

Threatened species set for major funding boost

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Five species ranging from turtle doves to rare diamond-backed spider will receive a major funding boost.

The government has unveiled the first five species set to benefit from the largest ever amount of government funding for threatened species.

The turtle dove, diamond-backed spider, Eurasian oystercatcher, red-billed chough and glutinous snail are among the hundreds of species set to benefit from new funding for recovery projects across England.

The government will invest £60m over the next three years – more than double the previous round of funding – into the Species Recovery Programme, which is administered by Natural England. A further £30m will be dedicated to fund species recovery on the national forest estate.

It comes as Defra reveals a new campaign, “Wild Again: Restoring England’s Wildlife”, which will encompass the government’s existing and future work to protect and recover native species through projects including the flagship Species Recovery Programme.

Environment Secretary Emma Reynolds said:

“We are a nation of nature lovers, and our wildlife is a huge source of pride for communities across the country.

“This record investment into species recovery will give help some of our most iconic species the chance to truly flourish - from the turtle dove to the red-billed chough - with many more projects set to follow in the months ahead.”

Natural England Chair Tony Juniper said:

“Once widespread and characteristic wildlife was in the very fabric of our nation. Following centuries of decline that fabric has become frayed and tattered, but all is not lost. New government support to assist with the recovery of some of our most threatened species brings hope through practical action.

“There are some extraordinary stories behind the recovery projects we are helping, including that of the red-billed chough that was once extinct in England, but which is now growing in number and spreading. We are also backing action for lesser-known species, such as the diamond-backed spider and glutinous snail, which while less familiar are no less important threads in the web of life.”

Today, the government has revealed five of the threatened species set to benefit from Species Recovery Programme funding:

Turtle dove

The turtle dove is one of our most vulnerable species and, for those lucky enough to hear its call, part of the soundtrack for an English summer.

However, that sound has become harder to find over recent decades, as the turtle dove population in England has declined by an estimated 99% between the 1960s and 2023. This is largely due to the loss of seed-rich food sources.

However, turtle doves are set to benefit from new funding for their recovery through a project led by the RSPB, with Kent Wildlife Trust & Natural England. This builds on previous work, which has seen the Southeast of England become a stronghold for turtle doves. Nature friendly farming schemes are helping to provide more of the wildflower seeds that these birds need to survive and new funding to help the turtle dove population recover will drive further progress.

The turtle dove is known not only for its distinctive markings, but also for its enduring status as a cultural symbol of romance. Through the centuries, poetry including Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle", cemented its symbolic status — and it remains most famous in popular culture for its mention in "The Twelve Days of Christmas".

Diamond-backed spider

Few conservation stories are as dramatic as that of the diamond-backed spider.

The spider, named for its distinctive markings, was thought to be extinct in the UK for nearly half a century, before it was rediscovered at Clumber Park, a National Trust site in Nottinghamshire in 2017.

Now, Clumber Park is still the only place where the diamond-backed spider can be found in the UK. This makes the tiny population of the species we have in this country extremely vulnerable, as any threats to this area of habitat could render the rare spider nationally extinct once more.

Aside from being one of our rarest species, diamond-backed spiders also have a role to play in promoting healthy ecosystems. Spiders act as nature's pest controller, feeding flies, aphids and moths, helping to manage their numbers and prevent damage to plants.

New government funding for the National Trust will help this population to flourish into the future, ensuring that we don't see one of our rarest arachnids disappear from the wild in England.

Red-billed chough

New funding will offer renewed hope for the red-billed chough, a bird which has been much beleaguered over the centuries.

The red-billed chough has been subject to persecution since the Middle Ages, when folklore cast them as fireraisers and claimed they got their red legs and bill from paddling in the blood of Thomas Becket after his execution.

Now, red-billed choughs are being recognised as ecosystem engineers for promoting biodiversity in grasslands by altering soil structure and managing invertebrate populations, but they are facing the twin threats of the loss of habitat and food sources.

Government funding will be used to build on ongoing work to help the red-billed chough recover in Kent. In July 2023, Kent Wildlife Trust and Wildwood Trust released eight choughs near Dover, and by May 2024 the first wild chough chick to be born in Kent for generations was discovered at Dover Castle.

Eurasian oystercatcher

The Eurasian oystercatcher is one of England's most recognisable coastal birds: boldly patterned in black and white with a carrot-coloured bill, very talkative, and almost impossible to overlook. They can also be remarkably long-lived, with some individuals known to have lived for nearly half a century.

Britain supports an internationally important number of wintering oystercatchers, with up to 45% of Europe's population spending the winter here. However, the oystercatcher has been facing decline in Europe, largely due to driven by habitat degradation and the over-exploitation of mussel and cockle beds on which it depends.

A new project by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust and Natural England will help to promote the breeding success of oystercatcher in England, making sure that England remains a haven for the species.

Glutinous snail

The glutinous snail is one of our most unusual species, notable for its jelly-like mantle which protects its thin and delicate shell. This gives the animal a glassy appearance and makes it sticky to the touch, giving it its name.

This distinctive creature is extinct in England and, in Britain, is now found in just one lake: Llyn Tegid in North Wales. In England, the last known population was found at Kennington Pit, a pond on the edge of Oxford, where it was recorded until the early 1990s. Its decline is thought to be linked to habitat deterioration, as the species is particularly sensitive to water quality.

A new project by the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, alongside a consortium of zoos, will reintroduce these weird and wonderful creatures in England and support their recovery.

Additional information:

More information on the largest ever Government investment in threatened species recovery.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/threatened-species-set-for-major-funding-boost>