnout is expected as part of Members' Business. John Mason MSP has lodged the motion for debate.

The next newsletter, due at the end of March, will take a positive retrospective approach. Andy will be emailing Nature Champions hosts in the coming weeks for contributions.

Work is underway to shortlist species and habitats for the next Parliament, with a deadline of 1 March for factsheets and images. On the parliamentary engagement side, a three-day exhibition is planned in the Scottish Parliament to encourage MSPs to participate in the initiative. A motion and a series of communications will also be deployed to boost MSP involvement.

Nature Champions leadership workshops are being organised to improve the level of nature and climate literacy among MSPs and parliamentary staffers. Workshops will take place in both autumn

and spring, providing a 'dummies guide' type introduction to key issues. Efforts are also planned to thank MSPs who have contributed to the initiative.

3. Natural Environment Bill

Statutory Nature Targets

- Ministers must set legally binding targets for habitats, species, and environmental conditions.
- Aligned with UN Convention on Biological Diversity.
- Scope widened: can include species at risk of future decline.
- Strengthened duty on public bodies to act in ways that contribute to statutory targets.
- Independent scrutiny remains protected.

The detail of the targets will be in secondary legislation. This process can be challenging to influence as the committee scrutinising only has the power to approve or reject (not amend). Focus will be on influencing Government. Officials have stuck to the line that targets will need to be shaped and influenced by the independent scientific advisors.

All members were encouraged to participate in the Bill Group and feed into secondary legislation.

Environmental Protections & Habitats Regulations

- Weakening amendments removed; safeguards preserved.
- New guidance planned via an independent working group and consultation. Juliet is to follow-up with officials on their plan for this.
- Flexibility within Habitats Regulations discussions will continue via the Wildlife Group.

National Parks Reform

- Stronger governance framework
- Clear definition of cultural development
- 10-year policy statement requirement
- Transparent process for new park designation

Deer Management Reform

- Nature Restoration Orders allow NatureScot to intervene where deer block habitat recovery.
- Statutory timescales for deer control orders.
- Combined deer/venison programme to support population reduction.
- Public reporting mechanisms and national deer data dashboard.

Invasive Non-Native Species

- Stage 3 amendment to make the INNS Action Plan statutory did not pass.

- Ministers acknowledged concerns (access powers, forestry self-seeding, gamebird releases).
- NatureScot Call for Views closed in mid-January; publication of INNS Action Plan expected before the election.

Strategic Working Group on Wildlife Management:

- Next meeting next Thursday.
- Focus on licensing for species such as ravens.
- Species Reintroduction Forum: eNGO-focused
- Wildlife Management Group: land management stakeholders
- Political attention may decline post-election

4. Update on biodiversity process

a. National Biodiversity Forum Meeting

LINK member CEOs attended – Deborah Long, Jo Pike and Anne McCall amongst other stakeholders. Meeting was chaired by Cabinet Secretary.

NatureScot is tasked with recommending a suite of indicators to track progress against the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy (SBS). 41 candidate indicators developed with JHI, FLS, SEPA, and JNCC. Drawn from global and European frameworks, including the Global Biodiversity Framework, EU Nature Restoration Law etc.

The Forum's role is to advise on risks emerging from this process.

NatureScot's first annual delivery plan assessment showed the majority of actions to be rated green. This is different to the LINK tracker results.

b. SBS Delivery Plan Tracker

Proposal for a live accountability tracker hosted on the LINK website to monitor progress against the SBS Delivery Plan. Many 2025–26 actions are already slipping, and there is no accessible public tracking system. Aim: improve transparency, scrutiny, and accountability by clearly showing which actions are on track, delayed, or unclear. DPF bid was approved to pay for website design.

- Quarterly updates led by Juliet, with member input via meetings or conveners.
- All members will have access to the [working spreadsheet](#).
- Engagement with NatureScot (via Stuart MacQuarrie) to understand gaps and avoid duplication.
- Hosted on the LINK website
- Longer term: all actions to be tracked

NatureScot tracker

- NatureScot is conducting annual internal assessments of delivery plan actions - many actions are currently rated “green.”
- LINK’s tracker will:
 - Provide independent analysis
 - Assess risks (finance, capacity, leadership)
 - Highlight actions most at risk of slippage

Clear boundaries will be agreed to avoid confusion where assessments differ.

Timeline

- Feb–March: Website development + meeting with NatureScot
- March–May: Develop comms (infographics, scorecards, “ambition vs delivery” narrative)
- End May: Public launch
- From 2026: Quarterly public updates

The comms and media plan will include spotlighting key actions that are slipping. Member support to identify these actions and provide context would be helpful.

To avoid peer review it was suggested that we get LINK Honorary Fellows to draft blog contributions.

There is a potential to leverage relationship with Nature Champions and highlighting key actions in relation to their championed species or habitat. This would contribute to political pressure of ensuring the actions are carried out.

c. Biodiversity Metric

The Scottish Government commissioned NatureScot to adapt the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) metric to support NPF4 Policy 3b. This is not introducing mandatory BNG at this stage.

Current proposals include compliance-based compensatory payments, which do not necessarily deliver actual biodiversity net gain.

Jonny Wyatt has convened a small working group from the Planning Group to develop a LINK position ahead of the consultation. He also serves as the LINK representative on the advisory group overseeing the metric.

d. 30x30

LINK held a workshop at the start of February to agree a shared LINK position on the moving parts of 30x30 - including Nature30 sites, statutory designation, Nature Networks, monitoring and timelines.

- Government reports 18%+, but this includes degraded sites and doesn't distinguish condition.
- Only 12.6% of Scotland's land is effectively protected (i.e. in favourable or recovering condition).
- Key habitats (lowland grasslands, freshwater, ancient woodland) are underrepresented in statutory sites.

30x30 is not a numerical exercise - Nature30 sites can be beneficial, but they cannot replace statutory protection. Everything needs to be properly linked and transparently monitored.

We will be organising a meeting with Ben Ross (NatureScot) and Brian Eardley (SG) to present the updated position + timeline of key asks:

E.g. by 2026 LINK would like to see:

- Public, transparent 30x30 dashboard
- Stakeholder forum and clear designation/restoration pipeline
- Improved monitoring coverage and reporting

By 2027

- Statutory site condition targets under the Natural Environment Act
- All protected areas with up-to-date management plans
- Expansion of statutory designation, prioritising underrepresented habitats

By 2029

- Full integration of Protected Areas, Nature30 sites, Nature Networks and landscape-scale projects
- Spatial map identifying restoration and connectivity priorities

By 2030

- At least 30% of land effectively protected (favourable/recovering condition)
- Measurable biodiversity recovery, not just mapped coverage

There is no realistic chance of meeting 50,000 hectares of sites with protections in place and an active management plan by the target date.

NTS concern: While the NatureScot30 criteria themselves are reasonable, the scrutiny and oversight of site selection and management remain a major concern. Deborah has been asked to sit on a Nature30 panel to assess applicants – this is alongside SLE, Community Land Scotland, Scot Gov and NatureScot.

AP: Juliet to update the group on this post Deborah meeting with Ben Ross.

The group discussed a potential escalation strategy if the Scottish Government or NatureScot resist key asks. Options include public communications campaigns and parliamentary pressure

AP: Ailis has not yet heard back from Ben Ross (NatureScot) and Brian Eardley (SG) regarding next steps and will chase for a response.

5. AOB

Afforestation Symposium on 21 April organised by NTS at the Edinburgh University Centre for Sustainable Forestry and Landscape; 60–70 attendees. A postdoctoral researcher will examine historical species/habitat losses during the Scottish Forestry Strategy period. Members are welcome to attend and contact Jeff.

Lynx to Scotland Consultation: Media coverage has focused on farming/gamekeeping interests. SWT has encouraged local members to respond and participate.

England Initiative – [Building Better Evidence for Biodiversity Recovery](#): Chaired by JNCC, first Scottish meeting tomorrow, focusing on collaborative monitoring and data collection.