Cirl Buntings

Today I wrote the following blog for the RSPB to highlight a new partnership, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, designed to bring threatened species back from the brink. A MP Species Champion programme designed to raise the political profile of threatened species conservation. I am delighted to be the Species Champions for the Cirl Bunting (photograph courtesy of Matt Adam Williams)

Ask your average political pundit what MPs Jess Philips, Norman Lamb and Desmond Swayne have in common and they might be hard pressed to answer. In fact, they’re just three of the nearly two dozen MPs who have come forward to stand up for a threatened UK species as part of the MP Species Champions programme. This week, we met with the RSPB and other conservation organisations in Westminster to discuss what we can do together to reverse species declines across the UK.

MPs are championing a range of species, from the smooth snake, to the Hen Harrier, to the Fen Orchid. Some species are iconic, like the Barn Owl, others are more every day like the charming dunnock, a familiar sight amongst participants of RSPB’s Big Garden Birdwatch. The scheme is a fantastic way to showcase the range of wildlife that we have here in England, and how much poorer we would be for the loss of these species.

Sadly, that risk of loss is very real. Rachael Maskell, MP for York Central, is championing the Tansy Beetle “a creature so rare that almost the entire UK population is resident in or around her constituency. The Bittern, championed by Therese Coffey, was seeing huge declines, but is now making a marked recovery thanks to conservation efforts.

Perhaps the most remarkable good news story comes from my own species. I have been a champion for the plucky cirl bunting since 2014. Back in 1989, this beautiful farmland bird was on the brink of extinction with just 120 breeding pairs left in the wild. Real collaboration between NGOs, government agencies and crucially farmers has seen the species make a huge recovery, and we hope this year to see the population reach around 1000 pairs.

The cirl bunting recovery is one of the great successes of the Countryside Stewardship scheme. It shows what can be achieved through understanding the science behind species decline and applying practical solutions. There is much we can learn from the work of the dedicated conservationists and farmers involved in the project.

These efforts to work together are needed more than ever. We are seeing increasing pressures on precious habitats and wild spaces across the UK. In my own area there are concerns that changes to the National Planning Policy Framework could lead to applications for more large scale development within South Devon AONB. The RSPB and others have concerns about proposals in the Housing and Planning Bill to allow ‘permission in principle’ for development on land registered as brownfield, without a guarantee that land of high environmental value will be excluded from such a register.

All the while report after report comes out showing the benefits of access to the natural environment for physical and mental health, particularly for children. We must not lose sights
of these benefits when set against the pressures for housing and infrastructure that are so desperately needed.

The cirl bunting's remarkable recovery has shown what can be done for nature when we work together. It was wonderful this week to see so many other MPs determined to improve the fate of threatened species in their own local areas. I hope as the Species Champions project progresses, we will have more inspiring stories to tell of species recovering against the odds - and many more MPs will join us in taking a stand for nature.