



BACK FROM THE BRINK

Turning the tide for species

An independent evaluation of Back from the Brink. February 2022

Back from the Brink was established as a sector partnership to turn the tide for our most threatened species and inspire the nation to help care for England’s most vulnerable wildlife.

This aspirational programme was developed and led by:

- Natural England, the government's adviser for the natural environment in England
- Rethink Nature partnership of seven species conservation charities: Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust; Bat Conservation Trust; Buglife; Bumblebee Conservation Trust; Butterfly Conservation; Plantlife and the RSPB.

The programme has aimed to live and breathe a new, more joined-up approach to conserving species and their habitats.

A team of experts and specialists, volunteers, land owners and communities collaborated across England in five special landscapes, two habitats nationally at risk and twelve projects each focussing on one threatened species.

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“ I am happier outdoors and recording and surveying wildlife (butterflies) gives added pleasure”
Volunteer



Lesser Butterfly Orchid

Foreword

Species matter because they endlessly fascinate and amaze us; we can relate to their lives and they help us describe and understand nature. Our world becomes dull and meaningless when we forget the individual species and just focus on ‘wildlife’, ‘nature’ or ‘environment’.

Back from the Brink had species conservation at its heart. This innovative project was born from a commitment to collaborate, explore new ways of working, a new way of communicating success and measuring impact, and crucially leaves a legacy to continue the work of saving some of our best loved and rarest creatures.

Central to the project’s aims was the need for people to care about species, to talk about species and to act for them. We wanted people to learn to share in our love of species, to value them and communicate that passion through their communities, getting more people involved. Creating a network of concerned and connected active citizens, working together through Back from the Brink made species recovery a reality.

The case studies featured in this report demonstrate how experiences have nurtured people’s connectedness to the natural world through learning about species and how that has motivated them to act. Ultimately, this report celebrates people taking action in all spheres of their lives to give us the rich diversity of extraordinary outcomes for species across England.

Tony Juniper, Chair, Natural England

Gill Perkins, CEO, Bumblebee Conservation Trust
Julie Williams, CEO, Butterfly Conservation
Joint Chairs, Rethink Nature

“ Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

Arundhati Roy



The backdrop for Back from the Brink

The huge and very real threat to the diversity of plant and animal species in England is well documented and accepted.



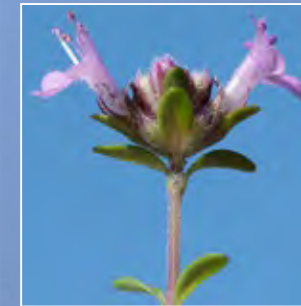
The State of Nature report (last updated 2019), for example, underlined the problem by presenting evidence that 13% of species in England are threatened with extinction from Great Britain. It also highlighted that acting now could save some of these most threatened species from imminent extinction.



Expert taxonomic groups identified actions they considered necessary to support the recovery of England's list of most threatened species (Section 41) and the achievement of Outcome 3 of the Government's Biodiversity 2020 Strategy:

By 2020, we will see an overall improvement in the status of our wildlife and will have prevented further human-induced extinctions of known threatened species.

Adding to the evidence of the need to conserve species, the National Ecosystem Assessment was the first



complete assessment of its kind in the world, of the benefits which nature provides; how the benefits have changed over the past; the prospects for the future; and their value to our society.

Rethink Nature and Natural England responded to the burgeoning body of evidence by designing Back from the Brink to directly address the need to save and improve the prospects of the most threatened and vulnerable species. The Theory of Change (pages 16-17) shows how the programme delivered this change.

Delivering the programme

The Back from the Brink joint species recovery programme comprised:

- Seven ‘integrated’ projects that tested approaches to multi-taxon delivery by focussing on habitats (in multiple locations) or landscapes that are important for several threatened species. These complex projects brought together expertise to navigate issues, such as the conflicting needs of Section 41 species
- 12 projects allowing an in-depth focus on a single threatened species for those identified as requiring highly targeted, urgent measures
- A centrally managed programme of communications and engagement including centrally commissioned community arts.

Project work was spread across England and further details of projects and locations can be found in the [Summary Report](#) and on the Back from the [Brink website](#).

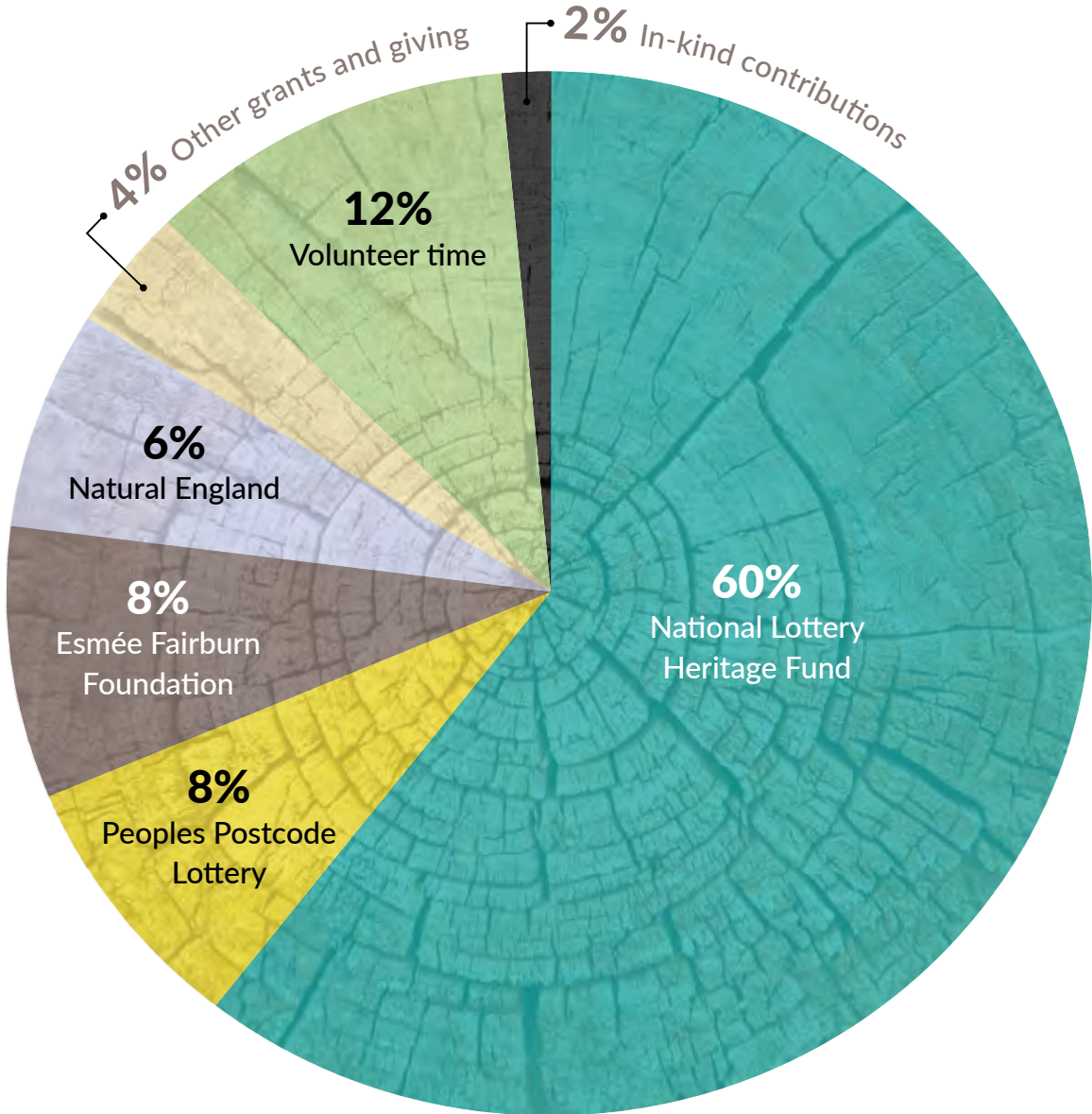
Programme delivery ran from 2017-2022¹ with strategic oversight from Rethink Nature and Natural England. Funding was received from a range of sources with the National Lottery Heritage Fund committing £4,737,400², volunteer time equating to £934,118 and non-cash contributions (such as time or resources given in-kind) accounting for £168,587, (see piechart for summary).

A cross-partner Steering Group had delegated responsibility for operational and strategic risk management and was key to delivery. The programme was staffed by a small central team, a large dispersed project team, existing partner staff and a large number of contractors. A team the size of a medium-sized conservation charity was effectively put in place ‘overnight’ enabling capacity and expertise to be in place to deliver projects but also creating a large body of people that needed to be on-boarded to the programme, networked together and supported.

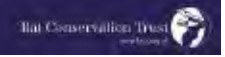
Capacity is often an issue in complex programmes and Back from the Brink would have benefitted from additional dedicated capacity to support areas such as strategic thinking and quality planning, and adaptive management for project-level communications, engagement and volunteer programmes.

A central branding was developed and was very successful and well established within the nature conservation sector but with much less recognition with target audiences. There was some conflict between this temporary partnership brand and that of the individual partner organisations. This is a tricky balance that any future partnership programmes will need to carefully negotiate their way through.

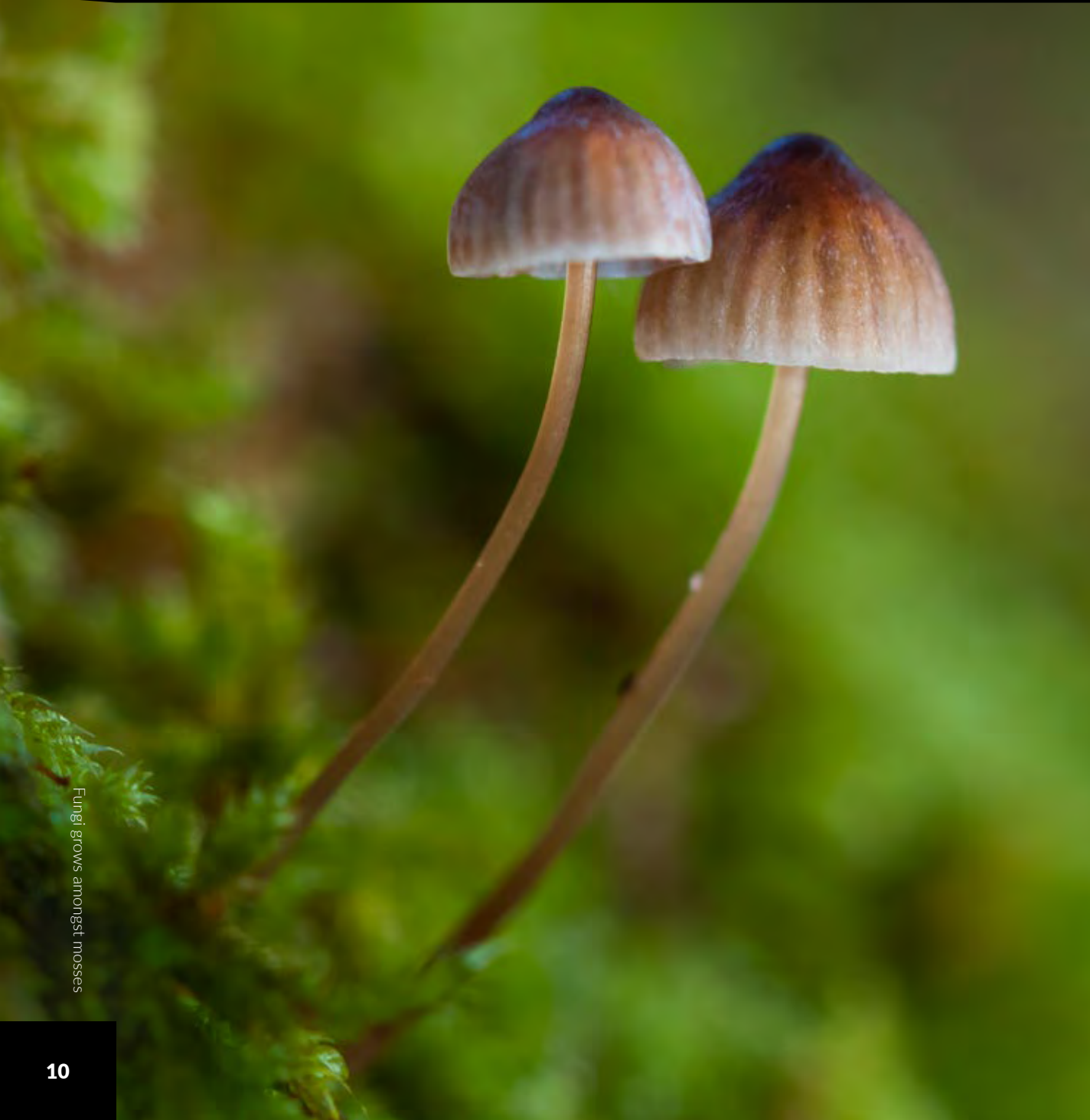
“ The Programme steering group worked well - allowing all to have oversight of programme progress, and determine key changes.” BftB Partner



Partners Funding Partners Delivery Partners

		
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¹Including an extension due to delayed delivery and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.
²This was an increased grant offer of which a final award is expected of £4,716,712.



Fungi grows amongst mosses

Understanding the impact

Back from the Brink was designed to undertake ground-breaking, game-changing work to deliver a raft of impacts for wildlife and people, and to create new ways of working.

Central to the monitoring and evaluation approach was building an understanding of the programme’s journey, its impact and being able to crystallise, share and act upon lessons learnt.

Heritage Insider led the programme evaluation and brought independence and evaluation expertise, in collaboration with Just Ecology and latterly Footprint Ecology, whose role was to encourage the adoption of a robust and effective scientific approach to ecological monitoring and to quality check data.

The extent of the programme, its partnership nature and the variation within its activity and capital investment was reminiscent of a national-scale (rather than covering just one landscape) area-based scheme. Evaluating a programme of this complexity required planning, coordination and flexibility in equal measure:

Issue encountered – how to...	Solution
Q. Create capacity to plan evaluation, navigate issues and take advantage of opportunities?	Form a Task and Finish group (delegated by the Steering Group) to bring additional technical expertise and greater capacity.
Q. Engender ownership in the evaluation process?	Employed a participative approach to evaluation planning, for example, each project undertaking their own evaluation needs assessment to identify their own priorities for data collection.
Q. Support project staff and volunteers of varying experience to collect and use quality data?	Training and coaching support provided throughout the programme and quality checks made on data.
Q. Ensure practical yet robust approaches toward monitoring habitats and species?	Expert support to review and fine-tune approaches. Developed new protocols for monitoring where no accepted standard existed.
Q. Harmonise assessment of species recovery across different taxa?	Adoption and adaption of the Species Recovery Curve model and exploration of species success measures ¹ .
Q. Assess likelihood of audiences acting for species and pro-environmentally as a result of participation?	Used the principles of creating nature connection to inform engagement plans and trialled measurement of nature connection as a 'leading' indicator (for example, using the ENACT scale ²).
Q. Evaluate a wide range of engagement activities across diverse audiences?	Provided a central toolkit of evaluation tools supplemented by additional creative or in-depth tools such as, key informant telephone interviews, instant polling, peer review and visual mood boards.
Q. Look beyond reach to assess the potential impact of national communication outputs?	Target audience focus groups and technical assessment of frames used with communication materials.
Q. Capture the lessons learnt by project and programme team and act upon them?	Integration of reflective practice with key stakeholders into programme delivery. Findings informed Evaluator's recommendations which were reviewed by Steering Group.

¹See resources on the Back from the Brink website for further details.

²Carr, Victoria and Hughes, Joeline (2021). Predicting the Development of Adult Nature Connection Through Nature Activities: Developing the Evaluating Nature Activities for Connection Tool. *Frontiers in Psychology*: vol. 12

A Monitoring and Evaluation Framework set out a logic model, key evaluation questions and guided data collection, whilst at project level, monitoring and mini evaluation plans mapped out practical tools for projects to employ in their day-to-day work.

This report, along with the resources on the Back from the Brink website, document the project’s impact.

“ I will confess that I was sceptical beforehand that the money allocated in the budget for evaluation would represent good value, but you have completely changed my mind! ”

BftB Partner





Species at the heart of the action

From the Violet Click Beetle that clicks and performs aerial acrobatics to right itself; the agile chestnut-brown Pine Marten, hidden from sight high-up in the woodland branches, and green and pink tufty patches of coast-loving Sea Bryum topped with its dainty pear-shaped capsules, to the Lunar Yellow Underwing Caterpillar grazing in the moonlight on the very tip of a blade of tussocky grass.

An amazing collection of mammals, birds, insects, amphibians, reptiles, plants and fungi that were in danger of being lost from England have been at the very heart of Back from the Brink.

“ The project informed, trained and allowed people to work as a team to both survey and conserve wildlife, no matter what your prior experience.”

Volunteer

				
Lesser Butterfly Orchid				
				
Pine Marten				
				
				
Little Whirlpool Ramshorn Snail				

“ The seed collecting training events have forged ongoing relationships with conservation organisations across England. As a result, a network of skilled seed collectors now exists who are not only contributing further to the 24 new collections in the Millennium Seed Bank but also using seed for their own conservation work. The project leaves a powerful legacy with a more secure future for rare arable plants in the UK.”

BftB Delivery Partner

Partnership working on a new level

Collaboration is at the heart of addressing a complex challenge such as building support for, and delivery of, species recovery. No one organisation can achieve this alone. Why? Because the capabilities needed to resolve the issue are not found within one single organisation, and a focus is needed to bring organisations together to act in a concerted way, across a focused timeline.

Back from the Brink was delivered by a synergy of over 100 organisations with a core of eight partners. Each organisation brought unique expertise, resource and opportunities.

Programme partnership working took many forms, from operational exchanges of knowledge or working practices, to strategic alliances to raise the profile of species conservation within national policy.

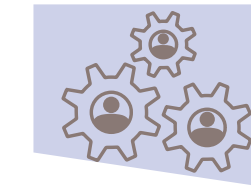
Perhaps the most overt expression of collaborative working was the cross-taxa approach to delivering species conservation. This has been central to the Back from the Brink approach, for example, within the Shrill Carder Bee and Colour in the Margins projects. This enabled organisations to work together to plan and trial effective evidence-based conservation approaches for a range of species, each with differing needs within a site or landscape.

Partnership working is time-consuming and demands on time within the programme exceeded those anticipated, resulting in staff giving significant time funded elsewhere. However it's benefits were numerous and outweighed the challenges:

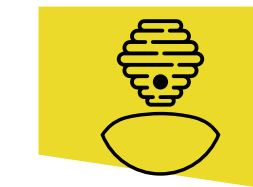
Example benefits of partnership working within Back from the Brink



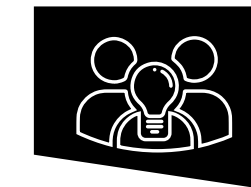
Profile for species conservation



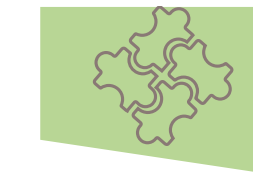
Strengthen connectivity between partners



A 'hive mind' for problem solving



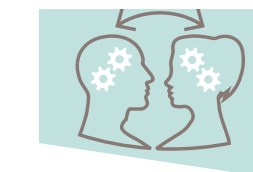
Provides access to expertise



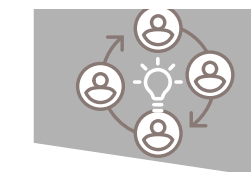
Builds partner profile



Cost-sharing



Knowledge exchange



Co-develop new ways of working

The partnership has undertaken a State of Collaboration Review and created a Statement of Intent to guide future work together. Partners also identified a number of practical opportunities to deepen and extend partnership working, for example:

- More time in the start-up phase to bring partners and project teams together to develop relationships, refine shared objectives, map skills and agree effective working practices
- Where appropriate, create shared tasks and outputs across teams to break down siloed project working
- Enhanced knowledge and skills exchange between partners and projects, for example, through a central programme of training, drawing on partner strengths
- Allocating time to develop solutions for cross-cutting issues faced in delivering species conservation, for example, convening think tanks and curating discussion papers
- Identifying opportunities where additional expertise from new partners would be beneficial, for example, in developing audiences currently missing from species conservation
- Work together to exploit strategic advocacy opportunities created by the programme, for example, sharing with peers and influencing national decision makers
- Embed longer-term joined-up working into legacy plans.

Back from the Brink Theory of change

Start by ...

So that ...

And then ...

Species

- Establish baselines and monitoring protocols
- Build species knowledge base through research, monitoring and data sharing

- Practical conservation works increase species numbers and/or expand range
- Re-introductions/ translocations establish new populations
- Create, restore and enhance habitats that support target species

- Target species have measurably improved prospects
- Other species benefit
- Shared approach to measuring place-based species recovery is outlined

People

- Find relevance of species by developing a better understanding of audiences and identifying barriers
- Develop relationships with existing and new audiences

- Test out ways to re-imagine the way species stories are told
- Employ nature connection principles
- Share species through inspiring communications, interpretation, education and engagement activities
- Build competencies, examples and resources such as photo library to support effective engagement

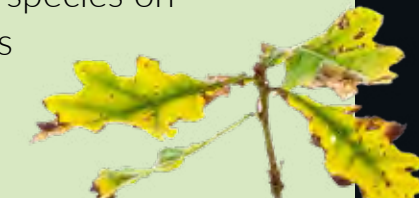
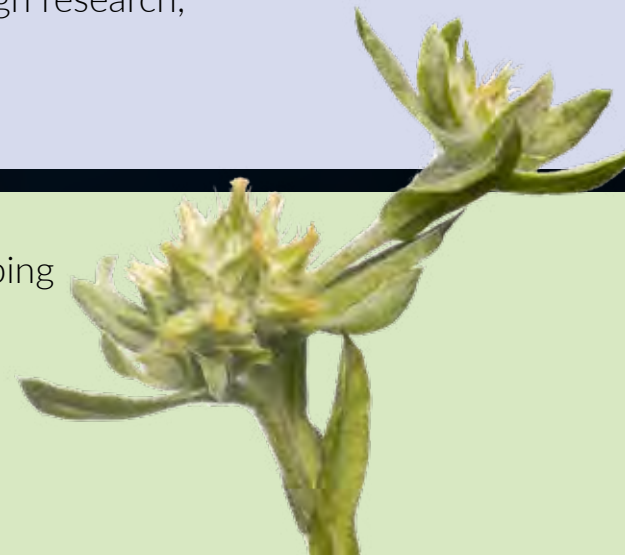
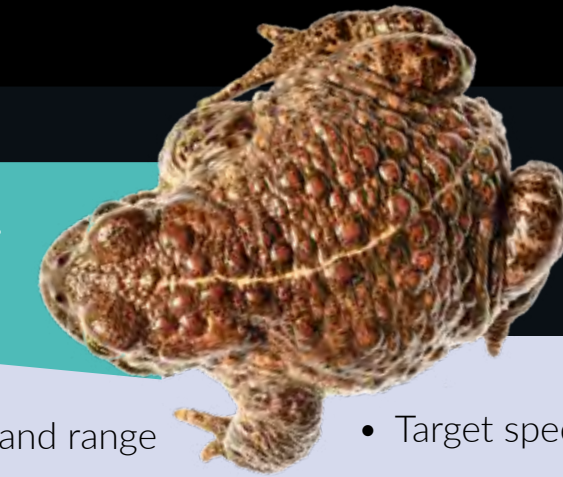
- Stronger nature connection, pride in species and value placed upon them
- People empowered to take action for species on their own land or in their communities
- Engagement becomes more effective and inclusive

Sector

- Develop species conservation and related skills through training, sharing practice and professional development
- Trial new methods and ways of working

- New conservation and engagement methods documented
- Lessons learnt gathered
- Create proof of concept for Back from the Brink approach

- Commitment to greater sector collaboration
- Cross-taxa and creative engagement become 'business as usual'
- Evidence-based species conservation planning informs future work



What difference did it make?

Back from the Brink comprised a raft of targeted conservation, activity and communication works across England.

These delivered an impressive set of outputs, the vast majority of which met or exceeded the targets set in the programme's development stage.

Read the [Summary report](#) for a full list.

This section gives a high-level overview of both the deep and emerging ways in which wildlife, people and communities have benefitted as a result.



People developed species conservation skills

10,338 people have developed skills as part of Back from the Brink.

Many of these skills were those needed to directly record and conserve species whilst others were in areas such as inspiring more people with local species, through social media or running successful events and guided walks. For example:

- Beginner and intermediate workshops, field sessions, practice walks and pocket-sized identity guides helped local people and new volunteers to identify bumblebees including the rare Shrill Carder Bee
- Volunteers learnt how to use a camera trap, how to set up feeder boxes and how to look for and recognise scats to help with Pine Marten monitoring
- Land managers and conservation professionals attended 'Managing Woodlands with Wildlife in Mind' workshops to help them manage land for a range of taxa
- Felling contractors learnt about features bat use on site visits in the Dorset Heaths.

The Covid-19 pandemic prompted some projects to further explore using digital methods of delivery of training. This resulted in establishing online courses and development opportunities that more people were able to take part in due to the switch to remote delivery. Recordings of training and presentations contributed toward the total of 21,274 people gaining skills indirectly from the programme.



“ Excellent evening, very informative, will set about identifying bees! ”

Community participant

“ I’ve thoroughly enjoyed all the surveys we’ve done over the past few years! It’s been amazing to meet so many nice, friendly and knowledgeable people, as well as learning about all those beautiful, rare species. Thank you very much!”

Volunteer

Species are better identified and recorded

Collecting data about target species has been key to the Back from the Brink programme. This has been a vital tool to establish baselines and to understand what impact the project activities had on species and their habitats. Data collected by the programme has also helped to shed light on areas where there was not enough information available, for example about distribution, preferred habitat, life-cycle or behaviour to inform future evidence-based conservation action.

Species monitoring has been a massive collective effort undertaken by partner staff, an army of volunteers, citizen scientists and specialist experts where a licence is needed or identification is difficult such as cryptic, rare, tiny species very similar to others. For example, the Little Whirlpool Ramshorn Snail was identified in the field using magnifying goggles with samples verified by three independent experts.

A wide variety of monitoring approaches were drawn up to quantify changes in abundance and distribution. In many cases, population-level changes will only be evident after the life of the project.

Lessons learned for species recovery monitoring include:

- Using the development phase to investigate how best to measure species recovery and use this to define monitoring objectives, create protocols and systems to collect, store, review and share data and obtain required baselines
- Using a designed experimental approach for recovery trials wherever possible
- Ensuring sufficient funding is available for advice from partners when working across taxa
- Promoting a geospatial approach to data collation and analysis.

See Review of Species Monitoring Report

“ Arable plants weren’t an area of particular experience so I do feel like I’ve come away with a good knowledge, as well as keeping skills up on my CV. ”

Volunteer

Revealing the secret life of the Willow Tit

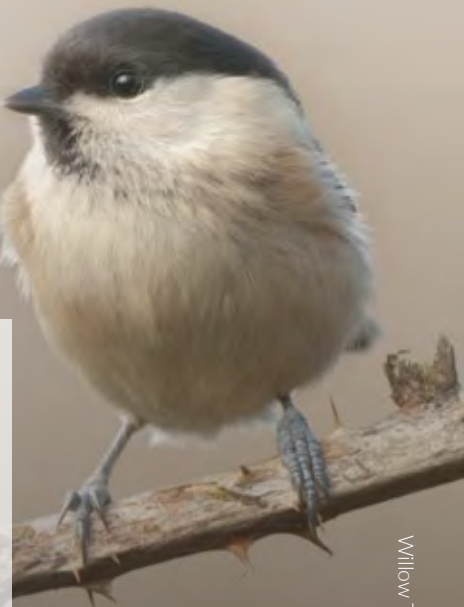
Willow tits are the second-fastest declining bird species in the UK and the reasons aren’t completely clear.

Willow tits are very secretive, so we don’t know much about how they move, their behaviours and territory size. This diminutive little bird’s sharp rate of decline makes it difficult to pinpoint and monitor populations.

Willow tits are resident in former mining communities such as the Dearne Valley, South Yorkshire. There has been a general trend for them to move north west across England. Back from the Brink worked with the British Trust for Ornithology licensed ringers to place coloured rings or tiny radio transmitters on individual birds. The team used these vital bits of kit to track birds for three to ten days and the trackers fell off naturally after two weeks.

The study's data will help conservation specialists plan how habitat is managed to help willow tits survive and thrive.

For example, individual birds covered territories much larger than previously expected with one bird covering a territory of nearly seven hectares, while pairs stuck to smaller territories such as an old railway line.



Willow Tit

“ The importance is the connectivity... post-industrial features were absolutely crucial. We saw Willow tits using them in almost all the birds that we tracked, to move around the landscape ”

Project Officer



Research during the development stage highlighted that **poor communication about threatened species brings an opportunity** to meet a hidden need.

People are largely unaware of the existence of many of the target species. There is also a low awareness of the current threats to public health, the economy and society, through the services provided by our natural heritage.

Species' stories have been rewritten

Interpretation is a powerful communication technique and Back from the Brink aimed to reveal the stories behind target species, their habitats and what it takes to safeguard them. Good interpretation:

- Attracts attention, is relevant and provokes thought
- Generates a sense of revelation and engages the emotions
- Invites activity and involvement
- Is easy to understand
- Is memorable.

The programme developed a range of traditional interpretation, from outdoor panels and exhibition displays to guided walks and illustrated talks as well as trialling more innovative approaches.

More than 3,000 people (many of them new to species conservation work) took part in a community arts programme (see The Art of Saving Species) in which artists and creative practitioners helped participants explore new ways of looking at our most threatened species.

The inspiring results form a collection of community co-curated interpretation that sheds new light on the stories of our nation's fascinating species, brings the seemingly uncharismatic, elusive or tiny to the fore and investigates their relevance and resonance with our lives.

Inspiring people with a reclusive Dorset resident

The Ladybird Spider is one of the UK's most spectacular spiders, but also one of our most endangered and a national conservation priority.



Back from the Brink worked to establish six new populations on heathland sites across Dorset to help secure the future of this fascinating species. However engaging the public with this threatened, elusive, small and legally protected species was a challenge.

A suite of new interpretation at RSPB Arne nature reserve was created to engage visitors of a range of ages and abilities. Giant models allow visitors to 'meet' this tiny arachnid in its web, whilst panels prompt them to look closer.



An army of people volunteered

Back from the Brink was successful in mobilising a volunteer force across England to help record and conserve species. The programme exceeded targets **with nearly 4,000¹ people giving 9,329 days of their time** with an equivalent **cash value of a massive £934,118**.

Some volunteers were newly recruited but many were existing volunteers within partner organisations and local volunteer groups. Feedback showed that being part of the programme was highly rewarding, revealed aspects to their local environment new to them and created a connection to our most threatened species. Volunteering proved a successful model for creating deep engagement with the local community.

Back from the Brink provided an opportunity to diversify volunteer opportunities, invest in volunteer skills and expand the experience of volunteers – which will be beneficial to support the future work of the nature conservation organisations they volunteer for. As part of Dorset Heathland Heart, for example, 'Species Champions' were identified for many species. This enhanced and flexible volunteer role identified a volunteer to be a key point of contact for one particular species. They co-ordinated and undertook surveys, liaised with site managers, species experts and other volunteers to take on varying degrees of responsibility.

“ A life-changing opportunity to learn from, and be inspired by, national experts in their field of Natural History within the context of my local area.”

Volunteer

“ I had so much fun! I have always taken training and surveying seriously because I strongly believed in the reasons behind this project, but I have laughed my way through this project with the most amazing people in some incredible settings.”

Volunteer

¹3,938 days recorded against a target of 2,930



People changed their attitudes and behaviours towards species

Many of the target species were unknown or little-known before the programme. Changing attitudes towards species, therefore, started with raising awareness of their existence, relevance or interest through engaging communications and engagement activities.



Amongst those deeply engaged with the programme, there is strong evidence that it has been successful in significantly affecting attitudes and behaviours to be more open, mindful and become advocates for target species. For example:

- Contractors and core and delivery partner staff have expanded their knowledge of different taxa and different audiences, and can consider their needs in future work
- Volunteers often spoke passionately about 'having their eyes opened' to new parts of their local landscape and the species in them, and then volunteering more time to help
- Communities expressed pride in the species in their area and have rallied support to care for them or engaged further with them of their own volition
- Land owners and managers have changed attitudes to recognise and value species on their land or this has reinforced the views they already held. Some have then gone on to change the way they manage their land.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the lighter-the-touch the engagement, the less attitudinal and behaviour change appears to be triggered. This has important implications for the design of future projects and the balance of resource allocated to different types of engagement.

Species and their habitats are better managed

Back from the Brink is leaving behind a legacy of better managed species and habitats through a number of mechanisms, for example:

- A suite of habitat enhancement capital works that will be maintained for at least 10 years
- 865 landowners and managers received targeted advice for species recovery. Many are using the advice to inform new or existing management plans. Lessons learnt about engaging land managers will also help to inform future projects and increase their likelihood of success, for example, through cross-taxa training for land management advisors
- Species factsheets and land management guides have been produced and shared, for example, practical tips for managing land for bats
- Progressing target species in their journey through the Species Recovery Curve has provided a richer body of information and evidence about species and their habitats to inform evidence-based management
- Partner organisations have trialled ways in which to manage habitats to support target species, and robust protocols to monitor species, that are being used in their own future management plans
- Capacity for management of species and habitats has been increased, for example, through developing the contractor supply chain and investing in volunteer skills.

Helping farmers to colour in their margins

Colour in the margins was a project aiming to save threatened arable habitats and the species that depend on them. **70% of England is farmland and arable plants are the fastest declining suite of plants in the UK.** This decline of once characteristic, and often colourful arable plants has had knock-on effects on other species that utilised this important habitat, such as ground beetles and birds.

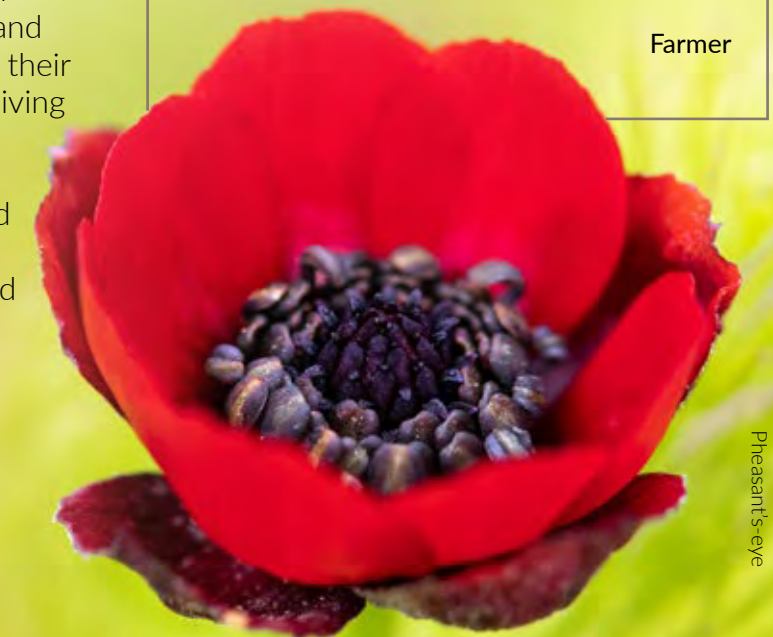
The project delivered advice and support to over 150 farms to tackle issues such as the lack of awareness in the farming community about the value and needs of arable wild plants, low take-up of agri-environment scheme options that could support these plants and lack of confidence in dealing with problem weeds. For example, taking project advice, one Wiltshire farmer joined up a patch of red hemp-nettle growing around the base of a pylon near an annually cultivated fallow plot for ground nesting birds, resulting in a trebling of red hemp-nettle population.

The one-to-one advice, which encompassed a range of different types of contact such as survey feedback reports, maps with targeted management advice, face-to-face field visits and telephone calls, was an effective method of engaging land owners and managers.

As a direct result, the project is leaving a legacy of improved land management for arable plants. Many farmers and land managers felt that the project inspired them to undertake voluntary management for arable plants and also used the information to enter agri-environment schemes. For example, 50% of workshop attendees and farmers interviewed said they changed their management as a consequence of receiving project advice, and many of those who did not change their management said that Back from the Brink had confirmed that they were already doing the right thing. Furthermore, the project changed the farmers' mind-set from thinking 'weed' to valuing 'cornfield flower' and 'flower crop'.

“ Surveying provides me with knowledge of what’s on the land which I would never normally take time to investigate. I’ve spotted lots of plants I’ve never given much attention to before. With knowledge of what’s there, I can protect it.”

Farmer



Pheasant's-eye

Species and their habitats are in better condition

Back from the Brink improved the condition of habitats, extended their area and created new habitats and niches. This work took place on 590 sites across England, within which 644 hectares of habitat were managed, restored or created for priority species. Delivery of a large programme of 127 capital works was key to achieving this and further gains were made through effective engagement with land owners and managers.

Having a robust way of measuring species recovery was key to understanding the difference Back from the Brink made. The partners therefore adopted the Species Recovery Curve model as a way of assessing this and that could also be applied across the programme. This posed a number of challenges including:

- The model being developed for national-scale assessment whereas projects were working at a local level
- The sequential approach of the model was not best suited to capturing the activities of projects that were often contributing toward several stages of recovery at once

- Baseline curve scores for some species had to be reviewed and adjusted to ensure they were appropriate and realistic. In addition to target or ‘primary’ species, secondary species were also identified to make progress which created further complications, unrealistic expectations and diluted effort
- Measuring impact on species within the lifespan of a short-term project is problematic due to the time lag between improvement works and tangible improvement in the health of populations
- Lack of guidance and experience of practical application of this approach in practical conservation works meant that some members of staff were reticent about its value and lacked confidence in applying it to their project.

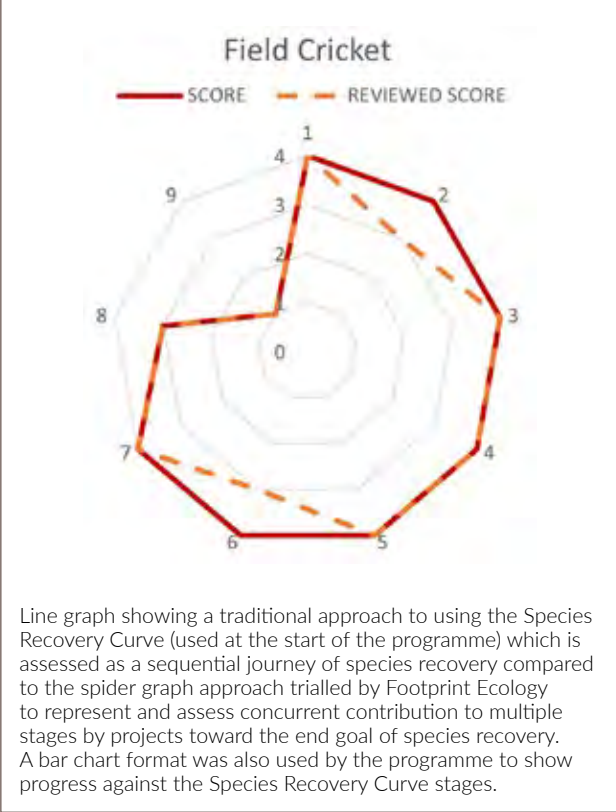
In real life, species recovery is complex. It is not necessarily sequential (i.e. it does not progress neatly from one step to the next, but may skip steps), and it is also that it is non-linear, (i.e. there is a looping motion as it moves forward then loops back to a previous stage but at a higher Y axis value, then perhaps skips forward a step or two before looping back again). Finding an effective model to track and assess this has

been an ongoing conversation for the Back form the Brink team.

A non-linear format indicating the extent of progress made at each step for each species over the lifetime of the relevant project was used instead of a linear assessment of progress along the curve – *see diagram right.*

Species recovery was assessed by each project and this was then independently reviewed by Footprint Ecology (see [Review of Monitoring and Supporting Species Recovery Curve scores](#) for further details).

This review found that 78% of final Curve scores were appropriate; that 82% of species progressed by at least one species recovery step and that Step 6 (Recovery Solutions Trialled) was the most frequently achieved step. Scores were then critiqued and validated by national taxon group specialists, although they did not have access to all of the relevant information and process for local-level use of the model to make a full assessment. Finally scores were ratified and adjusted by programme management.



In future programmes, improvements could be made to the process by, for example by:

- Increasing support and guidance to staff in implementing and interpreting the Species Recovery Curve in the context of their project
- Adopting a local-level, non-sequential approach to assessment from the start of the programme
- Creating greater capacity for, and changing the order of, the score verification process so that projects propose scores, programme management quality check them and then they are passed for independent verification by ecologists who can review all monitoring evidence and make recommendations to national taxon groups for final review and ratification.

14 of the 20 most highly threatened species aimed to be ‘saved from extinction’ have progressed along the Species Recovery Curve. **In total, 96 of the 112 target species have moved along the Species Recovery Curve** and now have improved conservation status and future prospects as a direct result of programme conservation work (see the Species Recovery Progress and Review of Monitoring reports for details). 33 of the



target species are projected to make further resulting progress over the next five years.

The actions identified by the national taxon groups to address species decline, and return them to resilient healthy populations, were adopted as a second approach to record contributions against this national set of measures. The allocated actions needed to be reviewed and rationalised during the life of the programme and proved to be a less effective measurement method for the specific activities of Back from the Brink projects. The programme did **contribute to 561 national conservation actions**, to directly and indirectly benefit 187 target species¹.

The programme has highlighted the complexities of recovering species, the collaborative effort and expertise required to deliver this and robustly measure the impact of conservation actions. Further exploration, discussion and principles for measuring species recovery can be found on the Back from the Brink website: naturebftb.co.uk .

²Overall, Back from the Brink is leaving targeted species and habitats in measurably better condition. Their journey to recover, however, is not over.

¹Against the original target of 224.
²Changes to condition of habitats were not fully assessed by all projects

More people are engaged with, and taking action for, species

“ Public engagement and mood shapes the space that politicians have to work in.”

Tony Juniper, Chair of Natural England

Back from the Brink delivered a significant programme of communications, learning and engagement activity across England to engage the public in species conservation. This included:

- Communications that shed light on the fascinating lives and plight of target species - creating an enviable 184,646,409 (footnote: estimate reach based on circulation/viewing figures) opportunities to engage, including via iconic nature programmes such as Springwatch and national publications and newspapers
- Over 1,000 events were delivered, engaging people more deeply in species in their local area, including 1,000 young people attending 'next generation naturalist talks'. Many participants shared how much enjoyment they gained from these opportunities
- Additional community arts and central engagement delivery, for example, an online exhibition of artworks
- Formal learning opportunities for schools, colleges and universities including school learning resources and workshops.

In turn, these delivered a range of outcomes from enjoyment and greater nature connection to learning, skills and creative inspiration.

Covid-19 curtailed some planned engagement works and this was a particular issue where engagement had been 'back-ended' into the latter stages of a project work programme or where an adaptive management approach was not proactively taken.

Did Back from the Brink 'inspire the nation'? This was an ambitious goal for a pilot project of its size with few dedicated engagement staff. The programme did, however, reach a huge number of people and delivered tangible benefits for those most deeply involved, including inspiring them to act.

There is still work to be done to foster the idea of engagement as integral to projects rather than an 'add-on' or 'nice to have', and reinforce the reasons why engaging people is imperative for delivering and sustaining species conservation. Whilst Back from the Brink did engage some who were 'new' to nature conservation, much more is needed for wholesale change, for example:

- Refining and better understanding target audiences
- Embedding the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion in project engagement design
- Breaking out of the green 'echo chamber' to reach a more diverse range of people in meaningful ways
- Designing engagement and communications to specifically trigger pro-environmental behaviours – the Words for Wildlife toolkit contains tips on framing communications for this purpose.

“ Many thanks for an excellent talk last night. The size of the audience clearly showed the attraction of pine martens as an iconic species, probably made more attractive and mysterious by the fact that most of the audience will never have seen one in the wild – or at least not in England ...”

Community Participant

“ Developing the Colour in the Margins education resources was an incredibly valuable experience. We engaged agriculture and wildlife students at the Royal Agricultural University, as well as aspiring ecologists from a range of colleges. The inspiration from Colour in the Margins has not ended with the project – we continue to embed arable plants in the curriculum and research at the university, generating more and more interest among students!”

Lecturer

Creative connection to nature



Rock-rose Pot Beetle

In the 1930's, unimproved limestone grassland covered 40% of the Cotswolds but today it's less than 1.5% (3,000 hectares); over half the UK's habitat of this kind.

Back from the Brink worked to restore a network of limestone grassland and help recover 30 species of vulnerable butterflies, bats, plants, bumblebees, beetles and adders.

“ As you can imagine, with that decline in habitat, we've also seen a decline in rare species that rely on it, so we've got a lot of rare and threatened species that live within these Cotswolds grasslands”

Community Engagement Officer

The team used tried and tested engagement methods to involve local people, such as guided walks and pop-up stands at local events but wanted to pilot ways of reaching new audiences through their existing interests and connecting them to nature, for example:

- Wild writing workshop – local people were invited to share and reflect on examples of nature writing before heading out to explore limestone grassland at Rough Bank, a Butterfly Conservation nature reserve. They then sat down overlooking a view, got their notebooks out and wrote poetry for the first time
- Walking the Land – the team collaborated with a local Stroud art group to visit Rough Bank. The group then wanted to experience the landscape through the seasons so visited again themselves and have now exhibited their works.

“ It became quite an emotional morning actually. It was very interesting to see quite how moved people are by nature writing.”

Community Engagement Officer



“ It just shows that getting people out with their interest in mind into nature really is a great way of engaging people with nature and the landscape you're working in”

Community Engagement Officer

A community endeavour

Barberry Carpet Moths were once widespread across the UK, but their numbers have sharply declined along with the Common Barberry plant on which it depends.

Back from the Brink planted out 4,110 Barberry bushes to help at nine of the 12 known remaining UK populations by linking up colonies in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, and expanded the range of the moth in North Dorset.

The project team put a lot of effort into increasing awareness of, and interest in, the plant itself, encouraging people to plant it in gardens, nature reserves and school gardens. Giving people a simple thing to do really helped - asking them to put a plant in their garden and explaining how doing that one thing will really improve the fate of a local rarity.

The project relied on the good will and enthusiasm of local volunteers in:

- Creating a community of people growing Barberry plants
- Volunteer planting tasks
- Storing and caring for plants and providing planting sites
- Helping to avoid negative press about wheat rust that can infest the plant.

“ Word of mouth was the best thing. Once you’ve got a few key volunteers involved, they’re really good at spreading news about a project.”

“ It’s always important to have a good tea kit to get volunteers to come back, and we even sometimes had Barberry flapjacks.”

Project Officer

The project generated pride and community spirit in the Barberry Carpet Moths which were celebrated through community arts and trapping events with expert lepidopterists. Interest from landowners snowballed and the project had to turn people away and direct them to nurseries. Thankfully Barberry plants are now more valued and widely available with seeds and germination advice for plant nurseries in the Wiltshire and Gloucestershire area. The area will be monitored in the coming years to identify any new colonies as the plants grow to over one metre and are suitable for the moth.

Local areas are now better places to live, work and visit

The place-based work of Back from the Brink has made an important contribution to:

- Improving the quality of life for local communities by establishing higher quality habitats that support greater numbers of our nation’s most threatened species and improved access to such sites
- Fostering community pride in special species that make their home locally, and increasing their connection to nature
- Creating opportunities for local people to act for threatened species, for example, community action, citizen science and volunteering
- Enriching the visitor experience at nature sites through more interpretation therefore contributing toward local visitor economies.

Partner organisations are more resilient

Back from the Brink has enriched the work of partner organisations by, for example:

- Providing a platform for engagement with peers, funders and senior stakeholders
- Delivery towards organisational objectives (which often contribute toward national targets such as conservation of Section 41 species) through delivering excellent species conservation work
- Showcasing the relevance of the work of taxon group specific organisations to wider nature conservation
- Inter-organisational learning and forging alliances
- Building internal capacity through staff development opportunities and refining approaches to areas such as monitoring and evaluation
- Operational efficiency gains through skills sharing that can be used in future projects and programmes
- Greater appreciation of issues and themes facing the whole sector
- Developing a better understanding of where partner focused actions fit into the wider conservation agenda.

Nemophora metallica

“ I was thinking ‘are people more interested in plants than moths?’, because it can be quite challenging to get people interested in a small brown moth.”

Project Officer

Northern Dune Tiger Beetle

Ingredients for success

At times, Back from the Brink expanded the reach of tried and tested ways of working, for example, guided walks to introduce audiences to a habitat, the special species within it and efforts to conserve them.

But more often, **the programme was trialling new ways of delivering species conservation**, for example, new methods to create habitat suitable for Northern Dune Tiger Beetles. As a result, the programme has been **a rich, and often rewarding, learning journey** for all involved.

Unsurprisingly partners couldn't pinpoint **one** 'secret ingredient' for bringing species back from the brink of extinction, but here's some of their thoughts:



“ A mixture of ambition, vision, creativity, curiosity, commitment, partnership, communication, flexibility, reflection, funds, capacity, data, expertise and good will.”



“ Sustained practical delivery effort and commitments beyond project funding/ funder cycles, backed by enabling policy and public understanding and support.”



“ As much collaborative working as possible.”



“ Focused, evidence-based actions and adequate resources, brought together by remarkable committed people.”



“ Getting people to realise that what makes nature beautiful, inspiring and resilient is diversity and abundance of life, and that takes decades to build, moments to destroy.”

Much of the partners' learning is captured and set out in **Principles for a Species Recovery Framework** which will be an invaluable tool for future work of this kind. The following are examples of **ingredients for success** that stem from methods trialled and lessons learnt by the programme:

Strategy

Have a strong uniting programme vision, one set of outcomes and a legacy vision that are revisited on a regular basis, for example, as standing item on agendas and staff reviews to help make the cultural shift from thinking about one species to a bigger, shared effort.

If collaboration is essential to delivering your vision, bring in expertise and make time for developing partnership working practice. Dedicate more time than you think you need in work programmes for both day-to-day and strategic collaboration.

Make space to bring together expertise to tackle 'big ticket' sector issues that will affect the programme, for example, area's 'data poverty' that hamper evidence-based planning.

Programme design

Plan a 'delivery sandwich' model with a generous start-up and onboarding period, then a delivery period finishing with a dedicated period for sharing success and lessons learnt and cementing legacy.

Use monitoring and evaluation as a governance tool to help embed an adaptive management approach so that you can flex and adapt the programme as you get feedback and review progress.

Options to appraise the nature, timing and location of planned staff contracts to ensure good staff welfare, fostering collaboration and effectiveness. Plan ahead for staff leaving mid-programme by having a thorough hand-over process ready, recording training etc.

Delivery

To help things run smoothly, create a programme handbook setting out project reporting responsibilities, branding etc., from the start, so everyone knows what's expected of them and when.

Provide technical support for the staff team on areas such as project management, quality standards for engagement, widening audiences through audience development, capturing and communicating their impact.

Welcome in specialist expertise and fresh perspectives, for example, artists, community-led or advocate organisations and specialist volunteering organisations.

Legacy

Consider how you can turn resources created during the programme into ongoing assets for partners and the wider sector.

Map the potential ongoing benefits of the programme at operational, strategic and organisational levels and what simple actions can help.

Plan practical ecological monitoring, and explore ways to capture longitudinal impact for engagement work beyond the life of the programme.



Natterjack Toad tadpole

Turning the tide for species

Back from the Brink set out to be ‘a **game-changing partnership** that will turn the tide for our most threatened species and inspire the next generation to care for England’s most vulnerable wildlife’.

Through Back from the Brink, Rethink Nature and Natural England have made a positive difference to the fate of many of the species targeted by the programme. And they have done so by bringing people on the journey with them, through telling the story of our most threatened species and empowering people to help care for them in their local area.

Whilst some of the benefits of Back from the Brink will take some years to come to fruition, it has shown proof of concept that a collaborative, cross-taxa and participative approach to species conservation, can be an effective tool in tackling the threat to our species.

As with all innovative projects, not everything worked all of the time. For example, building relationships with landowners and securing permissions for work on their land was sometimes a major endeavour that was not always fruitful.

The programme has underlined the need to be realistic about what a short-term project can achieve, especially in the long-term processes of habitat restoration, species conservation and community engagement. It has also highlighted how resource-intensive, yet advantageous, collaborative

working is, and that this needs to be thoroughly planned for.

More work is needed to:

- Find ways to embed and expand collaboration including cross-taxa working
- Develop the sector workforce skills and knowledge to deliver this kind of work
- Establish agreed approaches of measuring species recovery in the sector that can be executed at a local, as well as national, scale
- Explore how our precious species can be relevant to a diverse range of people and how we can tell their stories in imaginative ways
- Build on the engagement models piloted to further engage a much wider range of people in taking action for species
- Be more ambitious in engaging policy-makers, peers and those outside the conservation sector
- Work with funders to identify ways to secure long-term investment needed to properly support species recovery.

Shortly after Back from the Brink started, the government published it’s 25 Year Environment Plan and supporting policy is continuing to emerge. This, along with growing public support for conservation and reports such as the Landscape’s Review of protected landscapes, are creating fertile ground for projects such as Back from the Brink.

The programme has already been actively collaborating and sharing learning with other species recovery programmes such as those in development in Scotland and Wales. Back from the Brink will continue to deliver benefits for the sector, for example:

- Practical techniques have been transferred to other conservation efforts. For example, project staff and peers learnt ‘headstarting’ techniques to rear wild laid Black-tailed godwit eggs in captivity, that have since been cascaded to other organisations and used with curlews as part of three other projects
- 363 professionals attended BftB conference events

- A suite of resources has been produced to share the methods and experiences of the programme including [Principles for a Species Recovery Framework](#).

If we are to safeguard England’s natural heritage, effectively address the national biodiversity crisis and the needs of our most threatened species within this, our ambition as a sector needs to be bigger: more and more flexible resource; more time to act, monitor the results, reflect and embed ways of working; more partners bringing expertise and opportunities; many more people mobilised to help and ultimately, more species brought back from the brink of extinction and further along their recovery journey.



Great Crested Newt

Supporting documents:

Independent Monitoring Review

Audit of Species Monitoring
Activities

Individual Project Final Reports

Summary Report

Discussion papers

Words for Wildlife Communications
Toolkit

**Thank you to everyone who has
helped to tell the story of Back from
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- The Project Officers for trying out new ways of evaluating
- The Monitoring and Evaluation Group for the discussion and debate
- The Steering Group for supporting the process.