

CHAMPIONS OF THE COMMONS

FROM THE HEDGEHOG TO THE HEN HARRIER, MPs ACT AS CHEERLEADERS FOR THE UK'S RAREST SPECIES, BUT ASIDE FROM GIVING THEM A PHOTO OP IN A LOCAL NEWSPAPER, DOES IT BENEFIT THE WILDLIFE? ASKS JAMES FAIR

It's a blisteringly hot day in Central London in early July, and some 40 people are listening attentively to natural history TV presenter Steve Backshall handing out gongs to MPs. First up is a special mention for Oliver Colvile.

"Oliver is well known as a champion of the hedgehog," says Backshall to low murmurs of appreciation from the audience. "He frequently mentions hedgehogs in debates and – it says here – has gained 'a degree of notoriety over it'. I love the idea that you can be in the middle of a debate about the NHS or immigration, and suddenly Oliver shouts out, 'But what about the hedgehog?'"

And it's certainly true that Colvile has done much to raise the plight of the species, including launching a petition to enhance its legal protection. Though the petition subsequently failed to attract the 100,000 signatures it needed to force a debate in parliament, it gained a great deal of media coverage.

And then, at the General Election in June, Colvile lost his

seat in Parliament, and the hedgehog, in England at least, no longer has a champion.

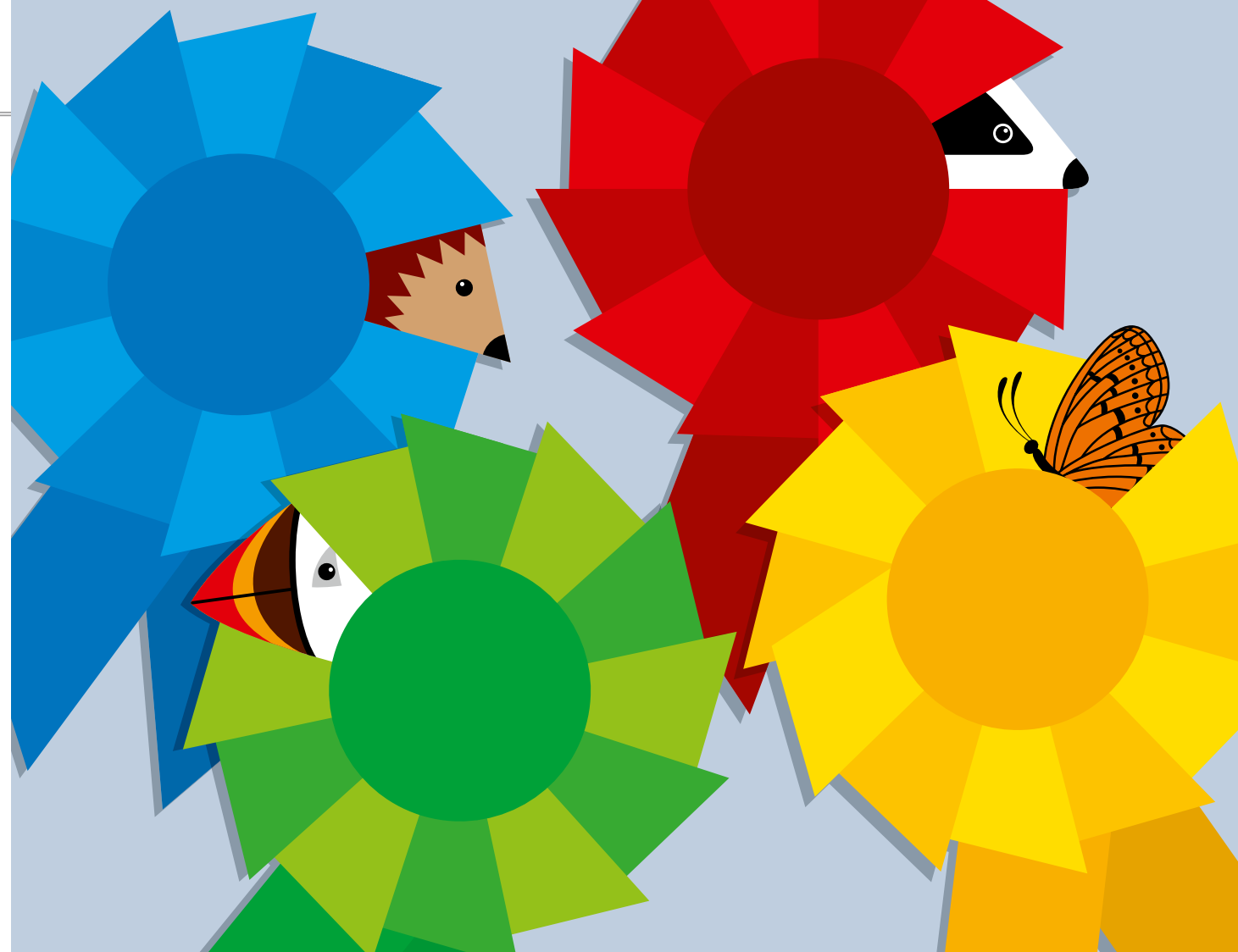
If you include 93 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) and 32 Welsh Assembly Members (AMs), along with 39 MPs in the House of Commons, 164 of our elected politicians are so-called species champions, cheerleaders for some of our rarest wildlife.

ANIMAL ADVOCATES

Mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, fish, trees and wildflowers are all championed. Species represented include the obvious (badgers, by Colin Smyth MSP), the obscure (the striped lychnis moth, by Steve Brine MP) and the ornate (the pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly, by Russell George AM).

They range from the largest – the blue whale, which has the MSP Kenneth Gibson as its advocate on the grounds that the waters between

Shetland and the Faroes are important habitat – to the smallest: the horrid ground-weaver spider,



I LOVE THE IDEA YOU CAN BE DEBATING THE NHS AND OLIVER SHOUTS, 'WHAT ABOUT HEDGEHOGS?'"

a UK endemic only found in four locations in the world and just 2.5mm long, which has the Conservative MP for South West Devon, Gary Streeter, proudly fighting its corner.

"This is a way of engaging MPs with nature and species in their constituencies," says Sarah Whitebread, a parliamentary advocate for the RSPB. "We hope to raise awareness of threats to wildlife, and give MPs ideas for action they can take,

such as raising questions with ministers or initiating a debate. We also encourage them to get out into the field and see their species on site visits."

This, many do enthusiastically. Overall winner Rachael Maskell – Labour MP for York Central and champion for the beautiful tansy beetle – regularly visits the parts of the River Ouse in her constituency that are, just about, the only place in the UK where it is found. Matt Warman, meanwhile, the Conservative MP for Boston and Skegness, receives the 'Muddy Welly' award for spending a day helping with a redshank survey at the RSPB's Frampton Marsh reserve.

Introducing the awards ceremony, Richard Benyon, the Conservative MP and former environment minister in the coalition Government, speaks passionately about the dire straits in which much of our wildlife finds itself. "What an affront it would be if the snake's

SPECIES CHAMPION

DEREK THOMAS

Constituency West Cornwall & The Isles of Scilly
Champions Manx Shearwater



Every MP likes to celebrate something about their constituency that's unique and exciting, and Manx shearwaters do that for me. People are nervous about how we navigate our exit

from the EU, and they want to make sure that this kind of work is still funded. So when people do talk about how we can make Brexit work for the UK, it's got to be more than about jobs and farm

subsidies, it's got to be about how we continue to protect these species and allow them to blossom. Tourism is our bread and butter in West Cornwall, and we know that properly thought-out and funded legislation really works.



SPECIES CHAMPION

RACHAEL MASKELL

Constituency York Central ★ Champions Tansy beetle

I've had an interest in wildlife all my life – I'm an outdoors kind of person and grew up in the country, so to have a species that is so unique to the constituency and needs protection seemed an incredible opportunity. The tansy beetle is about 1cm long, an iridescent green colour, and – apart from a small population in East Anglia – is only found along a short stretch of the

River Ouse. As the species champion, I've been to where it lives in my constituency, talked to academics who carry out research and I promote it at every opportunity.



head fritillary [the species he champions] or the lapwing or many of the species that colleagues are talking about today were to go extinct, even in our constituencies, let alone the country," he tells his colleagues.

BREXIT ON THE HORIZON

There are many people who may feel justified in taking what Benyon – or, indeed, any MP – says about protecting wildlife with an unhealthy pinch of salt, given the record governments have over recent decades of failing to reverse wildlife declines. This issue is raised by Kerry McCarthy, Labour MP for Bristol East and species champion for the swift. Last year's State of Nature report wasn't so much a wake-up call to the authorities, as a final plea for action, but there are some politicians who believe in the need to relax nature legislation in order to create jobs and boost the economy.

Along with many conservationists, McCarthy is concerned about what happens as the Government repeals legislation that stems from EU membership and replaces it with new national laws.

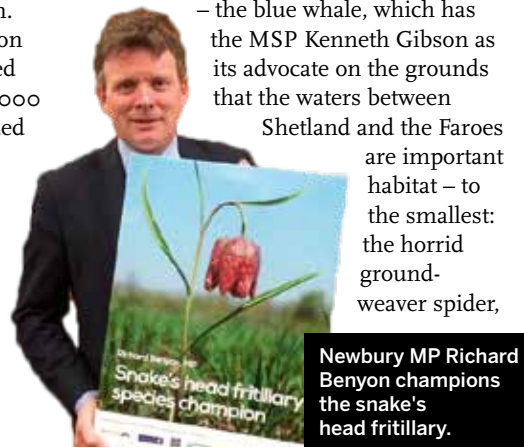
"I think 80 per cent of our environmental protection stems from Europe," she says. "Whenever I've raised this, I've had assurances from the Government that we aren't going to trade away those rights and what replaces them will be as good, if not better, than the EU standard."

But calls for an environment protection act, she says, went unheeded, and the appointment of Michael Gove as Environment Secretary she finds worrying. "Some things he's said in the past, about regulations being red tape and a burden, concern me."

But she indicates around the room and says: "It's good that there are Conservative as well as Labour MPs championing these species. Richard Benyon's good. We'll be putting Gove on the spot soon."

Talking to both Conservative and Labour MPs (neither the sole Liberal Democrat nor Green MP who are species champions were present) it was clear those who attended were serious about their responsibility to protect wildlife and the environment, ▶

Illustration by Patrick George/Debut Art; R Benyon: Plainfile; D Thomas: Chris McAndrew/UK Parliament/Creative Commons; Manx shearwater: Chris Gomersall/rspb-images.com; R Maskell: Buglife; tansy beetle: Steven Falk/Buglife



Newbury MP Richard Benyon champions the snake's head fritillary.



SPECIES CHAMPION

KERRY McCARTHY

Constituency Bristol East ★ Champions Swift

The RSPB asked if I would champion the swift because it's an urban bird and I represent an urban constituency. I hooked up with a group called Bristol Swifts and went to see

the home they've got with swift boxes. It took them years to attract the swifts, but they've got webcams now and it's absolutely fascinating. We had an event at Bristol Zoo, and architects were talking about how you can make sure all new-builds have swift boxes in them, which is something I'm very keen to push with Bristol Council. I think Exeter's done it and a few other places.



particularly in the light of our departure from the EU, and were broadly knowledgeable about the issues.

But nature protection is a complex issue, so how can we expect our MPs to understand the habitat requirements of a dormouse or the possible impact of an offshore wind farm on seabirds? Of course, that's where wildlife groups such as Buglife, Plantlife and

the RSPB (which all support the species champions initiative) come in, providing policy and briefing papers to help interested and supportive MPs.

ACHIEVING CREDIBILITY

It also helps if an MP, MSP or AM has been out in the field and understands the nuts and bolts of coalface conservation, according to Mark Holmes of the Conservative Environment

Network. "If you can get someone to buy into an issue, you get more of their time," he says. "Someone who is a species champion is likely to be speaking about it to ministers and will get traction with newspapers or TV. That gives you a direct route into both the House of Commons and the national media, and that's far more credible than what any policy officer might say."

The real question, says the writer, blogger and former Conservation Director of the RSPB, Mark Avery, is whether any of this talk will be translated into positive outcomes. The idea of species champions is a good one, but the proof of the pudding will be in the debating and the legislating.

"Let's say HS2 is going to damage some pipistrelle roosts and habitats," he says. "Will any of them, in a debate, bring up the species? To what extent will they actually represent this species in parliament when a serious issue comes up?"

This does happen, says Matt Shardlow of Buglife. He cites the example of the former MSP Mary Scanlon, who championed the pearl mussel until she left Holyrood. "She phoned us up and said there was a hydropower bill going through next week, so what did she need to say. We worked out what impact it might have on the pearl mussel."

“THE IDEA OF SPECIES CHAMPIONS IS A GOOD ONE, BUT PROOF OF THE PUDDING IS IN THE LEGISLATING.”

The curl bunting champion MP Sarah Wollaston, Conservative MP for Totnes, receives praise for mentioning the species as one that has benefitted from agri-environment schemes and so arguing the case for subsidies that protect nature. "Being a species champion changes the dynamic," says Shardlow. "MPs feel ownership of something."

Still, democracy is an unpredictable beast, and no MP is going to base their re-election at the next General Election on championing the ruderal bumblebee (Daniel Zeichner, Labour MP for Cambridge) or the violet click beetle (Harriett Baldwin, Conservative MP for West Worcestershire).

The skylark – which has declined by 60 per cent in 50 years – doesn't currently have a sponsor because Conservative Neil Carmichael lost his Stroud seat this year. With fundamental changes to the way we subsidise farming looming after we leave the EU, it will be needing one, and the RSPB says it has a few MPs under consideration. Whoever says yes will have a chance to be a real champion, and maybe get a gong from Steve Backshall. 🐦



SPECIES CHAMPION

REBECCA POW

Constituency Taunton Deane ★ Champions Snipe

I'm passionate about the environment and work a lot with the RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts and farmers, and I thought I would like to highlight the very good work the RSPB is doing on the Somerset Levels, where they have changed the habitat [in West Sedgemoor reserve] to encourage more snipe to breed. I went down there with my husband and the RSPB guys to see if we could spot any, and we heard them drumming with their feathers. I'd never heard it before – people try to explain it to you, and it means nothing until you hear it for yourself.



➤ FIND OUT MORE

Species champions:
www.buglife.org.uk/specieschampions (England); www.scotlink.org/work-areas/species-champions (Scotland); www.waleslink.org/species_champions (Wales)