



MPs come together to celebrate first year of the Species Champions Project

On Monday 3 July 2017 MPs attended an award ceremony in Westminster, hosted by Richard Benyon MP, to mark the first anniversary of the Species Champions project and celebrate the recruitment of 39 MPs from across the political spectrum. The most actively involved MPs received awards from TV presenter Steve Backshall, recognising their efforts for nature conservation in Parliament and out in the field.



MP Species Champions with Steve Backshall

During the ceremony MPs were asked to sign the Greener UK Pledge for the Environment. The pledge calls upon MPs to work to establish the UK as a world leader in the environment by committing to match or exceed the current protections we have in place for nature.



Rebecca Pow MP signs the Greener UK Pledge for the Environment



Marian Spain, Chief Executive of Plantlife, spoke about the Species Champions project, explaining why it has a species focus and sharing the evidence that shows species are in trouble. She highlighted the collaborative nature of the project and why 9 NGOs are better than one - this way the organisations can have a louder voice and work more efficiently. She emphasised that targeted action and funding can restore species and nature as a whole, citing the example of the increase from 500 to 12,000 fen orchids within 5 years. She rounded up the speech by explaining why MP Species Champions matter: they have a leadership role in society, they can take action in their constituencies and they have a voice in parliament.

James Cross, Chief Executive of Natural England, spoke about the importance of species as a way to help people connect with nature and explained how the organisation is focused on securing positive outcomes for nature. He also mentioned the Back from the Brink partnership project¹ that has received Heritage Lottery Funding of £4.6 million to conserve the highest priority threatened species and inspire a movement of people to discover, value and take action for England's threatened species.



James Cross, Chief Executive Natural England

The following three Awards were presented by Steve Backshall:

1. Best Parliamentary Champion

This award recognises the MP who has been most active in support of their species both in Westminster and in their constituency, and has worked to raise its profile.

Honourable mention: Oliver Colvile, Conservative, Plymouth Sutton and Devonport – hedgehog champion

Oliver was well known in the House of Commons for his role as champion of the hedgehog. He frequently mentioned the hedgehog in debates - gaining a degree of notoriety. He backed a petition

¹ <http://www.naturebackfromthebrink.org/>



to raise the level of legal protection for the hedgehog. Oliver lost his seat in the June 2017 General Election but will be sent his signed award certificate.

Honourable mention: Scott Mann, Conservative, North Cornwall - sea bass champion

Scott has been active in raising the plight of his species in front of government. He has spoken up on bass during last year's back bench fisheries debate ahead of the December 2016 EU Fisheries Council negotiations and has tabled several Parliamentary questions on bass conservation.

Winner: Rachael Maskell, Labour, York Central - tansy beetle champion



Rachel has taken her championship role to heart, engaging with warmth and enthusiasm with the species champions project. In May last year she visited the tansy beetle in its habitat along the banks of the River Ouse in York to find out more about local conservation work for the species. She also asked the press to attend and gained coverage in the local [media](#). She has been to York University to meet researchers in the biology department and learn more about her beetle.

She has championed the plight of her species on social media on several occasions, and highlighted the news around the numbers of beetles. She visited the new tansy beetle interpretation boards on the river bank near their habitat to help raise [awareness](#). Rachael has mentioned the beetle at a number of events in Parliament, including in a [debate](#) on global biodiversity, and she attended the State of Nature launch last September.

2. Species Award

This award is for the species that has shown the best improvement in its conservation status.



Honourable mention: Norman Lamb, Liberal Democrat, North Norfolk - Fen orchid champion

2016 was a great year for the fen orchid. More than 12,000 specimens were recorded in the East of England – a dramatic increase from around 1,000 in 2012. Plantlife's trial move of plants to new sites was a success, with many flowering in the summer, paving the way for future relocations.



Winner: Sarah Wollaston, Conservative, Totnes – Cirl bunting champion

Last year there was cause for celebration when it was revealed that collaborative conservation work had lifted the UK cirl bunting population to over 1,000 pairs, bucking the overall downward trend for most farmland birds. Once widespread, declines in food and nest site availability meant that by the late 1980s just 118 pairs remained, confined to an area of south Devon. Twenty five years ago a ground-breaking conservation project began which saw RSPB working in partnership with local farmers and Natural England to encourage land management practices that would benefit cirl buntings. With the support of the farming community it is hoped that numbers will continue to grow. Sarah Wollaston was one of the first species champion MPs, joining a trial of the project in 2013. In November she attended the event in Devon to mark the 25th anniversary of the cirl bunting partnership. Sarah Wollaston has been a very supportive MP, including blogging about the species on her [website](#).

3. Muddy Welly Award

This is an award for the MP who is most enthusiastic out in the field. The muddy welly represents this dedication to go out and engage with the species and help further its conservation.

Honourable mention: Daniel Zeichner, Labour, Cambridge – ruderal bumblebee champion

Daniel has not had to muddy his wellies so far, but he is receiving an honourable mention for fearlessly handling a bumblebee.

Winner: Matt Warman, Conservative, Boston and Skegness – redshank

In May 2016 Matt donned his wellies to count breeding redshank on the saltmarsh at RSPB's Frampton Marsh reserve in his Lincolnshire constituency. Matt was to be seen leaping across muddy ditches, armed with a clipboard, in quest of the secretive breeding birds.



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