

# A flutter on the lottery...

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*The chequered skipper butterfly. Images: Bob Eade*

Britain's cherished wildlife 'ghosts' are returning, thanks to a lottery-funded 'Back from the Brink' plan to reintroduce extinct and threatened species. It's an ambitious affair, full of hope and intricate planning, writes naturalist Alex Morss...

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Welcome home, little lost beauty, and spread your wings in our great oak forests, glide the glades again, as silently as the ghost that you were during all those dead decades.

In a secret woodland scene, as the gentle sun rose, a flurry of little treasures fluttered over England for the first time in 42 years.

Watching their release this week, were excited ecologists from Butterfly Conservation, the Back from the Brink team and the Forestry Commission, some of whom had been meticulously planning and longing for this moment for many years.

The special occasion was the long-awaited return of the chequered skipper: *Carterocephalus palaemon*,

a neglected butterfly that sadly went extinct in England in 1976.

## THE LONG WAIT

For me, this particular butterfly seems like a ghost that has haunted the minds of those who follow efforts to bring back our lost wildlife. In 1979, soon after it vanished, international laws and policies came in and placed obligations on the UK to investigate reintroducing native species.

But it's been a long wait. The business of reintroducing any lost species has proved to be a big and risky challenge. In all that time, the world has seen only a minority of reintroduction successes and many failures.

## OTHER ATTEMPTS

New sites have recently been established for beavers, pine martins, large blue butterfly, red kite, white-tailed eagle, sand lizard, common crane, natterjack toad, lady's slipper orchid, short-tailed bumblebee, Glanville fritillary butterfly, osprey and red squirrel.

Other rewilding ideas such as bringing back the wolf and lynx have met with fear and criticism. And a high proportion of translocations and reintroductions have felt like a lottery, with viable, breeding populations not re-establishing. For example there have been failures with hazel dormouse, the large copper and black-veined white butterfly.

## LOTTERY

With such mixed luck historically, perhaps it is fitting that a Heritage Lottery grant is behind the rescue of the chequered skipper and many others - and to the grand tune of £4.6million.



*Britain's rare ladybird spider. Image: Wiki Commons.*

The Back from the Brink team hopes to recover 20 extinct or threatened British species. Among them are the black-tailed godwit, field cricket, grey long-eared bat, ladybird spider, lesser butterfly orchid, pine marten, narrow-headed ant, shrill carder bee, barberry carpet moth, little whirlpool ramshorn snail, Cornish path moss and lesser butterfly orchid.

Butterfly Conservation normally prefers to focus on improving wildlife sites where populations are still hanging on, only attempting reintroductions as a 'last resort' - where a species has become extinct or is on the verge of extinction, has no realistic chance of re-colonising naturally, and where the habitat can be restored.

With so much at stake, the new chequered skipper site is under close protection. Hopefully, if all goes well, the revival of this and other disappearing delights will one day offer tantalising new quests for all those who, like me, rubber neck at all that flitters and flutters on sunny walks.

The return of our wonderful wildlife heritage will jog fond memories for older folk and create a first thrilling experience for younger generations who have sadly been deprived of witnessing these important gems of our wonderful natural world. And more importantly it will reinstate vital missing pieces in the ecological jigsaw of ecosystems.

#### CHEQUERS AND PEARLS

And this butterfly is a real little stunner, with its decorative chocolate and gold speckled wings, shining orange antennae tips and a fuzzy mottled grey face. The name comes from the chequered pattern on the 30mm-span open wings. When they are closed, the underwings display neat strings of pearls.

When the invitation comes, we must be patient to spot the adults, for they are fast flyers. The best bet will be to creep into a warm, sheltered woodland glade where a carpet of green foliage is enriched with a haze of blue and purple flowers.

Bluebell, bugle, marsh thistle and ground-ivy are particular favourites. Here, from mid-May to mid-June in future years, you may find the hungry, high-

energy adults syphoning regular long drinks of nectar. They need to drink continuously to sustain their high-energy, short life on the wing.



*Chequered skippers, mating. Image: Wiki Commons*

It will be easier to spot the males, as they dart out from cover to investigate activity and defend their territories. The females are more elusive, with paler markings and a habit of flying low among woodland grasses such as false brome, where they lay eggs in June.

The caterpillar emerges from its egg after about 10 days and uses silk cords to weave a tube 'tent' on a blade of grass where it lives and feeds. It moults five times over the following months, then builds another tent to hibernate through winter. In spring, the caterpillar forms a chrysalis, camouflaged among dead leaves until the adult butterfly emerges the following May.

#### HABITAT NEEDS

This little charmer is a lost dweller of England's great ancient oak woodlands, damp coppices, fens

and ungrazed limestone grassland among scrub. It was once found across Oxfordshire, Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire. It was always thought to be scarce, but Rockingham Forest in Northamptonshire was its last stronghold.

A reduction of nectar-rich woodland flora is partly blamed for this butterfly's demise. Its extinction illustrates how habitat change has such a big impact on our wildlife. The chequered skipper relied upon coppicing, deciduous woodland and maintaining open forest rides for the rich flora. Restoring this habitat and bringing back traditional management for the chequered skipper will benefit other woodland fauna too.

## HOME MAKING

The new release follows reintroduction trials back in the mid-1990s, which provided vital information ahead of this year's attempt. Parts of the forest have been restored to ideal conditions with wider, flower-filled rides. Finally, a team of experts collected female butterflies carrying eggs from a site in Belgium where they are widespread.

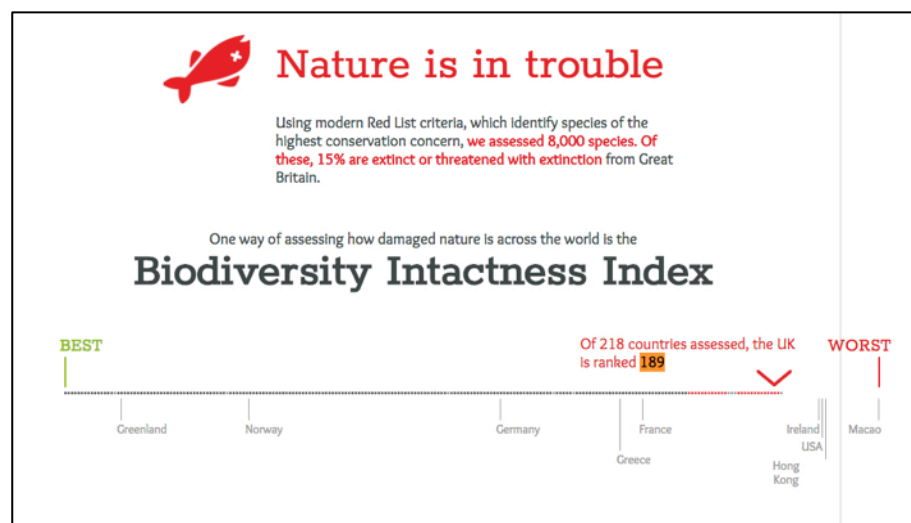
Several more reintroductions will follow at other sites across the forest over the next three years. It will take a few years monitoring before it is known whether they have successfully reproduced, to fully re-establish a breeding forest population.

Dr Nigel Bourn, Butterfly Conservation Director of Science, said: "Today is an important milestone for

conservation in the UK. It is a privilege to help return this charismatic little butterfly to its former stronghold. It has taken many years and a lot of hard work from many people to get to this point.”

## URGENCY

Projects such as Back from the Brink are desperately needed if we are to have any hope of reversing Britain’s loss of wildlife. One 2016 study estimated that 15% of British species are either lost already or threatened with extinction, and we rank a desperate 189<sup>th</sup> out of 218 countries on how ‘intact’ our remaining wildlife is.



*The UK is one of the worst performers globally for how much wildlife we have trashed. Image: State of Nature Report 2016.*

I wonder what it must have been like living a few generations ago when the world was so much richer in wildlife than today - were these creatures taken for granted?

On my bookshelf, there are never enough natural history books, but I have an old one on butterflies that sometimes feels like a train spotting challenge.

It mentions once-achievable quests such as the English chequered skipper and other lost beauties such as the large tortoiseshell.

We are so lucky to have this one chance to bring these precious species back from the brink. Nothing will be taken for granted this time.

*Alex Morss*

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