

REPORT TO INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICES COMMITTEE – 24 AUGUST 2017

NOMINATION OF BIODIVERSITY CHAMPIONS

1 Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to:

- 1.1 **Support the proposal to continue and expand the Biodiversity Champions initiative in Aberdeenshire; and**
- 1.2 **Nominate Council Members as Biodiversity Champions for the listed projects and species.**

2 Background / Discussion

- 2.1 At a meeting of Councillors and nature conservation bodies held in October 2013, it was proposed that Aberdeenshire Council consider adopting a 'Species Champion' initiative similar to that which is being run at a national level. The national initiative was launched by Scottish Environment LINK's Wildlife Forum in January 2013 and continues to invite MSPs to choose from a list of species that are currently facing significant threats to their future, and then champion their survival.
- 2.2 North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership (NESBP) proposed a similar initiative in partnership with Aberdeenshire Council and this was approved by Infrastructure Services Committee at its meeting of 27 November 2014, and was formally launched in 2015. An initial list of 6 projects/species were 'adopted' with a proposal to expand over time if the initiative were successful.
- 2.3 Each of the initial projects/species selected was a priority for action in the local area, and Councillors have worked with Project Officers at a local and national level to promote their project or species, for example, by attending a Scottish Wildcat Communication Workshop; supporting the development of an Aberdeenshire Council Pollinator Action Plan; posts on Facebook and other social media; and through press articles.
- 2.4 The initial list of projects and species were:
 - Invasive non-native species
 - Ponds
 - Pollinators
 - Scottish Wildcat
 - Pine Marten
 - Red Squirrel

It is proposed that the following projects/species be added:

- Peatlands
- Swift
- Fresh Water Pearl Mussels
- Farmland birds
- Hedgehog
- Bottlenose Dolphin
- Community tree planting

2.5 **Appendix 1** provides background information on the issues relevant to each species or project, and an information sheet will provide background information and will outline the problems faced together with potential solutions. Landscape Services, the Countryside Ranger Team and Economic Development have been consulted on actions relevant to their Services.

Appendix 2 provides examples of information sheets for the Scottish Wildcat and the Swift.

2.6 Members are asked to support the continuation and expansion of this initiative and nominate Council Members as biodiversity champions for each project/species. It is suggested that Members consider nominating two champions for each project/species, one from the Administration and one from the Opposition.

2.7 The Head of Finance and the Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this Report. Their comments are incorporated within the Report and they are satisfied that the Report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.

3 Scheme of Governance

3.1 The Committee is able to consider and take a decision on this item in terms of Section F.1.1 of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as it relates to the Council's policy issues in relation to Planning and Building Standards.

4 Equalities, Staffing and Financial Implications

4.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment is not required because the recommended action will not have a detrimental impact on any of the protected characteristics.

4.2 There will be no financial or staffing implications arising from the content of this Report.

Stephen Archer

Director of Infrastructure Services

Report prepared by: Judith Cox, Environment Planner

Date: 19 April 2017

APPENDIX 1

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE PROJECTS AND SPECIES SELECTED FOR 'CHAMPIONING'

- **Invasive non-native species** have a detrimental impact on native species and habitats and in particular are causing problems where they have become established along watercourses. Raising awareness of this issue amongst decision makers and landowners is an important aspect of this project.
- **Pooling our Ponds project** was initiated following a realisation that we have very little knowledge of the location and quality of ponds in Aberdeenshire. Schools and community groups have been mobilised to record the presence of key indicator species in their local ponds and we are looking to expand this initiative.
- **Pollinators** such as bees, hoverflies and butterflies have received considerable media attention in recent months, charting their declines due to loss of suitable habitat and the damaging impact of certain pesticides. Aberdeenshire Council is well placed to assist in changing practices to benefit these valuable species.
- **Scottish Wildcats** – The Scottish wildcat is one of Europe's most elusive and endangered mammals. Wildcats are rarely seen, but within Aberdeenshire are known to be in the Strathbogie area around Huntly, with smaller numbers in Deeside, Donside and Kincardine. The Scottish wildcat population is in decline and under threat, principally through hybridisation with the domestic cat; exposure to disease, and parasites passed on by feral cats; and accidental persecution. Aberdeenshire Council is a member of the Scottish Wildcat Action Project and has assisted with raising awareness of the threats to our native wildcat population.
- **Pine Marten** is one of Aberdeenshire Council's good news stories with the spread in range and numbers of this species over recent years. This has come to light, at least in part, through increased survey effort initiated by the NESBReC Mammals Atlas project. As the spread of this species may bring it into contact with people, working with householders and farmers to avoid conflict and seek creative solutions will be an important aspect of this project.
- **Red Squirrel** – The red squirrel is one of Scotland's most endearing and charismatic species. Aberdeenshire is a stronghold for this species, with squirrels present in suitable woodland throughout much of the area. The native red squirrels are under threat due to competition from the grey squirrel, which was introduced into Aberdeen in the 1970's, as the greys are able to outcompete the red squirrels for resources in most habitats. Loss and fragmentation of woodland habitat are also a problem for red squirrel. Aberdeenshire Council has supported the work of the Saving Scotland's Red Squirrel project to reduce numbers of grey squirrels.
- **Peatlands** include the heather clad moorland on the mountains and hills as well as lowland mires and bogs that are home to some highly specialised plants and invertebrates. We are now much more aware of the value of peatlands and the benefits they provide, and the need to protect them from adverse pressures such as development and drainage. This will allow them to remain resilient in the face of new challenges such as climate change.

- **Swifts** are now on the Amber list of birds of Conservation Concern. It is unclear what the reasons for their decline are but the loss of suitable nest sites is likely to be one of them, as is the available food through the loss of suitable habitat for insects. There are opportunities to be designed into new buildings or to be retrofitted into existing ones with many different designs of 'swift bricks' available.
- The **Fresh Water Pearl Mussel** is one of the most critically endangered molluscs in the world and Scotland contains many of the world's surviving populations. Several rivers in the north east of Scotland have been designated as being of high nature conservation importance due, in part, to the presence of fresh water pearl mussels. However, even here they are rare and are at risk from poor water quality and in particular, from silt and sediment entering rivers.
- **Farmland birds** - Aberdeenshire is fairly intensively farmed with cereal crops, oil seed rape, potatoes, and beef breeding being the main activities. Within this there are pockets of semi-natural habitat and some lower intensity farming which can support a variety of birds, particularly seed-eaters and waders. As well as the semi-natural habitats, hedges, dykes, and ditches can be important, providing nest sites, feeding areas, and song posts. Typical farmland birds include yellowhammer, linnet, tree sparrow, lapwing, oystercatcher, skylark, and carrion crow.
- **Hedgehog** numbers have declined in the north east over the last 10-15 years. More intensive management of farmland and the loss of hedgerows has reduced the available habitat, whilst within more urban areas an increasing use of chemicals and the excessive 'tidying' of gardens may be factors in their decline. There are many ways in which individuals and organisations can help hedgehogs by creating linked areas of good feeding habitat and shelter for nesting.
- The **Bottlenose Dolphin** population seems to be relatively stable locally, but it is isolated and therefore vulnerable. There are a number of activities that collectively could put pressure on this population and these include offshore development, entanglement with fishing gear and nets, and recreational water based activities. The Moray Firth has been designated as a Special Area for Conservation, but this only covers part of the range of the local dolphin population so it is important that decision-makers and others are aware of the potential impact of a range of activities on this species. The Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code has been designed to promote responsible tourism, whilst minimising disturbance to wildlife.
- There is a programme of **Community Tree Planting** being rolled out by the Council across Aberdeenshire. The benefits of tree planting in and around our communities are numerous – providing habitat for a wide range of species, storing carbon, adding to visual amenity, filtering air pollution and, with careful design, reducing flood risk. It is also an activity that can involve communities – tree planting being a popular activity with volunteers. In addition to these benefits, tree planting can also positively contribute to the Council's commitments to reduce carbon emission, both in the increased carbon storage provided but also in avoided carbon emissions through reduced grass mowing. Maintenance costs can also be reduced to the benefit of Council budgets. The planting of trees in greenspace can be seen as a significant change and the reasons and benefits need to be clearly communicated to our communities – a particular role for a Champion.

APPENDIX 2

Aberdeenshire Council Biodiversity Champions

Swift

The Problem

Aberdeenshire is rich in natural resources which makes for an attractive environment in which to live and work, and supports a diversity of natural habitats and species. Loss of variety amongst our native wildlife creates many risks; and not just today, but especially for future generations. As the variety of species declines, so do future options. Biodiversity remains vital for many of our industries such as agriculture, pharmaceutical, timber, pulp and paper, and horticulture. As well as being important for nature conservation and for the raw materials they supply, habitats and species provide important 'services' such as pollination, clean water, and flood management. With the advances in technology and our increasing reliance on it, it is easy to forget that nature can, and does, provide more natural solutions to many of society's problems.

Swifts are summer migrants which breed in the UK and typically spend much of the winter in Africa. They are one of the last summer migrants to arrive and are the first to leave, so they are here for a relatively short period of time - around 3 months. Swifts have been recorded flying at an amazing 69mph and they feed, mate, and sleep entirely on the wing. The only time they land is when they nest – mostly high up in the roof space under the eaves of buildings, where they can drop into the air from the nest entrance. Swifts are very clean, quiet house guests and do not leave a lot of mess down the walls of buildings.

Swifts feed on flying insects over water, meadows, and woodlands. They can fly long distances – up to 800km/day and in rough weather tend to feed over water where the insects are easier to catch.

Threats and Opportunities

Swifts are now on the Amber list of birds of Conservation Concern. It is unclear just what the reasons for their decline are but the loss of suitable nest sites is likely to be one of them. The demolition and renovation of old buildings has removed historic nest sites and the design of new buildings is not always so accommodating for this species.

There are opportunities to be designed into new buildings, or to be retrofitted into existing ones, with many different designs of 'swift bricks' available.

Swifts eat large numbers of insects and the loss of suitable habitat for insects and therefore food for the swifts may be another factor in their decline.

Action – 5 steps that Aberdeenshire Council can take

1. Access to good wildlife records helps to support sustainable development and infrastructure in the right location. Aberdeenshire Council will continue to support the work of North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) in collecting and collating biological records and habitat data, and will use this data to inform its decision making.

2. Opportunities will be sought to provide new nesting sites for swifts, both within Council buildings and through encouraging developers to incorporate into relevant new buildings.
3. Aberdeenshire Council will take into consideration the presence of swift colonies when determining applications for development, or when carrying out works.
4. We will seek opportunities to retrofit ,or incorporate swift bricks, when renovating suitable buildings through project work with Aberdeenshire.
5. Aberdeenshire Ranger Service will raise awareness and understanding at relevant public events, and school and community group sessions.

Aberdeenshire Council Biodiversity Champions

Scottish Wildcat

The Problem

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The last native cat in Britain, the Scottish wildcat, is now largely confined to a few isolated populations in northern Scotland. Heavily persecuted up to the early 20th century, wildcat are now legally protected. The most critical threat now comes from hybridisation (interbreeding) with domestic cats and, particularly, feral cats. Other threats include disease, accidental persecution during predator control, and the fragmentation, or disturbance, to habitats through development, or changes in land management.

Threats and Opportunities

A national project, Scottish Wildcat Action, which is a partnership of over 20 organisations, has identified 6 wildcat priority areas in Scotland, one of which is 35,000 ha of mainly forest, in and around Strathbogie and Clashindarroch. The aim of the priority areas is to focus effort on protecting the wildcat. This has initially included recruiting local volunteers to assist with survey and monitoring to identify the location of wildcats but also of feral cats. This will be followed by an ambitious programme of trapping and neutering feral cats to reduce further hybridisation and the project officers will work with landowners and gamekeepers to reduce the risks to wildcat from predator control. A further strand of the project is encouraging cat owners to neuter, vaccinate, and microchip their pet cats. Aberdeenshire Council has signed up as a partner to the Scottish Wildcat Action project.

5 steps for Aberdeenshire

1. Access to good wildlife records helps to support sustainable development and infrastructure in the right location. Aberdeenshire Council will continue to support the work of North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) in collecting and collating biological records and habitat data, and will use this data to inform its decision-making.
2. Aberdeenshire Council will continue its support for the Scottish Wildcat Action Project by promoting the aims of the project and the use of Council facilities to promote awareness of relevant actions such as the vaccination of pet cats.
3. Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service will promote awareness and understanding of Scottish Wildcat at public events, and with schools and community groups, and will highlight issues such as responsible cat ownership.
4. Aberdeenshire Council will ensure that development proposals in the relevant areas of Aberdeenshire take account of the potential for wildcats to be present, and any impact there may be on this species.
5. Aberdeenshire Council will assist the Scottish Wildcat Action project by reporting on road kill and other sightings to assist in building up a picture of the location and movements of wildcat within the area.