

20 Years of Action for Biodiversity in North East Scotland

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The North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership is a shining example of how collective working can facilitate on the ground conservation through active engagement with local authorities, agencies, community groups, volunteers and academics. As one of the first local biodiversity action partnerships in Scotland, its achievements in protecting threatened habitats and species over the last two decades is something to be proud of. The 20 articles highlighted here capture the full spectrum of biodiversity work in the region, including habitat creation and restoration, species re-introduction, alien eradication, as well as community engagement, education and general awareness-raising.

Much of the success in enhancing our rural and urban environments in North East Scotland reflects the commitment of key individuals, with a 'cando-attitude' and willingness to engage, widely. Their passion for nature, determination to make a difference on the ground, and above all, stimulate a new generation of enthusiasts, is the most valuable asset available to us. Without these dedicated individuals our lives will not be so enriched.

The strengths of our local biodiversity partnership make me confident that over the next 20 years there will be even more inspirational action for biodiversity in North East Scotland.

S.DAMon

Steve Albon Chair Steering Group, North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership





# Capercaillie: monitoring and conservation in North East Scotland

Photo - Capercaillie displaying in the rain, Desmond Duga

## 1.3 million wildlife records and counting

NESBReC is the Local Records Centre for North East Scotland. Founded in 2000, NESBReC collates, manages and provides biological information for Aberdeenshire, Aberdeen City, Moray and the Cairngorms National Park. Currently, over 1.3 million species records are held, as well as datasets on habitats and sites of conservation value.

Records are welcomed by NESBReC of all wildlife. Every record is important. All records help to build up a more comprehensive understanding of our local biodiversity and can help ensure that decisions that may affect habitats and species in the North East of Scotland are made with the best available knowledge. Records submitted to NESBReC may be shared with other organisations and users for the benefit of the conservation and understanding of species and habitats, not just in North East Scotland, but in the wider context of the UK, and even Europe.

NESBReC is currently supported financially by Aberdeenshire Council, Aberdeen City Council, Cairngorms National Park Authority, Forestry Commission Scotland, RSPB Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage. Furthermore, it relies on the fantastic contribution of so much useful data sent in by volunteer recorders in North East Scotland.

Free training events are offered every summer by NESBReC in order to increase wildlife identification skills and promote the biodiversity of our local area. By giving people the skills to start identifying what they see, those people will, hopefully, feel confident enough to submit records to NESBReC in the future and contribute to the database of biodiversity information.

In 2010, NESBReC produced its first atlas publication, for Dragonflies and Damselflies, based on the records held in its database from 1900-2008. In 2017, NESBReC is to publish the Mammal Atlas of North-East Scotland and the Cairngorms. This is the culmination of a three year project aimed at galvanising mammal recording and producing the first account of the distributions of the 43 mammal species that are present in the area.

Capercaillie, the iconic giant grouse of the Scots pinewoods, underwent a roughly 90% population decline in Scotland between the 1970s and 1990s and although the population has remained between 1000 and 2000 birds for the last 20 years, the range has continued to contract. Now, Capercaillie are restricted to five areas in Scotland, all relatively isolated from each other. The area with the largest amount of pine forest is Strathspey and this forms the population stronghold, with around 85% of the national total. In Aberdeenshire, the forests of Deeside now hold between 5 and 10% of this total, with a far smaller number of birds left on Donside.

Working in partnership, private landowners, the National Forest Estate, RSPB Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and Forestry Commission Scotland have been delivering work prioritised by the Capercaillie BAP Steering Group. This has included identifying and protecting areas of suitable habitat, improving habitat where it isn't optimal

and supporting the creation of new habitat through suitable woodland creation projects. Blaeberry is a key field layer plant for Capercaillie, so reducing herbivore grazing pressure to allow it to thrive is an ongoing issue. Likewise, deer fences have long been recognised as a killer of Capercaillie, so the marking of fences and the removal of all but the most necessary remains a priority.

Set against the backdrop of national decline, two sites on Deeside where Capercaillie have been absent in recent years have started to show promising signs following deer reduction or exclusion and the subsequent tree regeneration and field layer recovery.

At Mar Lodge, a cock and hen were seen together during the spring lek period in 2016, which is possibly the first breeding attempt here for over a decade, and at the RSPB's Crannach site, suspected Capercaillie droppings suggest that birds are moving in as the young woodland matures.

Glenn Roberts NESBReC Co-ordinator Gareth Marshall Capercaillie Project Officer



Photo First Tree President in 2010 Kee Wetsen

# Community-led action to tackle invasive American Mink

Photo - Water Vole conservation began in the Ythan Catchmen

### Community moss conservation and woodland creation

Portlethen Moss is an area of rare natural raised acidic bog supporting a unique and diverse variety of plant and animal species. Over the years it has been subject to development pressures, consequently much of it has been lost. In 2004 a local group of volunteers formed the Portlethen Moss Conservation Group to preserve what is left of this environmentally sensitive area and the unique flora and fauna it supports. We work in partnership with Aberdeenshire Council, who own part of the Moss, and raise awareness of the site's importance. The Moss is now a Local Nature Conservation Site.

Conservation work continues to help keep the peat from drying out. An example of this was the creation of new ponds and a dam to slow the water passing through the moss; this has increased biodiversity by attracting dragonflies and damselflies. We also created an area of hibernacula, from the spoil after digging out

the ponds, so our amphibians have somewhere safe to hibernate. Another project, supporting biodiversity, is an area of gorse control which has allowed heather to regenerate, creating an ideal habitat for moths, butterflies, bees etc. A second project of the group is the creation and ongoing maintenance of a local community woodland, from what was a disused agricultural field. In partnership with Aberdeenshire Council, Talisman, the Forestry Commission Scotland and local schools the first trees were planted in 2010. A hedgerow surrounds the periphery of the site and is developing nicely and already attracting birds

We chose species that would provide blossom and berries to attract as many insects and birds as possible. Each year we top up tree numbers, adding new native species and plant wild flowers, adding to the biodiversity that increases year on year as the woodland matures.

The North East Scotland Water Vole project was initiated and led by scientists from the University of Aberdeen with facilitation from NELBAP and support from Scottish Natural Heritage. Initially focussed in Aberdeenshire, the project has expanded to include multiple fisheries trusts and other partners and funders and has been led by Rivers and Fisheries Trusts of Scotland (RAFTS) since 2009.

American Mink is an invasive species responsible for the decline of Water Voles and other riparian fauna. This project coordinated and optimised the efforts of an existing, local and skilled workforce with convergent interests to deliver coordinated, systematic sub-catchment by sub-catchment eradication and monitoring of American Mink. This has achieved maximum conservation benefit on a scale not previously attempted.

A key component was to promote the

systematic use of mink rafts, floating platforms with a footprint-recording plate made of moist clay and sand under a wooden tunnel. Mink rafts are designed to act both as a monitoring device and as a trapping site for American Mink. Traps are placed in the tunnel of the raft subsequent to mink footprints being recorded during checks.

After the first 6 years, the project expanded mink control from an initial 30 km² area holding a residual Water Vole metapopulation to a vast 6,000 km² encompassing the Cairngorms National Park. Following this an enormous 29,000km² area protecting one third of Scotland from the influence of mink was secured. Large scale mink control initiated by NELBAP and involving multiple volunteers and organisations created the conditions for an ongoing spectacular recovery of Water Voles, the focal native species, with hints of recovery by other affected species.



#### **Drummuir 21:** Unlocking the countryside

Drummuir 21 is a partnership group made up of representatives of local businesses, voluntary and youth organisations and individuals working together for the sustainable development of Drummuir and environs into the 21st century. The charity was constituted at the beginning of the millennium and took its name from the place and from Local Agenda 21: act local, think global. I imagine that now most members would not know anything about LA 21, the 800 page agreement signed by 70 nations at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The agreement committed governments not only to introduce policies for achieving sustainable development but also to secure greater local community involvement in environmental issues.

Here at Drummuir, we took the call to action seriously and over the last 17 or 18 years we have met together, consulted widely, taken action and continue to regenerate our membership and our partnerships. We have steadily worked away in a beautiful landscape that supports a wide variety of wildlife. Red Squirrels, Water Voles, Pine Martens and Wildcat are all within our sights. Sometimes quite literally: as when a squirrel runs across a path or a Pine Marten is picked up by the night camera. From the moth monitoring session organised by Moray Wildlife Watch, we know that we have at least 19 varieties of moths here. We would like to encourage the Osprey to settle...or to know that it definitely has.

Annually we run St Fumac's Fair, May 20th this year, so named for the parish's Celtic saint. The Fair is a spring festival celebrating our outdoors and enabling visitors and residents to learn about the natural environment in an informal way. One of the local school children plays Fumac's Air on the fiddle whilst a wreath of daffodils is processed to crown the chainsaw-carved statue of the Saint.

We are not a big group, we have not changed the world, but here at Drummuir we have made a difference, and are proud to have done so.



#### East Tullos Burn - Nature in the heart of the city

In 2012, Aberdeen City Council launched a project to look at ways to improve the East Tullos Burn in Torry. Sadly the Burn had been neglected in the past, suffering with poor water quality and litter problems. The aim of the project was to look at ways to transform the burn into a more natural water feature that helps to improve the water quality, provide a haven for wildlife, and become attractive to local communities and visitors to the

With the help of the local community, a design was produced and work on the ground to implement it began in March 2014. The design included a new meandering course for the burn as well as the creation of wetland pond areas, with extensive planting of wetland plants and trees, plus improved access around the area, including a new bridge. Local school children from St. Fittick's Primary school helped put the finishing touches to the burn by helping to plant the remaining flowers on the

The site quickly became awash with colour during the summer of 2014, when plants included Yellow Iris, Ragged Robin, Purple Loosestrife and Meadowsweet as well as Poppy and Cornflower could be seen, with many lasting well into the late autumn and early winter. Many insect species such as ladybird, butterfly, damselfly and dragonfly, have moved in with many bird species being seen with the odd migrant and rare species also being

Along with Aberdeen City Council, there were a number of funders for the £300,000 project including the North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership, who funded the wildflower planting.

The project won two awards in 2015 which were Winner of the Herald Society Awards in the Environmental Initiative of the Year category and Highly Commended in the Sustainable Development category of the RSPB Nature of Scotland Awards.







#### Hope for Corn Buntings; Farmland Bird Lifeline

Halting the Invasion Deveron Biosecurity Project

The Deveron, Bogie & Isla Rivers Charitable Trust launched the Deveron District Biosecurity Project in November 2009, after securing substantial funding from Scottish Natural Heritage and the European LEADER Fund. Our plan sets out the Trust's vision to protect the district from existing and potential non-native species and recognises some vital elements; such as the need for long term commitment and the need to tackle invasive species at a catchment scale.

The project began by employing a full-time Biosecurity Officer to oversee the day-to-day running of the project and forge links with all relevant stakeholders and landowners. He was also tasked with enlisting 'River Champions' (volunteers) who assisted greatly in controlling invasive plants and American Mink.

Control of the dangerous plant, Giant Hogweed, was achieved by a lot of hard work, but also with such innovative techniques as grazing control

with a local farmer's Blackface sheep, which are able to graze the young plants without any harmful effects. Clay pads were used to detect mink paw prints and by focusing our trapping effort where we found signs, 287 American Mink were removed. Through the course of this work we realised that focusing limited resources on trapping in the territories of breeding females is most cost-effective. Japanese Knotweed, another very damaging plant, has been controlled at 28 sites, mainly by the laborious, but effective direct injection of weedkiller into the plant stems.

Invasive Non-Native Species have major impacts on our native wildlife and the native Water Vole was almost wiped out by American Mink, and the plants overwhelm our native vegetation. They are also a major problem for salmon fishing where the plants make it difficult to get to riverbanks and the mink eat Salmon; so this project has been a win-win.

The Corn Bunting is one of Scotland's fastest-declining birds. Approximately 750 to 900 territorial males remain in Scotland, and several local extinctions have occurred during the last decade. Eastern Scotland now holds most of the remaining Scottish population, but even here, they have declined rapidly. A recent study revealed an 83% decline in singing males on 25 sites in Aberdeenshire and Tayside between 1989 and 2007. The combination of a late breeding season, preference for nesting in growing crops and a seed diet centred on grains is likely to have made Corn Bunting populations especially vulnerable to modern agricultural practices.

Farmland Bird Lifeline (FBL) is an RSPB initiative supported by Scottish Natural Heritage. It has been running since 2001 and has involved approximately 37 farms in Aberdenshire, with work also extending to Angus, Fife and, previously, Inverness-shire. The work aims to;

- highlight the plight of the Corn Bunting and demonstrate the best package of options
- demonstrate how targeted management options can be integrated into commercial operations
- trial new management options for Corn Buntings and other farmland wildlife

RSPB research has shown that this targeted agrienvironment approach can reverse Corn Bunting declines in eastern Scotland. A seven-year monitoring study linked to FBL and involving 71 farms, measured Corn Bunting responses to two conservation schemes - the Scottish Government's Rural Stewardship Scheme (RSS), which supports general conservation management for farmland birds, and FBL. On farms in FBL, Corn Bunting numbers increased by 5.6% per annum. In contrast, numbers showed no significant change on farms in RSS, and declined by 14.5% per annum on farms outside both schemes.

The results suggest that 72% of the Corn Bunting population in mainland Scotland must receive highly-targeted measures, backed by expert advice, to halt declines. In 2009, only 24% of the population was targeted in this way, but we are now hitting approximately 42%.

A 2015 resurvey of the Aberdeenshire sites has shown that numbers appears to have been stable since 2009, following earlier declines across the study area.







Photo - Curlew, Silverford, Ian Francis

## Local Nature Conservation Sites

A review of sites of regional and local importance for biodiversity and geodiversity was undertaken by Aberdeenshire Council in collaboration with North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). These sites form part of Aberdeenshire's rich and varied landscape and cultural heritage. As well as protecting habitats, features of geological interest and maintaining populations of notable species, these areas are also important in maintaining our quality of life and supporting recreation, education and tourism. A key element of this review was the expertise provided by a small panel of local biologists and geologists who assessed sites in the context of the Aberdeenshire area. A wider panel provided a broader perspective representing farming, forestry and enterprise as well as regulatory and wildlife interests.

The review involved undertaking habitat, geological and species surveys as appropriate and collating this information to allow assessment of sites

against agreed criteria. Communication with site owners was an important part of the process. The review identified 99 sites, now referred to as Local Nature Conservation Sites (LNCS). The sites vary in size from less than 3 ha to nearly 4000 ha and include some well-known places such as Bennachie, Blackdog Beach and Portlethen Moss. Others, whilst less well known, support rare and declining species such as a series of small bogs which are important locally for Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary butterflies.

The LNCS will be identified in the forthcoming Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2017 which also contains policies to protect the sites from adverse impact from development and infrastructure. Information on LNCS will be shared with planners and agencies such as SNH, Forestry Commission Scotland, and Scottish Environment Protection Agency to ensure that the interests of these sites can be taken into account when considering applications for works and grant aid.

### Mapping the breeding birds of North-East Scotland

North-East Scotland is extraordinarily rich in birds. Over 170 species have nested since 1968, and, for 20 of these, our region holds more than 10% of the UK breeding population. These birds are found in a wide range of habitats, from some of the UK's highest mountains to a spectacular and diverse coastline. North-East Scotland holds nationally important concentrations of native pinewoods, coniferous plantations, arctic-alpine land, lowland raised bogs, coastal sand dunes and heaths, with notable proportions of Scotland's heather moorland, arable farmland and coastal shingle. Many renowned bird localities are also found here, including the Cairngorms, Mar Lodge, Lochnagar, Glen Tanar, Loch Spynie, Findhorn Bay, Loch of Strathbeg, Fowlsheugh, the Moray Firth and the Ythan estuary.

This book, published in 2011, covers the breeding birds of Moray, Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City - almost 4% of the UK land area and 11% of Scotland, and includes close to half of the

Cairngorms National Park. It is the largest atlas of its kind ever undertaken and maps the distributions of all breeding birds during the period 2002–06. It also makes comparisons with earlier local and national atlases. In all, 350 local observers took part; 60 of these also wrote the species accounts and 62 photographers contributed illustrations of breeding activity – an enormous 'citizen science' undertaking! Copies were given to all libraries and secondary schools in the area.

The distributions of most of the 189 breeding species during 2002–06 are mapped, and their habitat, breeding biology, local breeding status and distribution are summarised. Estimates of breeding populations are provided, along with evidence for change in distribution and numbers. The geography and habitat context in which our breeding birds are found is described, as are the main influences on their distribution and trends in numbers - issues that are critical to bird conservation in contemporary North-East Scotland.



Meeting the (wild) neighbours

to participate in some rather unique outdoor

education.

The project, which was short-listed for a Nature of Scotland Award in 2015, allowed rural and urban schools to uncover the secret world of wildlife that shared their grounds and surrounding areas. The schools were encouraged to submit a video of their highlights, for a chance to win one of the cameras to continue their studies. One winner was an inner-city school, which, although recording only a handful of species, used the project to explore a range of biodiversity issues. The schools project has gone from strength to strength and in December 2016, with support from Scottish Natural Heritage, the initiative was rolled out across Scotland, involving schools from the Western Isles to Dundee.

The projects contribute to Scotland's 2020 Route Map, through facilitating outdoor learning and enabling individuals and communities to enjoy their green spaces and to engage in citizen science. It's also really great fun!

OPAL (Open Air Laboratories) is a UK-wide partnership initiative that inspires communities to discover, enjoy and protect their local environments through citizen science-based activities . Started in England in 2007, the programme was expanded in 2014 to include Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Led by Imperial College London and funded by the Big Lottery, organisations including universities, wildlife groups and museums, work in partnership to deliver citizen science activities. The eight OPAL surveys are Air, Soil and Earthworm, Water, Bugs Count, Biodiversity, Tree health, PolliNation and New Zealand Flatworm.

scientists of the future

Aberdeen University delivers OPAL in Scotland along with The Conservation Volunteers, Field Studies Council and Glasgow Science Centre. Since 2014, over 3,700 teachers across the UK have been trained to deliver outdoor learning and over 21,000 children from inner cities, remote rural communities or areas of high deprivation have had the opportunity to explore their local environment and appreciate the relevance of the natural world to their lives. Since OPAL began, nearly one million people have

benefited from exploring their local nature through OPAL activities and at Aberdeen, OPAL Community Scientists have helped 15,000 people across the region to engage with their local environment.

Surveys carried out have used lichens to identify areas affected by air pollution, discovered that earthworm diversity is high in back gardens, helped track the spread of invasive species and diseases such as Ash Dieback, as well as finding out more about the differences between urban and rural biodiversity. The New Zealand Flatworm survey, launched by the University of Aberdeen and the James Hutton Institute, has generated 1,300 records and raised awareness of the species and its impacts on earthworms. The survey has also received records of four other invasive flatworms, showing the merit of a citizen science approach to identifying and tackling the spread of invasive species.

The latest report "OPAL – Exploring Nature Together" is available at www.opalexplorenature. org/ENTreport. For more information, contact Annie Robinson on annierobinson@abdn.ac.uk

It is difficult for communities to value or protect that which they are not aware of. Many animals are elusive or nocturnal and local residents often have no idea of the species that they share their space with. However, technological developments, such as camera traps, are increasingly providing a method for scientists, naturalists and the general public to detect and monitor a range of species that are often difficult to survey by other means.

In 2013, with funding from LEADER and Forestry Commission Scotland, we bought five cameras that were loaned to volunteers and community groups. They were used in nature reserves, gardens, private land and land managed by community projects. This proved hugely successful.

Keen to tackle the well-documented disconnect between young people and the outdoors, in 2014 we worked with more than a dozen primary schools across Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray. With the assistance of five ranger services and individuals involved in environmental education, more than 250 children were given the opportunity

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Rose Toney North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership

Annie Robinson OPAL Community Scientist

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Reclaiming the North East



Only in recent years have we woken up to just how important peat bogs are. Not only do they provide the precise environment in which a range of highly specialised plants and animals thrive but they also lock away carbon and, in so doing, help to reduce impacts of climate change. Unfortunately, most of our lowland raised bogs (one of the two main kinds of peatland) have been destroyed, either through peat extraction for use in horticulture and gardening or by draining for agriculture. The race is now on to save what we have left

Just a few miles south-west of Aberdeen lies a hidden treasure of a nature reserve. Red Moss of Netherley became a reserve of the Scottish Wildlife Trust in 1997. Initially just part of the site was purchased for conservation, but the Trust now also manages most of the remainder of the bog. Whilst still retaining much of the character of a natural bog, the moss has been damaged by former peat extraction.

However, over recent years, volunteers, staff and contractors have installed 90 small dams and 11 larger dams that are reinforced with timber frames, to hold back water on the moss. Over 20 ha of trees and scrub have also been removed to prevent them drying out the bog. Over time, the higher water table should encourage regrowth of natural bog plant communities and improve the level of carbon storage.

In summer, Red Moss of Netherley abounds with cottongrasses, Bog Asphodel and sundews. Regular monitoring has shown the reserve to host at least 19 mammal species, including Pine Marten, Water Shrew and Otter along with scarce breeding birds, such as Water Rail. The reserve also acts as a showcase for peatland restoration and plays host to visiting groups of peatland specialists and other naturalists as well as local groups, including children from the neighbouring primary school.

The Red Squirrel is Britain's only native squirrel. Formerly widespread in the UK, it is now restricted to Scotland, Northern Ireland and North England with small pockets found elsewhere. Seventy five per cent of the UK population is found in Scotland with an estimated population of 120,000. Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels (SSRS) is a collaborative project led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust to stop the decline of Scotland's core Red Squirrel populations and to improve conditions for viable Red Squirrel populations across Scotland.

The main threat to the survival of Red Squirrels is the presence of the more robust Grey Squirrel, which replaces the native species by out-competing it for food and living space wherever both species occur together. Records from the Forestry Commission Scotland suggest that the North East had the largest area in which Red Squirrels had been continuously present between 1973 and 1992. In subsequent years the Red Squirrel was replaced by the Grey Squirrel in Aberdeen City, and

greys were spreading out into Aberdeenshire and beyond, reaching as far as Inverness, Elgin, Ballater, and the western Cairngorms.

In 2009, SSRS began a coordinated and strategic Grey Squirrel control program across Aberdeenshire. This program has targeted key Grey Squirrel source populations and dispersal routes, and has resulted in the species being eradicated from almost everywhere except Aberdeen City itself. An extensive monitoring program, consisting of systematic surveys and public sightings, has demonstrated that where Grey Squirrels have been removed. Red Squirrels have recovered remarkably quickly. Red Squirrels are recovering and recolonising all across the North East, and are now frequently seen in the heart of Aberdeen City itself. The success of the project thus far is a result of strong collaborations over many years between several governmental and non-governmental organisations, and the dedication of hundreds of volunteers.



## Scottish Wildcat warriors – fighting the good fight

Scottish Wildcat Action is a national project to save our endangered Scottish Wildcats with Strathbogie, Aberdeenshire as one of its six wildcat priority areas. Due to extensive survey work, six possible wildcats were detected last winter in this area alone, thanks to trail camera technology and a scoring system based on the cats' markings. However, the odds are stacked against the few that may remain in the wild unless urgent action is taken.

Wildcats are threatened with extinction because they are vastly outnumbered by domestic cats. Domestic cats have lost many of the adaptations that make them successful wild animals so if they stray and have feral offspring these cats lead a very tough life. Scottish Wildcats have always lived wild. They have denser fur to keep them warm, a bigger brain and stronger jaw for crunching bones. We are sadly losing them to disease, which they catch from domestic cats, and through cross-breeding. If this cross-breeding continues, the Wildcat gene pool is diluted and their special adaptations lost.

There are thought to be 100,000 feral domestic cats in Scotland compared with fewer than 300 wildcats. To catch a feral domestic cat living in a wildcat priority area takes a lot of hard work and resources which would not be possible without the support from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Local help from committed staff and volunteers, as well as support from vets and land owners, enables Scottish Wildcat Action to take action, putting out dozens of humane cage traps in Morvern, Strathpeffer, Strathbogie, Northern Strathspey and the Angus Glens.

These are checked every 12 hours. Some are in very remote areas. Caught feral cats are then taken to a vet to be neutered and vaccinated before being returned to the wild. Since autumn 2016, we have neutered over 80 domestic cats across the wildcat priority areas. At the same time, a campaign called #supercat is championing responsible cat ownership to prevent the flow of new feral cats into the countryside.

See: www.scottishwildcataction.org/supercat.



breeding usually occurs at 2-4 years old) and the first successful breeding attempts occurred the following year, in 2009, when 7 chicks were reared from 5 successful nests. The population has grown year on year with an estimated 35 pairs established in the wild by 2016 following reintroduction and establishment. They range from the edge of the Cairngorms National Park to Aberdeen City and have spread south into Angus. To date around 300 chicks have been reared in the wild.

Many local primary schools were visited by RSPB staff and volunteers to help them learn more about the kites and what makes them so special. Sixty-seven of these schools named young Red Kites with inspired names like Monymusketeer and Tango.

This project was made possible by support from so many brilliant volunteers and members of the public who report their sightings. If you see a red kite we would love to hear about it: aberdeenredkites@rspb.org.uk.

Aberdeen Red Kites aimed to reintroduce the enigmatic Red Kite back to Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire after an absence of almost 150 years. The project was hosted by RSPB Scotland, with key support and funding from Aberdeen Greenspace, Heritage Lottery Fund, Scottish Natural Heritage and Voluntary Services Aberdeen. After the suitability of the area was assessed, the reintroduction project began in 2007, with 101 Red Kites released over three years. Chicks were sourced from a number of wild populations that had established following successful reintroductions across Scotland and England. Radio transmitters and wing tags fitted to the released birds allowed them to be followed locally, and traced as they dispersed through the wider countryside, with several birds being reported at feeding stations in Central Scotland and Dumfries & Galloway.

The first nesting attempt occurred just a year after the first batch of 30 birds was released (first

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Vicky Burns Scottish Wildcat Action

Jenny Weston RSPB Scotland

Photo - Red Kite, John Young







## The ABC of Slopefield Allotments

Local residents are making the most of a city greenspace, bringing together Allotments, Biodiversity and Community. Slopefield Allotments, owned by Aberdeen City Council, and managed by members of the local allotment association is a great example of how a green space can provide a host of benefits to the community and the environment, including food production, biodiversity, healthy, outdoor activity and education.

The dedication of the allotment association members, or "plotters" as they are known, has seen the project go from strength to strength over the last few years. It has received multiple awards and accolades, including the top award in Keep Scotland Beautiful's "It's Your Neighbourhood" scheme four years running, as well as a Certificate of Distinction (for continuous improvement) for the past two years. Among the enhancements the community group has undertaken at the site to benefit biodiversity are building bat and bird boxes, planting hedgerows and digging a pond. With the help of the North-East Scotland Biodiversity Co-ordinator, Rose Toney, they

have also set up a scheme to record the wildlife at the site and were delighted when a Hedgehog was captured on film, using a camera trap, near to the bug hotel they had built. The decline in Hedgehog numbers, especially in towns and cities, is often the result of fragmented habitat, so the relatively large, green space of the allotments means the Hedgehogs don't have to cross roads to get enough food; even in the heart of the city we can help wildlife.

Slopefield members have also been keen to share their knowledge with the local schoolchildren. In the spring and autumn months, students from Airyhall School visit the allotments once a week to find out about food production, sustainability and wildlife. With help from the plotters and staff from the James Hutton Institute, the children spend time both on practical tasks, such as weeding and planting and on finding out about how biodiversity supports food production. There's also time for playing some games, including "Whose Poo?" and making moth finger puppets!

The Wards Wildlife Site -Elgin

The Wards Wildlife Site in south Elgin is an important wetland habitat, covering 15 ha. A Scottish Wildlife Trust survey in 1997 identified the site as being a reservoir of wildlife in an urban setting. It contains a mosaic of valuable habitats including unimproved neutral grassland, wetland, willow scrub and native broadleaves.

At that time the site was unmanaged, largely inaccessible for recreation, subject to anti-social behavior and poaching and also subject to pressure for development. Following the survey, the site was designated as a non-statutory wildlife site for its environmental interest and was protected through the policies of the Moray Local Plan 2000, and a Local Biodiversity Action Plan was prepared by The Moray Council and Scottish Natural Heritage.

At a public consultation workshop on 4th June 2001, there was general consensus that the site offered great potential as an educational and community resource. However, there was concern that this might impact on the habitat and species currently on the site. A management plan was drawn up in 2002, based on the suggestions made at the consultation workshop

and the plan identified the following objectives for management:

- Securing the wildlife interest of the marsh area
- Enhancing the flora and fauna of conservation interest (notably the North Marsh Orchid)
- Creating habitat for amphibians and invertebrates
- Enhancing and maintaining the tree scrub cover
- Removing non-native species
- Encourage visitor use and community involvement.

The Moray Council and Scottish Natural Heritage funded the creation of a circular footpath, pond dipping platforms, and interpretation in 2002 along with a programme of school visits with the Greenspace Education project officer.

That project was a great success, opening up the area and it remains popular today with school groups, dog walkers and runners and provides a green corridor connecting the north and south of the railway line in Elgin. Recorded visitor numbers are over 30,000 per year.



Giant Hogweed, Himalayan Balsam and Japanese Knotweed are invasive non-native plant species. After being introduced in the nineteenth century, they have become established along the River Ythan catchment. These plants outcompete native riparian species, and this can lead to river bank erosion as plants with stronger root systems lose ground. In addition, Giant Hogweed causes terrible blistering on contact with human skin, leaving the unfortunate individual with permanent sensitivity to sunlight on the affected area.

A survey carried out by the River Ythan Trust in 2012 was followed, from 2014, by community-led control carried out by the Ythan Project Volunteers, who became The Ythan Biodiversity Volunteers (YBV) in early 2015. Control of the invasive species has been carried out through affected areas of the Ythan catchment entailing over 30 days per year of volunteer time and the assistance of a contractor. In 2015, financial assistance from the Formartine Community Planning Group and the Aberdeen

Environmental Forum enabled the entire catchment to be treated for the first time with herbicide.

Control work by the YBV continued in 2016 and is planned for 2017. Funding has been a constant challenge, but work that has been carried out has shown considerable local benefit. For example, Chapel of Seggat, near Auchterless, has seen an 80% reduction in Giant Hogweed since 2014 whilst at Monks Burn, Fyvie, 200 m² of Japanese Knotweed has been reduced by 75% to 50 m² in extent. Progress elsewhere has been slower, such as at Wateridgemuir on the Esslemont Estate, where 6,410 m² of Giant Hogweed along the 3 miles of the Tarty Burn was reduced by a more modest 12% in 2015.

It will be several years before these plants can be fully eradicated and this hoped-for success is reliant on sufficient funding being secured. Without the tremendous effort and enthusiasm of the local volunteers, work on these species would not even have been attempted.

The Tree for Every Citizen Project was a manifesto commitment from the Aberdeen City Council administration in 2007. This project aimed to plan, design and implement the planting of at least 210,000 trees in the form of new woodlands, with mainly native broad leaved and coniferous trees, across the City. This was a challenging but inspiring task. In addition, the objective was to complete the programme at no net cost to the Council. To cover the costs of the trees, ground preparation, the planting itself, project management and subsequent maintenance required approximately £260,000 for Phase 1 of the programme, which involved planting 87,000 trees, creating some 40 ha of new woodland in 2010.

The second phase of tree planting, in 2012, was on six more sites totalling 52 ha at a cost of around £450,000 for planting and ongoing maintenance costs. The largest of the sites saw around 87,500 trees planted over some 35 ha at Tullos Hill, much of which is a restored landfill site. This site was

identified as the Woodland Trust's first "Scottish Diamond Wood" in a programme to plant 60 new woodlands across the UK of 60 acres or more in extent in 2012 to mark the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.

The Tree for Every Citizen Project was achieved by a dedicated group of the Council with external funding mainly from Scottish Rural Development Programme and Aberdeen Greenspace Trust. The input from volunteers played a big part of delivering the project, helping to plant trees and to help with maintenance work as the trees established.

Aberdeen City Council is committed to meeting its target of being carbon neutral by 2020. The Tree for Every Citizen of Aberdeen woodland creation programme will contribute towards this goal.

The woodlands are already making a big impact both for biodiversity and for people. They will continue to do so as the woodlands develop.









