



Media release

Shocking decline in Northern Ireland's wildlife continues

Northern Ireland is now one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world with 12% of species¹ assessed, threatened with extinction, as revealed by the new State of Nature 2023 report.

The report, which has been compiled by leading professionals from over 60 research and conservation organisations, is the most comprehensive review of nature in Northern Ireland and reveals the devastating scale of nature loss.

The trends presented show some of the biggest nature losses and the impact of intensive management of our land and seas, as well as climate change.

- Farmland birds have rapidly decreased by 43% since 1996, across 17 monitored species.
- Breeding birds more widely are in decline – on average 10% across 64 species.
- Butterfly species decreased on average by 16% since 2006, over the 14 monitored species.
- 891 plant species have declined by a 14% average between 1970 and 2019.

Dr. Peter McEvoy, Ulster Wildlife's Director of Land Management said: "The findings of this report are clear: we cannot continue to take nature for granted. Healthy soils, clean rivers, and thriving wildlife populations are crucial to our health and prosperity. A step change in investment from our Government is badly needed to put wildlife into recovery and take action to address the climate crisis. We must future-proof our farming system by ramping up support through new agri-environment schemes and put in place the legislative framework to establish Nature Recovery Networks across our countryside to help wildlife thrive and adapt."

Gillian Gilbert, RSPB NI's Principal Conservation Scientist and lead author of the local report, commented, "This report highlights just how much nature in Northern Ireland needs more help. Despite ongoing efforts, from nature-friendly farmers, wildlife charities and all the individuals who are passionate about doing their part for nature, we are still not tackling this crisis at the scale needed. Urgent action is necessary to slow down biodiversity loss, and to try and reverse some of the damage of recent decades."

The report also highlights the growing recognition among the public and policymakers of the value of nature, including its role in tackling climate change, and the need for its conservation.

¹ These include: common skate, basking shark, European eel, Atlantic salmon, porbeagle shark, undulate ray, freshwater pearl mussel, large heath butterfly, Irish damselfly, dwarf spike-rush and Cornish heath

With approximately 76% of land in Northern Ireland being used for agriculture, nature-friendly farming urgently needs to be implemented at a wide scale to halt the decline in farmland wildlife. It must be considered alongside the challenge of responding to the nature and climate crisis, while still meeting people's needs for food, energy and fuel.

On a more positive note, the report also reveals that communities, conservation projects and legislation can have a positive impact on nature and the wider environment. For example, ten percent of the UK's peatland resources can be found in Northern Ireland. Only 15% of peatland assessed is in good condition, and a new peatland strategy aims to quantify the natural capital value of this resource. Peatland restoration projects, such as Garron Plateau blanket bog, restore and create carbon rich habitats, benefiting climate change mitigation and biodiversity.

The report uses data from monitoring schemes and biological recording centres, collated by thousands of volunteers and naturalists, and looks at evidence over the last 50 years, identifying large-scale trends.

To download a full copy of the State of Nature 2023 report and to find out what you can do to help, visit www.stateofnature.org.uk.

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For further information and to arrange an interview, please contact:

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Additional quotes:

The State of Nature spokesperson said "The UK's wildlife is better studied than in any other country in the world and what the data tell us should make us sit up and listen. What is clear, is that despite progress to restore ecosystems, to save species, and move towards nature-friendly land and sea use, the UK's nature and wider environment continues to decline and degrade."

Jim Foster, Conservation Director at Amphibian and Reptile Conservation said: "The state of Northern Ireland's nature should be of vital importance to all of us. Animals such as frogs, toads, newts, snakes and lizards are a fundamental part of our natural and cultural heritage, but like many of the other species and habitats covered in this report, they are increasingly under pressure from factors such as land-use and climate change. This report shows that it is possible for conservation projects to recover species populations, and how important it is that we scale up our efforts to reverse nature declines."

Niamh Roche, Bat Conservation Ireland's Bat Monitoring Coordinator and report contributor said: "Thanks to dedicated citizen scientists in Northern Ireland we've been tracking trends in common bat species for almost twenty years, and despite declines in habitat quality, luckily some of these appear to be stable or on an upward trend. However, we have major concerns for Northern Ireland's more vulnerable and rarer bat species that we do not yet have accurate trend data for. Countless volunteers show their passion for their local environment in Northern Ireland by contributing so much time and effort to these kinds of surveys and it's high time policymakers recognised the need to take bigger and braver steps to tackle biodiversity loss."

David Noble, BTO's Principal Ecologist said: "We wouldn't know any of this without the work of tireless volunteers who carry out surveys in some remote and challenging landscapes, whatever the weather! There's a lot we still don't know about how wildlife is doing, especially in areas where few people live and which are

difficult to get to. This makes the contributions of volunteers in Northern Ireland and particularly the less populated areas, so valuable.”

Heather McLachlan, Director for the National Trust in Northern Ireland said: “This report is a stark reminder of how nature needs our help in Northern Ireland. Looking after wildlife at the places in our care and partnering in nature restoration work is central to the National Trust’s strategy to restore a healthy, beautiful natural environment.

“We work closely with farmers who help manage land we care for and we’re very supportive of farming practices that restore nature and capture carbon. We’re keen to see future agriculture support which rewards farmers for their efforts in nature recovery.”

Editor’s notes:

1. The State of Nature (SoN) is a partnership of organisations that are directly involved with conservation evidence and/or conservation delivery, who work together on appropriate science and evidence-based products.

The principal role of the SoN Partnership is to improve the collection, collation and efficient use of data from biodiversity recording and monitoring relevant to nature conservation in the UK and its Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories: understanding the status and trends of species, habitats, sites and other environmental variables including those which drive changes in biodiversity, and the causes and consequences of changes in these.

2. List of partners: A Rocha, Action for conservation, Alderney Wildlife Trust, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (ARC), Association of Local Environmental Records Centres (ALERC), Bat Conservation Ireland, Bat Conservation Trust (BCT), Biological Records Centre/CEH (BRC), Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland, British Arachnological Society (BAS), British Bryological Society (BBS) (CEH), British Dragonfly Society (BDS), British Lichen Society, British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), Buglife, Bumblebee Conservation Trust, Butterfly Conservation, CEDAR Centre for Environmental Data and Recording, Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (CEH), Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM), Chester Zoo, Continuous Plankton Recorder, Earthwatch, Freshwater Habitats Trust, Friends of the Earth, iSpot (The Open University), James Hutton Institute, Jersey Government Department of the Environment, John Muir Trust, Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), Local Environmental Records Centre Wales, Mammal Society, Manx BirdLife, Marine Biological Association (MBA), Marine Conservation Society, MARINELife, National Biodiversity Network Trust (NBN Trust), National Forum for Biological Recording, National Trust, National Trust for Scotland, Natural England (NE), Natural History Museum, Natural Resources Wales (NRW), NatureScot, Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), Northern Ireland Marine Task Force, ORCA, People’s Trust for Endangered Species (PTES), Plantlife, Plymouth University, Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, Scottish Environment Link, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Shark Trust, States of Guernsey, Ulster Wildlife Trust, University of Sheffield, Vincent Wildlife Trust, Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC), Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT), Wildlife Trusts, Woodland Trust, WWF, Zoological Society of London (ZSL)

