Briefly

SPOTLIGHT ON THE IUCN RED LIST

IUCN marks 60th anniversary of Red List

Hundreds of leaders, experts, partners and supporters of the IUCN gathered at the 16th Conference of the Parties in Cali, Colombia, in October 2024 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. There are plans to expand this critical indicator of the health of biodiversity, with assessments to be increased to include at least 260,000 species, and 142,000 species to be reassessed. To celebrate this milestone, IUCN also announced the launch of a year-long social media campaign, *The Most Iconic Things Are Not Things*, to raise awareness and funds to accelerate species assessments and reassessments, which will culminate at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi in October 2025.

Source: IUCN (2024) iucn.org/es/node/42475

IUCN partners with Alipay Ant Forest for anniversary campaign

To further celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Red List, Alipay Ant Forest and IUCN have launched a campaign on biodiversity and climate action. The campaign, hosted on the Alipay Ant Forest digital platform, emphasizes the significance of threatened species in our ecosystems, and aims to inspire > 100 million people to take environmentally positive actions in support of a sustainable and biodiverse planet. The IUCN Red List has become a critical global resource for assessing the conservation status of species and raising awareness about the need for biodiversity preservation. With this partnership IUCN hopes to reach a broader audience and raise awareness of the importance of protecting Earth's biodiversity. As one of the world's leading digital platforms for promoting eco-friendly actions, Alipay Ant Forest is committed to driving sustainable initiatives through digital innovation. Since its launch, > 700 million users have participated in activities that have resulted in the planting of > 548 million trees.

Source: Business Wire (2024) businesswire.com/news/home/20241112585482/en/alipay-ant-forest-and-iucn-red-list-join-forces-to-increase-public-awareness-of-biodiversity-and-conservation

More than one in three tree species worldwide faces extinction

For the first time, the majority of the world's trees have been assessed for the IUCN Red List, and at least 16,425 of the 47,282 species assessed are at risk of extinction. Trees now account for over one quarter of species on the IUCN Red List, and the number of threatened trees is more than double the number of all threatened birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians combined. Tree species are at risk of extinction in 192 countries, with the highest proportion of threatened trees found on islands. Island trees are at high risk because of deforestation for urban development and agriculture, as well as invasive species, pests and diseases. Climate change is increasingly threatening trees, especially in the tropics, through sea-level rise and stronger, more frequent storms.

Source: IUCN (2024) iucn.org/press-release/202410/more-one-three-tree-species-worldwide-faces-extinction-iucn-red-list

Red List status reassessed for four UK shorebirds

Four UK shorebird species have seen significant declines in numbers and have moved to higher threat categories on the global IUCN Red List as a result. Grey plovers spend the winter mainly on estuaries and have declined by > 30% globally since the late 1990s. The species' conservation status has moved from Least Concern to Vulnerable. Dunlins, which also winter mainly on estuaries, have declined by at least 20% since the early 2000s. Similarly, turnstones, which can be found in many countries and mainly spend the winter on more rocky coastlines, have declined by at least 20% since the mid 2000s. Both dunlins and turnstones have been recategorized from Least Concern to Near Threatened. The curlew sandpiper is a scarce species that passes through the UK on its autumn migration between its wintering areas further south and its Arctic breeding grounds. It has declined by > 30% globally since the late 2000s and its Near Threatened status has been updated to Vulnerable. It is not just these four shorebirds that are struggling; the latest IUCN Red List update for birds revealed a concerning downwards trend in migratory shorebird numbers globally, with 16 species moved to higher threat categories.

Source: RSPB (2024) rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/four-uk-shorebirds-moved-to-iucn-red-list-following-latest-review

European hedgehog now categorized as Near Threatened

The conservation status of the west European hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus* has been updated from Least Concern to Near Threatened in the latest release of the IUCN Red List. Once abundant across Europe, the species' populations are rapidly shrinking. Urban development, agricultural expansion and road infrastructure have fragmented its habitat, and vehicle collisions, the use of pesticides and poor management of gardens continue to reduce hedgehog numbers. Monitoring efforts indicate that its decline may exceed 30% over the past decade, putting the species at serious risk. Hedgehogs feed on a variety of soil invertebrates and are considered an indicator species for the health of the ecosystem as a whole.

Source: Mammal Society (2024) mammal.org.uk/press-hub/breaking-european-hedgehog-listed-as-near-threatened-on-iucn-red-listnbsp

Over 40% of reef-building coral species facing extinction

A reassessment of the conservation status of nearly 900 warm-water reef-building coral species, the first since 2008, shows that 44% are now categorized as Critically Endangered. In the previous assessment, one-third of the species were at such risk of extinction. The reassessment used the latest data from the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network, alongside analysis of current and future threats, such as the projected increase in warming and bleaching events using data from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Alongside climate change and rising sea temperatures, corals are susceptible to other pervasive threats, including pollution, agricultural runoff, disease and unsustainable fishing practices such as bottom-trawling. Scientists agree the primary solution to reverse this situation and save corals from extinction is to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This reassessment focused on reef-building corals, which occur in shallow, warm-water habitats, where they form the colourful reefs typical for tropical and sub-tropical ocean areas. Assessments of cold-water corals, which are found in colder, deeper waters and do not directly depend on sunlight, are still ongoing.

Source: Oceanographic (2024) oceanographicmagazine.com/news/over-40-of-coral-species-now-face-extinction-says-iucn-red-list

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INTERNATIONAL

Palm oil sector threatens progress to UN goal of ending deforestation

The palm oil sector has made significant advances in commitments to zero deforestation but evidence of implementation is widely lacking, reveals the latest assessment by the Zoological Society of London. The assessment marks a decade of evaluating progress in the industry's environmental, social and governance public disclosures. Although it reveals steady progress in companies adopting zero deforestation commitments, crucial gaps in implementation threaten progress towards the global goal of ending and reversing deforestation by 2030. The team behind the report is urging the palm oil sector to enhance transparency and accountability, asking companies to publicly report on how they are eliminating deforestation. Investors and buyers must also share the responsibility by actively engaging with companies, ensuring their commitments are implemented.

Source: Zoological Society of London (2024) zsl.org/news-and-events/news/palm-oil-sector-threatens-progress-un-goal-ending-deforestation

Devastating extinction of the slender-billed curlew

Scientists published an objective analysis indicating the extinction of the slender-billed curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*, a migratory shorebird that once bred in western Siberia and wintered around the Mediterranean. It was last recorded in north Morocco in 1995. This is the first known global bird extinction from mainland Europe, North Africa and West Asia. The IUCN Red List currently recognizes 164 bird species to have become extinct since 1500, out of more than 11,000 species that have had their conservation status assessed by BirdLife International, the global Red List Authority for birds. The causes of the curlew's decline may never be fully understood, but possible factors include extensive drainage of their raised bog breeding grounds for agricultural use, the loss of coastal wetlands used for winter feeding, and hunting of an already reduced, fragmented and declining population. There could have been additional effects of pollution, disease, predation and climate change, but the scale of these impacts is unknown.

Source: BirdLife International (2024) birdlife.org/news/2024/11/18/new-publication-indicates-devastating-extinction-of-the-slender-billed-curlew

Dolphins breathe in microplastics, possibly damaging their lungs

Dolphins in the Gulf of Mexico are inhaling microplastics, which could lead to lung problems. Researchers at the College of Charleston, USA, carried out routine catch-and-release health assessments on five bottlenose dolphins *Tursiops truncatus* from Sarasota Bay, Florida, and six from Barataria Bay, Louisiana, in 2023. During the checks, they held a petri dish above the animals' blowholes, looking for any bits of plastic in their breath. To ensure the dishes weren't picking up microplastics floating in the air generally, they held a second petri dish away from the blowholes to collect control samples. They found that all of the dolphins exhaled microplastics. Fifty-four such pieces were collected in total, evidencing that dolphins are breathing in microplastics, which is probably a global problem. The team did not investigate whether these particles were harming the dolphins, but previous research suggests they could be.

Sources: PLOS One (2024) doi.org/nng6 & *New Scientist* (2024) newscientist.com/article/2452155-dolphins-breathe-in-microplastics-and-it-could-be-damaging-their-lungs

WWF Living Planet Report: a planet in crisis

The WWF Living Planet Report 2024 highlights a global crisis, revealing a dramatic decline of 73% in wildlife populations over 50 years. This decline, measured by the Living Planet Index (LPI) and observed during 1970–2020, demonstrates that Earth's biodiversity is under immense threat, with severe consequences not only for natural ecosystems but also human survival. The LPI, developed by the Zoological Society of London, monitors nearly 35,000 population trends across 5,495 species. It shows the extent to which our natural world is in peril, and warns that the ecosystems we depend on are rapidly deteriorating. The report identifies habitat degradation and loss, driven primarily by unsustainable agriculture, as the most significant threat to biodiversity globally. In the Arctic, however, climate change is the primary driver of biodiversity loss, exacerbating other environmental pressures in this already fragile region. The LPI is a crucial tool for understanding the health of ecosystems by monitoring changes in animal populations over time. Declines in population sizes serve as early warning signs of rising extinction risks and the potential collapse of ecosystems.

Source: WWF (2024) arcticwwf.org/newsroom/features/wwf-living-planet-report-2024-a-planet-in-crisis

Global environmental organizations unite to scale outcomes

At the UN Biodiversity Conference in October 2024, Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Re:wild, The Wildlife Conservation Society and WWF in the USA announced the formation of a coalition to scale climate and conservation outcomes through the use of sovereign debt conversions. Although > 200 nations share common goals as part of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and Paris Agreement, financing has fallen short and at least USD 200 billion are needed in additional annual funding to achieve these targets. Scaling sovereign debt conversions could be part of the solution, with a potential to unlock up to USD 100 billion in climate and nature finance, according to Coalition estimates. In a debt conversion project, a government works with an NGO and other stakeholders to develop climate and conservation commitments that are paid for through savings from refinancing externally held commercial sovereign debt. These projects are a win–win–win for governments, local communities and nature.

Source: Re:wild (2024) rewild.org/press/global-environmental-organizations-unite-to-scale-climate-and-conservation-outcomes-through-sovereign-debt-conversions

Local voices are key to success of 30 × 30 nature goal

Ahead of the crucial global talks on saving nature at the 2024 Conference of the Parties (CoP16) to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, NGO Fauna & Flora has urged decision-makers to put more power into local hands. The Global Biodiversity Framework target 3 (commonly referred to as 30 × 30) calls for 30% of land, inland water and ocean to be in protected and conserved areas by 2030, with requirements for effectiveness, connectivity, ecological representation, social equity and human rights. There is a growing recognition of the need to better integrate local people into decision-making, and of the vital contributions of locally led initiatives. Yet how well these approaches work for both people and nature is poorly understood. A new research report, commissioned by Fauna & Flora, indicates that locally led conservation projects can have a greater impact and be more enduring than large-scale, often state-run, projects. It provides a rapid review of available evidence for the effectiveness of locally managed protected areas, their implications for human rights and how global conservation organizations are responding.

Source: Fauna & Flora (2024) fauna-flora.org/news/local-voices-key-to-success-of-30x30-nature-goal

EUROPE

Dam removal boosts connectivity in Swedish Lapland

With financial support from the Open Rivers Programme, Rewilding Sweden have overseen the removal of four small dams in Swedish Lapland. The barriers were located within the Vindelälven-Juhttátahkka Biosphere Reserve in the county of Västerbotten, northwest of the city of Umeå. The removal of the barriers will enhance the connectivity of 84 km of waterways. These waterways run into the free-flowing, 450 km long Vindel, the largest tributary in Sweden. A second grant will see five more dams in the Vindel River catchment investigated for potential removal in 2025. Artificial barriers are one of the main threats to aquatic and riparian biodiversity. They significantly degrade river ecosystems by causing habitat loss and fragmentation, altering the distribution of sediments and nutrients, and concentrating pollutants.
Source: Rewilding Europe (2024) rewildingeurope.com/news/dam-removal-boosts-connectivity-in-swedish-lapland

Police seize 6,000 wild birds' eggs in UK raids

More than 6,000 eggs have been seized in the biggest haul of its kind in UK history, after police carried out raids in Scotland, South Yorkshire, Essex, Wales and Gloucester. Thousands of eggs were found in attics, offices and drawers. The November 2024 raids in the UK were part of Operation Pulka, an international effort to tackle organized wildlife crime, specifically the taking, possessing and trading of wild birds' eggs. The raids began in June 2023 in Norway, and resulted in 16 arrests and the seizure of 50,000 eggs. In Australia, an estimated 3,500 eggs have been seized, worth up to AUD 500,000 (GBP 250,000). Intelligence suggests this is a single, international crime network. Egg collecting was a hobby for natural historians in Victorian times, with collectors looking to acquire eggs from all species, particularly rare ones. This had a terrible impact on some species—the great auk was hunted to extinction for its meat and large eggs, with the UK's last bird killed in the 1840s in St Kilda, Scotland. Most wild egg collecting is a criminal act in the UK since 1954, and all wild birds, including their nests and eggs, are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.
Source: The Guardian (2024) theguardian.com/environment/2024/dec/30/police-seize-6000-wild-birds-eggs-as-raids-net-largest-haul-in-uk-history

Wolves in Europe: Bern Convention weakens protection...

In late 2024, the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention voted to lower the protection status of wolves under the Convention, a decision widely criticized by conservation experts and environmental organizations. By doing so, EU Member States ignored the pleas of > 300 civil society organizations, the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe and hundreds of thousands of citizens urging science-based action to promote coexistence with large carnivores. The EU already allows for the responsible management of wolves, including culling if necessary. Yet, in December 2023, the European Commission proposed weakening wolf protection to manage livestock depredation, following a consultation process that is now being investigated. Wolf populations had in the past gone extinct in most parts of Europe, and weakening their protection could jeopardize their fragile recovery.
Source: WWF (2024) wwf.eu/?16132891/Nature-under-attack-Bern-Convention-weakens-wolf-protection

... but rewilding lays foundations for Iberian wolf comeback in Portugal

Once widespread across Portugal, the Iberian wolf population has decreased significantly in size and range because of habitat loss, persecution and a lack of wild prey. There are currently c. 250–300 Iberian wolves in Portugal. Most are found north of the Douro River, in a relatively stable subpopulation. The remainder, c. 14%, inhabit areas south of the river. These animals are in a more precarious position, distributed across a handful of scattered, disconnected packs. For many years, rewilding efforts focused on supporting these scattered packs have worked to improve connectivity, with the aim of supporting population recovery and genetic exchange with other wolf populations across the border in Spain. Rewilding Portugal and local partners have provided 108 livestock guarding dogs and 52 wolf-proof fences to local livestock owners. Additionally, measures such as the creation of permanent pastures, facilitating the natural regeneration of woodland, and construction of ponds, mean roe deer populations have increased. These efforts to restore landscapes and promote coexistence with people are beginning to yield encouraging results, representing a first step towards enabling the comeback of the Iberian wolf in areas of Portugal where it is clinging on.
Source: Rewilding Portugal (2024) rewilding-portugal.com/news/rewilding-efforts-lay-foundations-for-iberian-wolf-comeback-in-portugal

Glimmer of hope for UK water voles

A report from The Wildlife Trusts identifies continued declines in overall water vole populations in the UK, but increases in areas where conservation efforts have been focused. The report examines water vole distribution over 10 years by analysing the number of 10 km grid squares across the country where water voles are present. Statistics show the overall water vole range is declining: a 39% decrease in the number of areas occupied by water voles compared to the 2006 baseline. However, when the data are examined more closely, encouraging trends emerge. The project also looks at the concentration of water voles and has found that whilst the national picture is one of overall decline, some important local pockets of water vole populations have been increasing, with 11 new regional key areas identified in recent years. This includes areas where conservation work has been undertaken to support the species' return, such as Hertfordshire, Oxfordshire, Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and East Anglia.
Source: The Wildlife Trusts (2024) wildlifetrusts.org/news/new-report-hope-for-water-voles

Keeping big cats is trending amongst organized criminals in Albania

Across the Balkans, large felids such as lions and tigers have become the ultimate symbols of power among criminals and influencers, for whom their dangerous nature, exclusivity and high price are indicators of success. For individuals, keeping such animals is illegal; official and legal ownership is restricted to zoos, wildlife parks and approved institutions with special permits. But this has not stopped high-profile individuals in Albania and neighbouring countries from obtaining lions and flaunting them on their social media feeds. Estimates suggest there are up to 90 lions being kept illegally by private owners in Albania, which were probably bred in captivity in Albania, Serbia or nearby North Macedonia. The trend of owning exotic big cats, inspired by Middle Eastern elites, appears to be growing despite the high costs of obtaining and maintaining these animals. Many of the lions and tigers suffer from malnutrition and inbreeding-related health issues. Enforcement of animal protection laws remains weak because of corruption and resource constraints. As a result, the exotic pet trade continues to thrive, with cases of abandoned or escaped lions becoming more frequent across the region.
Source: New Lines (2024) newlinesmag.com/reportage/in-albania-keeping-big-cats-is-the-latest-fad-for-organized-crime

AFRICA

Conservation collective launches campaign to save African penguin

The South African government is facing pressure to take action to protect the African penguin, following dire warnings that the species could be extinct in the wild by 2035 if current trends continue. Dramatic declines in local food sources, fuelled by competition from commercial fishing practices close to the penguin breeding colonies, has led to a sharp drop in the population. The number of breeding pairs has fallen below 10,000 for the first time. Rates of survival and breeding success have dropped dramatically in recent years, leading to the loss of 97% of the species' wild population. To reverse these trends, the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds has, together with BirdLife South Africa and the ocean conservation charity Blue Marine, taken legal action against the South African government in the pursuit of more impactful measures that better align to the penguin's feeding habits and the areas from which its food is sourced.

Source: Oceanographic (2024) oceanographicmagazine.com/news/conservation-collective-launches-mission-to-save-african-penguin

Nearly 1,000 rescued lemurs and tortoises to return to Madagascar

International cooperation has led to hundreds of threatened animals being repatriated to Madagascar after being seized by police in Thailand. The groundbreaking repatriation effort, involving nearly 1,000 individual animals belonging to rare, endemic species such as radiated tortoises, spider tortoises and ring-tailed lemurs, was announced in November 2024 by Thailand's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. The animals were rescued by Thai police in May 2024. A total of 1,117 animals, both alive and dead, were confiscated. Thailand is heavily involved in wildlife trade, being the biggest legal importer and exporter of CITES-listed wildlife from Madagascar within Southeast Asia. Over 90% of Madagascar's biodiversity is found nowhere else, and illegal wildlife trade threatens to drive many of these natural treasures to extinction. But seizures and repatriations like this offer hope, underscoring the importance of robust enforcement and cooperation among nations to protect threatened species.

Source: TRAFFIC (2024) traffic.org/news/conservation-success-madagascar-welcomes-home-1-000-rescued-lemurs-and-tortoises

Giant African rats trained in the fight against illegal wildlife trade

Rats could be the latest weapon deployed in the fight against wildlife trafficking, according to a study of rodents trained to sniff out pangolin scales, rhinoceros horns, elephant tusks and hardwood. Researchers trained eight African giant pouched rats to sniff out the contraband, even when it was hidden among items commonly used to hide trafficked goods, including peanuts, leaves, wigs and washing powder. The rats were studied by scientists at Apopo, a Tanzania-based NGO, whose rodents also sniff out landmines and tuberculosis. The animals were initially rewarded with a food pellet if they held their nose for three seconds over a sample of pangolin scale, wood, rhinoceros horn or elephant ivory. The rats were able to perfectly detect pangolin, wood and rhinoceros horn after 8 months of not smelling them, suggesting that rats could remember smells for as long as sniffer dogs.

Sources: Frontiers in Coservation Science (2024) doi.org/n3jk & *The Guardian* (2024) theguardian.com/environment/2024/oct/31/rats-trained-to-sniff-out-smuggled-rhino-horn-and-pangolin-scales

Climate-induced poisoning likely the cause of elephant deaths

The > 350 elephants that died in mysterious circumstances in 2020 probably drank toxic water, according to a new study that warns of an alarming trend in climate-induced poisoning. The deaths in Botswana's Okavango delta were described by scientists as a conservation disaster, with elephants of all ages seen walking in circles before collapsing and dying. The researchers suggest the elephants were poisoned by water that contained toxic blooms of blue-green algae, or cyanobacteria. The climate crisis is increasing the intensity of harmful algal blooms. Researchers used satellite data to analyse the distribution of the carcasses relative to watering holes. They believe the elephants generally walked just over 100 km from the waterholes and died within 88 hours of drinking. In total the team examined 3,000 waterholes; those with increased cyanobacteria blooms in 2020 had high concentrations of elephant carcasses. It is possible other wildlife died after drinking from the waterholes, but bodies may not have been spotted from aerial surveys, and smaller carcasses could have already been taken by scavengers.

Sources: Science of the Total Environment (2024) doi.org/n4nx & *The Guardian* (2024) theguardian.com/environment/2024/nov/29/mystery-mass-die-off-deaths-elephants-toxic-water-botswana

Mau Forest in Kenya is disappearing

The 2,700 km^2 Mau Forest is considered the most important water catchment in western Kenya, providing water to millions of people. But recent satellite data reveal that Mau is continuing to lose its vital forest cover. Although most of Mau Forest is formally protected, it lost c. 25% of its tree cover during 1984–2020. Satellite data from Global Forest Watch show forest loss dropped dramatically in 2021 and 2022 before increasing again in 2023. Preliminary data and imagery indicate parts of Mau Forest have been experiencing another major bout of deforestation in 2024. Mountain forests play a critical role in capturing and recycling water, and tree loss disrupts local climate patterns. Reduced rainfall and drying rivers are already affecting crop yields in the surrounding communities, according to local residents. In addition to regulating the regional climate, Mau Forest provides important habitat to species such as the African elephant, the African golden cat and the bongo, as well as many rare plants and birds. The primary driver of deforestation is agricultural expansion, including cattle grazing and crop cultivation.

Source: Mongabay (2024) news.mongabay.com/2024/11/western-kenyas-most-important-water-capturing-forest-is-disappearing-satellites-show

First photograph of rare bird in Itombwe Mountains

In December 2023, a team of scientists from the USA and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) embarked on an expedition to the Itombwe Mountains in the eastern DRC. Their journey led to the first confirmed sighting of the yellow-crested helmetshrike *Prionops alberti* since 2007. This elusive bird, characterized by its bright yellow crest, yellow eyes and pink-red legs, was observed in a small flock of six to eight individuals. Michael Harvey, an ornithologist and assistant professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, managed to capture the first-ever photographs and audio recordings of the species. The discovery provides valuable insights into the species' behaviour and habitat. The birds were previously thought, for example, to live and feed in the branches and canopies of tall forest trees. However, the team's observations suggest they may instead prefer mid- or understory trees, as they were always seen 1–15 m above the ground. The little-known species is threatened by habitat destruction and climate change.

Source: Mongabay (2024) news.mongabay.com/2024/09/dream-birds-in-the-mist-first-photo-of-lost-bird-in-drc-mountains

AMERICAS

Near-extinct Caribbean reptile makes comeback

The population of the Sombrero ground lizard *Pholidoscelis corvinus* has increased from < 100 individuals in 2018 to > 1,600 in 2024. The Critically Endangered reptile was on the brink of extinction before conservationists stepped in to help the species in 2021. Since then, experts from the Anguilla National Trust, Fauna & Flora and Re:wild have been working to help the species and its island habitat to recover. The lizard is endemic to Sombrero, a 38 ha island situated 54 km from Anguilla. Although small, this Caribbean island is a globally important area for biodiversity and forms the heart of the Sombrero Island Marine Reserve. Several other extremely rare species are unique to the island, which also supports large seabird colonies and is designated as an Important Bird Area and a Ramsar Site. Because of historical mining for phosphates, invasive mice and severe hurricanes, the Island was on the verge of ecological collapse. Conservation efforts have focused on removing the invasive rodents and planting native species.
Sources: Re:wild (2024) rewild.org/press/near-extinct-caribbean-reptile-makes-epic-comeback2

Underwater mountain hosts numerous new species

Scientists discovered a new underwater mountain off the coast of Chile, and more than 100 potentially new-to-science species, during expeditions in the south-eastern Pacific, including rare creatures such as a siphonophore (a jellyfish relative) called the flying spaghetti monster and a not yet formally described mollusc known informally as Casper octopus. The seamount, located c. 1,450 km off the coast of Chile, rises 3,100 m from the seafloor and hosts thriving deep-sea ecosystems with ancient corals and glass sponges. Researchers created detailed 3D maps of the seafloor topography using their ship's advanced multibeam sonar system before conducting exploratory dives on one of the mountain ridges using a remotely operated underwater vehicle. In addition to mapping and visual surveys, the teams collected samples of plants and animals for analysis. These findings highlight the rich biodiversity of the high seas at a crucial time as the UN finalizes the high seas treaty to protect international waters.
Source: Mongabay (2024) news.mongabay.com/2024/10/in-the-pacific-depths-an-underwater-mountain-hosts-a-bonanza-of-new-species

Deadly parasite turns jaguar conservation into a human health priority

Analysis of jaguar droppings in Brazil's Pantanal wetlands have uncovered the presence of *Spirometra* tapeworms, a parasite with significant ecological and public health implications that can be dangerous to people in its larval form. Pantanal ranchers typically see jaguars as pests because they prey on livestock; however, conservationists aim to use this new finding to reframe these big cats as allies in ecological balance, as they control parasite-carrying prey and serve as vital bioindicators of the biome's health. The underreporting of parasitical infections in humans caused by *Spirometra* reveals a gap in public health awareness in Brazil, making the discovery of the parasite in jaguars a key breakthrough toward protecting communities. Educational workshops and practical measures such as electric fencing have significantly reduced jaguar–livestock conflicts while improving community practices and promoting coexistence between humans and the big cats.
Source: Mongabay (2024) news.mongabay.com/2024/12/a-deadly-parasite-turns-jaguar-conservation-into-a-human-health-priority

Salmon return to the Klamath River after 100 years

After being absent for more than a century, salmon have been spotted in Oregon's Klamath River Basin, following a dam removal project in California, USA. In October 2024, fish biologists at Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife identified an autumn-run Chinook salmon in a tributary to the Klamath River, upstream from where the John C. Boyle Dam once stood. It is the first anadromous fish (species that migrate from the sea upstream to spawn) to be seen in the state's Klamath Basin since 1912, when the first of four hydroelectric dams was constructed. In August, the last dams were demolished. This followed a lengthy campaign by tribal communities, who hoped the dam removal would lead to the return of salmon, a vital source of food for the people living alongside the Klamath River. The headwaters of the Klamath River originate in Oregon, flowing through the Cascade Mountain Range into Northern California, and emptying into the Pacific Ocean. With a length of 423 km, the river was once the third-largest salmon-producing river on the West Coast, and was a life force for numerous Native American tribes, such as the Yuroks, who are known as the 'salmon people'.
Source: BBC (2024) bbc.com/future/article/20241122-salmon-return-to-californias-klamath-river-after-dam-removal

Cape Cod seeing more whale, turtle and dolphin strandings

Dolphins, whales, seals and turtles are turning up in large numbers on the beaches of the famous Cape Cod peninsula, requiring more rescue operations than ever before. The cause is change in tidal patterns, with more extreme differences between high and low tide. On Cape Cod, this difference can be 3–4 m, which can be fatal to a dolphin if it becomes stuck on land. More than 140 dolphins were stranded off Cape Cod back in June 2024 in the largest mass stranding of the mammals in USA history. Seven individuals were euthanized and 37 died naturally, but > 100 survived, according to the International Fund for Animal Welfare. Turtles are also being affected, becoming cold-stunned when they are exposed to rapidly cooling waters, which often causes them to become weak and prone to health problems. Many of the turtles facing this problem in Cape Cod are Kemp's ridley sea turtles *Lepidochelys kempii*, the smallest sea turtle species, which is Critically Endangered globally.
Source: The Guardian (2024) theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/28/cape-cod-whale-turtle-dolphin-strandings

Extinct in the Wild Hawaiian crow released on Maui

Five Hawaiian crows, known as 'alalā in the Hawaiian language, have been released on the island of Maui. Thirty of the birds were reintroduced to their native Big Island during 2016–2020, but after some successful years, numbers began to decline and reintroduction efforts were paused. The remaining 'alalā were returned to human care. This new effort is the first release of the crow on Maui and the first reintroduction attempt outside of the Big Island. Three male and two female juveniles were selected for the release in Maui, as young birds are less territorial than adults and may therefore show more group cohesion and teamwork, learning from one another as a result. The crows hopped out of their cages on the leeward slopes of Haleakalā, in the Kīpahulu Forest Reserve on Maui. These particular individuals were selected for their highly developed social and behavioral skills that may mean they are more likely to succeed in the wild at foraging, predator avoidance and pair bonding. The field team will continue to monitor the birds into the foreseeable future, supplementing their food and keeping an eye on their health and well-being.
Source: Good News Network (2024) goodnewsnetwork.org/hawaiian-crow-that-went-extinct-in-the-wild-decades-ago-released-on-maui

ASIA & OCEANIA

First community red panda conservation area declared in Nepal

Despite the region's ecological importance, the cloud forests of the Himalayas suffer from deforestation and overgrazing, leading to habitat fragmentation that threatens red pandas. Only 2,500–10,000 red pandas are remaining in the wild. In August 2024, Puwamajhuwa Community Red Panda Conservation Area, home to the densest population of red pandas in Nepal and to many of the plants they need to survive, was declared the country's first official red panda protected area, marking a significant step towards a thriving and sustainable red panda population in the country. The conservation area will be managed by the local community, an approach that is not new to Nepal, where community-based conservation has restored and protected critical ecosystems for decades.
Source: Red Panda Network (2024) redpandanetwork.org/post/the-first-ever-community-based-red-panda-conservation-area

Endangered Polynesian storm-petrels return to Kamaka Island

Endangered Polynesian storm-petrels, ground-nesting seabirds, are returning to Kamaka Island, French Polynesia, after an absence of > 100 years thanks to a successful restoration and rewilding project. Once widespread across the south Pacific, the petrel's populations have dwindled because of invasive species such as rats. These predators pose a significant threat to the survival of many seabird species, particularly on remote islands. The return of the storm-petrel is the result of an ambitious project that deployed drones to remove invasive rodents from Kamaka Island, allowing threatened birds to return to what is now a secure breeding site. To attract the Polynesian storm-petrels to the Island, the team installed two solar-powered sound systems, burrows for nesting and motion-sensing cameras. The sound systems broadcast recorded sounds from the nearby Manui Island storm-petrel colony, and the cameras document activity. After the deployment of sound systems in March, just before the start of the breeding season, cameras detected individuals visiting one of the sites. By June, and through the remainder of the breeding period, storm-petrels were visiting areas around both sound systems and began spending time in the nest boxes.
Source: Re:wild (2024) rewild.org/press/endangered-polynesian-storm-petrels-return-to-kamaka-island

1000th oceanic manta ray identified in the Maldives

The Maldives Manta Conservation Programme has announced the identification of the 1,000th oceanic manta ray *Mobula birostris* in the Maldives waters. This remarkable milestone highlights the collaborative efforts and dedication of the conservation community towards understanding and safeguarding these magnificent creatures. Sightings contributing to this impressive number have been meticulously collected by the Maldives Manta Conservation Programme through direct research field seasons, citizen science submissions, and the support of local dive centres. This comprehensive approach underscores the importance of community engagement in marine conservation efforts. Oceanic manta rays, now categorized as Endangered on the IUCN Red List, face threats from targeted and bycatch fisheries. The identification of the 1,000th individual serves as a beacon of hope for this threatened species. The Maldives now hosts the largest recorded population of reef manta rays *Mobula alfredi* and the third largest recorded population of oceanic manta rays in the world.
Source: Manta Trust (2024) mantatrust.org/1000th-oceanic-manta-ray-maldives

Extinct in the Wild sihek released into wild

For the first time since the 1980s, six sihek (Guam kingfishers) are now officially living in the wild, in the tropical forests of Palmyra Atoll. The birds' successful release is the result of years of work by the Sihek Recovery Program, a global collaborative of conservationists dedicated to reestablishing the sihek in the wild for return to its homeland in Guam. A total of nine young birds, four females and five males, were hand-reared over several months at the Sedgwick County Zoo for this historic rewilding. Prior to release from temporary aviaries at Cooper Island, each sihek was given a health exam. A tiny radio tracker was fitted to each bird, so the project team can monitor their movements as they settle into new habitats across the atoll. Sihek are a territorial species, and the team expects the birds will establish home ranges quickly, which will also help with locating and monitoring them. The team hope to gather data that will provide insights on the species' habitat use, foraging and breeding ecology. Supplemental food will be available to help the birds transition to the wild.
Source: Zoological Society of London (2024) zsl.org/news-and-events/news/extinct-wild-sihek-released-wild-first-time-40-years

Australia now protects more ocean than any other country

Australia now protects more ocean than any other country, with the Albanese Labor Government signing off a massive 310,000 km² expansion of the sub-Antarctic Heard and McDonald Islands Marine Park. More than half (52%) of Australia's oceans are now under protection, exceeding the 30% target the Government signed up to as part of a UN nature treaty in 2022. The Heard and McDonald Islands marine reserve will quadruple in size and provide greater protections. The Islands are home to glaciers, wetlands, Australia's only active volcanoes, and diverse and significant populations of penguins, seals and albatrosses. The decision came after extensive consultation with researchers, conservationists and the fishing industry. The design supports the sustainable, well-established fishery in the region.
Source: The Guardian (2024) theguardian.com/environment/2024/oct/08/huge-environmental-win-australia-to-protect-52-of-its-oceans-more-than-any-other-country-plibersek-says

Dead native birds and flying foxes found in south Australia town

Dozens of native birds and flying foxes have been killed by acute lead poisoning in the south Australian town of Port Pirie, home to one of the world's largest lead smelters. Locals raised the alarm when they found dead birds and flying foxes in large numbers in parks and green spaces. Two lorikeets, a honeyeater and three grey-headed flying foxes were sent for laboratory testing that ruled out avian flu or other infectious diseases and confirmed the animals died from lead poisoning. It is unclear how many animals were affected in total, but there were 14 reports of sick and dead birds in Port Pirie during 24 July–14 September. All animals affected were nectar-feeding birds and flying foxes, which may provide some clues regarding the sources of the contamination.
Source: The Guardian (2024) theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/dec/05/native-birds-flying-foxes-lead-port-pirie-south-australia-ntwnfb

All internet addresses were up to date at the time of writing. The Briefly section in this issue was written and compiled by Emma Sinnett, Julia Hochbach and Martin Fisher. Contributions from authoritative published sources (including websites) are always welcome. Please send contributions by e-mail to oryx@fauna-flora.org.