



a million voices for nature

**Chairman's report to members at the AGM held on the 8 October 2011,
delivered by Ian Darling, Chairman of Council**

This year, I would like to begin by posing a disarmingly simple question. How important is nature?

At a time dominated by economic concerns, when as the global summit held in Nagoya demonstrated, we are not winning the battle against biodiversity loss and our children are more disconnected from nature than ever, the answer would seem to be a rather depressing one.

Let me dispel that impression. Looking through the Annual Review of the RSPB's achievements in 2010-11, there are signs of real hope that it is possible to restore biodiversity, at home and overseas.

In the past year the RSPB membership has risen to a record 1,096,015. It goes without saying that what we do would not be possible without the support of our members, and for that, I thank you. You helped to make the 'Letter to the Future' campaign our most successful with more than 360,000 signatures gathered, each one helping to give nature a voice, ensuring a thriving, healthy environment for future generations.

This is a wonderful – and tangible – endorsement of the appeal of our conservation work. But it's also a blow against the cynicism that some believe dominates these trying times. We asked people to step up for nature, and they have. Yes, people *do* still care. And no, nature is not a luxury – it is a fundamental right, and a basic need.

It is more important than ever that this message is passed on. In September 2010 we launched our *Every Child Outdoors* report, and our President has been lobbying Government hard on our behalf, outlining the many benefits that contact with nature can bring, and we are actively demonstrating those benefits through the many creative ways we engage with young people.

There have been some wonderful success stories. The 'Great Crane Project' restored the common crane to the Somerset Levels after an absence of 400 years. 18 of these magnificent birds, raised at Slimbridge and released at a secret location, have settled in well to their new wetland home – aided in part by an unusual surrogate parent: a person in a crane costume. That really is dedication.

Thanks to a major nest protection effort, red-backed shrikes bred successfully for the first time in the UK in 17 years, with three young shrikes fledging on Dartmoor in Devon. And, following a successful reintroduction project, we were able to celebrate the first young red kites hatching in Northern Ireland in two centuries.

Corncrake recovery is also back on track. The Scottish population increased for the first time in three years and now stands at an estimated 1,200 calling males. It was good news, too, for Scotland's white-tailed eagles. They passed 50 breeding pairs, producing more young per pair than in any other year throughout the reintroduction project's 35-year history.

We also reintroduced several rare insect species to suitable RSPB reserves around the UK, including field crickets and pine hoverflies. Futurescapes, a new programme of landscape-scale conservation projects covering a million hectares of land across the UK, will – with the support of partners and landowners – provide even more habitats for wildlife, and more green spaces to enjoy.

But many challenges remain with us year after year. There were continuing reports of bird poisoning, deliberate abuse cases, and the shooting and destruction of birds of prey, as well as illegal taking, possession or sale of birds and their eggs.

RSPB lobbying of Government helped ensure that the National Wildlife Crime Unit secured funding for a further two years.

We also made key contributions to Wildlife and Countryside Link's assessment of Government performance against the 2010 targets to halt biodiversity loss. Sadly, this showed the Government still has some way to go. To help bring about positive change, we have embarked on our most ambitious campaign ever, Stepping Up For Nature.

At the launch earlier this year we presented Environment Secretary, Caroline Spelman with a roadmap of targets to achieve the 2020 commitment to halt biodiversity loss, and our President challenged Government, businesses and individuals to step up and play their part for nature.

Elsewhere, there was proof that our lobbying really does make a difference in Westminster. Thanks to our 'Don't Cut the Life From the Countryside' campaign, the Comprehensive Spending Review – one of the largest shakeups of public spending in decades – spared the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme, allowing the budget for rewarding wildlife-friendly farming in England to be increased.

Following the government re-think on public forest sales, our Chief Executive has a seat on the panel making recommendations on the future of English forestry policy, ensuring nature gets a good deal. Our lobbying also led to Government publishing a policy for restoring heathland damaged by plantation forestry, making it better for wildlife such as adders, nightjars, Dartford warblers, small copper butterflies and natterjack toads.

Land ownership remains the surest way to secure habitats. While land acquisition was down last year, we nonetheless added four new reserves to the 211 now managed by RSPB – including the Crannach on Deeside. And, there were extensions to 14 existing ones, in particular some large areas of land at Forsinard Flows in Scotland.

Direct management of land allows us to maintain the delicate balance necessary for

species to flourish. Our reedbed creation at Dungeness in Kent – a vital habitat for a range of wildlife, from water voles to newts – was rewarded with the successful nesting of a pair of purple herons; a first for the UK. Bitterns also nested there for the first time.

Many of these vital projects could not happen without the input of volunteers. Last year, we surveyed 683 farms across the UK through the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance with EU LIFE plus funding. More than 5,000 farms have now been surveyed thanks to volunteers giving 96,300 hours of their time. To save you doing the maths, I can tell you that equates to a total of 11 years' hard labour.

We now have new means to bring volunteers together. The RSPB volunteering Facebook page attracted a growing community of friends. And it seems even birds themselves have been drawn into the world of social networking. A surprise internet hit was the 'Puffincam' at Sumburgh Head reserve in Shetland, which was watched by people from as far away as Australia.

There are, of course, slightly more traditional ways to observe birds. More than 600,000 people took part in the Big Garden Birdwatch and over 88,000 children and teachers took part in Big Schools' Birdwatch – all-time highs for both.

165,000 people are now taking action to help wildlife in their gardens in our Homes for Wildlife project, while almost half a million people attended 'Date with Nature' events around the UK, enjoying a huge range of wildlife, from ospreys and choughs, to red deer and dragonflies.

Partnerships continue to be fruitful, often in surprising ways. We worked with aggregates company CEMEX to develop their Biodiversity Strategy, resulting in their commitment to create 1,000 hectares of high-quality wildlife habitat post-extraction by 2020. Our Nature After Minerals partnership with Natural England also put nature at the heart of the minerals sector's restoration plans, and our advice contributed directly to the restoration of over 2,000 hectares of land.

Alarmingly, woodland birds are showing the same losses as their farmland counterparts. We are working with the Forestry Commission a range of partners and landowners to understand the reasons for this decline, and to ensure that more woodlands are better managed for birds.

Partnerships and collaborations make projects possible on a far grander scale than we could otherwise contemplate, and much further afield. Last year, Gola Rainforest in Sierra Leone was finally declared the country's second National Park. In collaboration with BirdLife International, we were also awarded a second licence for Harapan Rainforest in Sumatra, giving us management control over nearly 100,000 hectares of this stunning forest, the equivalent of two-thirds the size of Greater London. With our BirdLife partners we have also successfully fought damaging development proposals in Kenya, Romania and Tanzania and protected Belarus' peatlands.

Of all our international successes, one of the most satisfying is our albatross campaign. Research in Argentina revealed many thousands of seabirds were being

accidentally caught and killed every year by their fishing industry. This includes albatrosses, 17 species of which are threatened with extinction. For the first time last year, however, Albatross Task Force teams in Brazil, Namibia, Argentina and Uruguay achieved zero, or near zero, seabird bycatch on the vessels on which they were working. The challenge now is to ensure all fleets use the Task Force's methods.

Elsewhere the news was equally positive. A successful petition led to the European Commission pledging to address the annual loss of 200,000 shearwaters and other seabirds, killed by the fishing gear of EU vessels. Thanks to the European Regional Development Fund for the Future of the Atlantic Marine Environment (known as FAME – not to be confused with the dance academy) we can now use the latest tagging technology to reveal important foraging areas for seabirds and help prioritise Marine Protected Areas.

Our scientific research provided evidence that the northern Scottish population of red kites has had its growth severely limited by illegal killing. We have also shown, that birds of prey can have a fantastic effect on tourism. An economic analysis of the Galloway Kite Trail in Scotland found that visitors have spent £21 million in the area since 2004, proving that the value of nature is not always intangible.

At the end of last year, we called upon the Scottish Parliament for better protection for birds of prey. These efforts were rewarded in June 2010 by the announcement of the Wildlife And Natural Environment bill, which provides the legal framework to help prevent wildlife crime affecting some of our most vulnerable species.

Last year we faced an unprecedented number of public inquiries, including Lydd airport – proposed for the Dungeness peninsula. We also successfully fought potentially destructive tidal power schemes for the Severn Estuary, and prevented the M4 Relief Road being driven through the Gwent Levels.

We are proud to highlight our success in Wales, where we are celebrating our centenary and developing some exciting new partnerships. We are particularly happy to be working with the Girl Guides movement which will mean 22,000 girls visiting our reserves or Futurescapes projects and taking part in the Big Garden Bird Watch. Elsewhere in Wales the black grouse survey recorded the largest number of birds since our recovery project began in 1997 – 238 displaying males were recorded. Our LIFE funded project in Wales blocked over 485 km of drainage ditches to help restore blanket bogs at RSPB Lake Vyrnwy, benefitting the rare cloudberry plant, and an even rarer ground beetle which sadly has no English name. Wales was also the only country in the world that held an inquiry to find out why those biodiversity targets highlighted at Nagoya were not met. The reason the National Assembly for Wales held that enquiry was due to lobbying by RSPB Cymru.

In Northern Ireland, achievements included a project initiated with Birdwatch Ireland to help species such as curlew, corncrake, Irish damselfly and northern colletes bee. The past year also saw the launch of an ambitious management plan for Lough Beg. In its foreword, Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney describes with wonderful eloquence this 'country of the mind', the inspirational landscape of his childhood that the plan aims to restore. He writes of a land 'where the peewit and the curlew and

the whirring snipe are as common as they used to be on those 1940s evenings when I'd go with my father to check on our cattle on the strand'..... 50 RSPB colleagues and 300 volunteers will make this a reality once again.

With this beautiful evocation of childhood, it is perhaps appropriate to mention our junior arm, RSPB Wildlife Explorers. This has now passed 200,000 members – a tremendous milestone. 53,000 children visited our reserves in school groups during the past year, and 30 RSPB nature reserves have been awarded the 'Learning Outside the Classroom' Quality Badge, enabling even more children to connect with nature. This work we do with young people is perhaps the most worthwhile investment we can make. The future really is in their hands.

It is unusual to single out an individual in speeches such as this, but to finish, I would like to do exactly that. Katie-Jo Luxton is the director of RSPB Cymru, whose two-year-old daughter Carys was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer last year. Carys is now in remission, thanks to a medicine synthesised from a small, pink flower – the Madagascan periwinkle. As Katie-Jo puts it, her daughter's life was literally saved by nature. I can think of no more potent symbol to express why we do what we do, and no better answer to the question I posed at the beginning of my speech. What, after all, could be more important, or more valuable than nature?