

## Meeting Notes- Wildlife Group Meeting 26 March (10.00am-12.00pm) via Teams

**Attendees** – Juliet Caldwell (LINK), Bruce Wilson (SWT), Dan Paris (LINK), Andy Marks (LINK), Ailis Watt (RSPB Scotland), Nonie Coulthard (SWBG), Claudia Gebhart (Bat Conservation Trust), James Silvey (RSPB Scotland), Ashley Buchan (CIEEM), Kirsty Richards (SWT), Nora Casey (RSPB Scotland), Erin Shott (Plantlife Scotland), Aimee Seager (Plantlife Scotland), Shreoshi Das (Buglife), Nicole Baxter (SWBG), Eric Baird (Scottish Countryside Rangers Association), Claudia Bell (RZSS)

**Chaired by** – Bruce Wilson (SWT)

**Apologies** – Paul Walton (RSPB Scotland)

### **1. General updates**

#### **a. Acceptance of Previous Minutes & Review of Actions**

The previous minutes were agreed and all actions have been completed.

### **2. Nature Champions**

Recent work has focused on celebrating Nature Champions from the last Parliament, including thank-you emails and certificates to MSPs, which received positive feedback. <https://www.scotlink.org/being-a-nature-champion-is-not-just-for-parliament/>

Preparations are underway for relaunching the initiative. Members are asked to send any remaining factsheets and images to Andy by the end of April. A communications pack and updated guidance are being developed to help promote the programme more widely.

Plans include short films for social media, a possible Parliamentary exhibition and a leadership programme focused on nature and climate literacy. Andy will contact members for support with filming.

### **3. Scottish Beaver Advisory Group: Draft Beaver Messaging Framework**

A draft communications toolkit is being developed to support understanding and acceptance of beaver expansion in Scotland. It is intended to complement, not replace, formal consultation.

There may be opportunities to publish and promote the toolkit and potentially develop a wider piece marking 10 years since beavers were reintroduced. Engagement is currently limited in some areas, particularly Fife and Lothian.

#### **4. Update on biodiversity process**

There was discussion around how the Scottish Government will communicate new duties to public bodies. Following a recent meeting with Brian Eardley, it was noted that officials are still working through what the relevant amendment is intended to achieve. Advice is expected to be developed for ministers in the coming weeks, including on structure and stakeholders, with a commitment to have arrangements in place by 2026.

The Scottish Law Commission is also progressing work on consolidation of environmental legislation ([2023–2027](#)), with a Habitats Regulations working group expected to run in parallel. Members expressed interest in being kept informed and contributing to the LINK position via staff.

On secondary legislation, there are concerns about limited visibility of progress. While draft targets are reportedly well developed, the process lacks transparency. The Programme Advisory Group has completed its current role and a new scrutiny group is expected to review the targets.

##### **a. [Scottish Action Plan for Invasive Non-Native Species 2026-2032](#)**

Paul sent over initial feedback – he suggests the draft plan is an improvement in how it frames the issue and sets out the overall approach. However, there are significant concerns about a lack of ambition, specificity, and clear, measurable actions. Key concepts such as “priority INNS” are not clearly defined, and the plan does not sufficiently reflect lessons learned from past work.

There is also concern that the plan does not identify or prioritise the most pressing threats, and that previously included best practice principles have been removed. The timing of publication, ahead of the Environmental Standards Scotland inquiry, has also been questioned.

While there is welcome recognition of the role of private investment, there is still a need to clarify LINK’s position on this. Concerns were also raised about the consultation process, including limited transparency.

Juliet will draft a LINK response and circulate it to the INNS subgroup for input. There is also a planned meeting with Diarmuid O’Neill (ENFOR) on 8 April.

##### **b. [Landscape Scale Restoration Projects](#)**

Concerns were raised about the use of ‘exemplar projects’, particularly the risk that these could be perceived as preferred or agency-led projects and may unintentionally draw funding or attention away from other work. There are also concerns about gaps in geographic coverage, including the absence of the Northwest and Islands, and a lack of clear alignment with other frameworks such as land use strategy.

NatureScot has clarified that the exemplar list is intended to represent a broad mix of projects, including community, farmer, NGO and partnership-led initiatives, rather than focusing on agency-led work. They have also stated that they are engaging with funders to ensure that these priorities do not influence independent funding decisions, and that the aim is to increase overall investment in nature restoration rather than concentrate it.

Feedback from previous engagement has been incorporated to some extent, including widening habitat coverage. However, concerns remain.

Juliet, Andy and Deborah are meeting with Brenan Turvey on 2 April to discuss further. Members are encouraged to share specific concern, examples or questions in advance. This includes questions around how INNS will be addressed and how this work aligns with 30x30, Nature Networks and other initiatives, without creating additional layers of strategy.

The group discussed how they would bring their thinking together with the Land Use Group, who are also interested in this piece of work. The group agreed to focus on wildlife elements within this broader agenda.

#### **c. [SBS Delivery Plan Tracker](#)**

A proposal is being developed for a live, publicly accessible tracker on the LINK website to monitor progress against the SBS Delivery Plan. This would track all actions with brief updates and RAG ratings, alongside deeper analysis of a smaller number of priority areas such as INNS, landscape-scale restoration and 30x30.

The tracker would also score actions against the six objectives of the strategy to assess their contribution to nature recovery, providing an overall picture of progress and supporting communications outputs such as blogs. It is intended as both an analytical tool and a means of strengthening accountability and media narrative.

Design work is underway, and an upcoming meeting with Stuart MacQuarrie from NatureScot on 2 April to flag the launch and detail of the tracker.

#### **d. 30x30**

An internal LINK position paper is being developed, setting out the current state of play and key gaps, including monitoring, site condition, Nature30 and landscape-scale delivery.

This has not yet been shared externally, as further detail is expected on Nature30 guidance and criteria. Deborah is attending a Nature30 panel on 1 April, although there are concerns about confidentiality of panel documents and the difficulty this creates for sharing information across the network.

The plan is to refine the paper following this and share it with Brian Eardley and Ben Ross ahead of a meeting on 22 April. Following that and an upcoming workshop, the group will decide whether to publish an updated LINK position, potentially as a refreshed report with supporting communications.

There was also discussion about the UK 30x30 organisation, which appears to be a community interest company rather than a Defra-led initiative. IUCN guidance on evidence and retrospective management was noted as important, particularly to avoid risks such as wildlife estates being counted as Nature30 sites. The Environment Strategy (page 34) references Nature30 as the mechanism for delivering 30x30.

#### **e. Nature Networks**

A pipeline of work is forming on Nature Networks. As part of Governance Group work, planning authorities are being contacted (via FOI) to understand progress. Available information confirms that development is mixed, with some local authorities expecting to have local development plans in place next year.

A recent workshop with Argyll and Bute Council highlighted challenges around data, particularly in identifying and protecting specific habitats such as rainforest.

#### **5. AOB**

[The UK consultation on improving protection for huntable wild birds](#) (covering England, Scotland and Wales) is now open. It includes some positive elements, such as proposals for adaptive harvest management, although this will require robust data on bird numbers and mortality. The consultation also refers to the potential introduction of a licence return scheme. RSPB will be responding.

CIEEM is hosting its [annual species licensing update](#) with NatureScot on 13 April (13:00 - 14:00). Wildfires have been highlighted in the Rural Affairs Committee's legacy report as an issue the next committee should prioritise early in the new Parliament.

At the last SBL policy group, a number of questions were raised. There was short notice that Martin Faulkner is retiring, with Abby Gardener taking over. Members are encouraged to attend one of the upcoming workshops. Ian MacDonald was noted as a helpful NatureScot contact on this work.

Wildfires are raised in the Rural Affairs committee's legacy report as something the next committee should look at early in the parliament.