

The Wildlife Trusts' Marine Review 2024



The Wildlife Trusts' 2024 marine review explores how wildlife monitoring, new research and huge contributions from the British public helped conservationists learn more about in UK seas. Highlights include ambitious nature recovery projects, new species records and spectacular sightings around UK shores.

In the year that the UK became the first country to estimate the carbon stored in all its seabed habitats, pressure grows on policymakers to ban bottom-trawling in protected areas and ensure offshore developments are positive for nature.



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SCOTLAND'S SEAS

- Scottish Wildlife Trust completed its snorkel trail network with 3 new trails in South Ayrshire, the Small Isles and Orkney.
- Scottish Wildlife Trust made a time capsule for its 60th anniversary. It includes written work and photos of humpback whales and will be opened again in 2064.

ENGLISH NORTH SEA

- A giant basking shark was seen near the Farne Islands off the coast of Northumberland. It was around 30 feet long, with a dorsal fin that measured four or five feet high.
- A giant mural was created on a Northumberland beach to celebrate the Stronger Shores project. The initiative tackles flooding, coastal erosion and climate change.
- Hundreds of people got involved in hedge planting, sowing wildflowers and improving access along 17km of coastline in Northumberland and Tyneside.
- Yorkshire Wildlife Trust trialed remote setting for the first time in the UK. This restoration method allows seeded oysters to be produced closer to where they will eventually grow.
- A pilot was launched in Essex to support native oyster restoration in the Blackwater, Crouch, Roach and Colne Marine Conservation Zone.
- Norfolk Wildlife Trust and Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust highlighted the importance of the Wash estuary for wildlife and how plans for a tidal barrage could affect marine species.
- Suffolk Wildlife Trust surveyed saltmarshes at its new reserve at Martlesham Wilds, recording bass, mullet and common goby, noting the area's value as a spawning area.
- Suffolk Wildlife Trust surveyed juvenile fish at Hazlewood Marshes, which shows how the re-aligned coast continues to support large numbers of young bass in the estuary.
- Essex Wildlife Trust and Suffolk Wildlife Trust helped to launch Recovering the Deben to reverse habitat fragmentation in the River Deben catchment and estuary.
- 33 ringed plover chicks fledged nests at Colne Point in Essex – a 1000% increase on last year – after special cages were trialed to keep predators away.
- 2024 was final year of the LIFE Recreation ReMEDIES project, which studied the pressure from recreation on sensitive seabed habitats.
- Kent Wildlife Trust helped to survey fish in the Medway – the largest no-take zone in the UK. Species included juvenile bass, common gobies and shore crabs.
- Kent Wildlife Trust made the first record of wakame – a type of seaweed – on an open shore in Kent. It was discovered on a guided walk called 'seaweeds and their secrets'.
- A coalition of organisations launched the Kent Dolphin Project to better understand dolphin behaviour, movement and breeding sites.
- Significant numbers of Asian shore crab were recorded on the Naze in Essex over summer. They may affect native crab, fish and shellfish by out-competing for food.

ENGLISH CHANNEL AND WESTERN APPROACHES

- Alderney's northern gannets – 1% of the global population – became one of the first in the world to be surveyed with drones and Artificial Intelligence.
- The Solent Seascape Project was endorsed by the United Nations for its work to restore coastal habitats across the Solent strait.
- Cornwall Wildlife Trust launched Tor to Shore – a huge nature recovery project that joins conservation on land with efforts to protect seagrasses and maerl beds in St Austell Bay.
- Sussex Wildlife Trust made the first record of a warty doris sea slug in Sussex, in Chichester Harbour. The first UK recording was made in Hampshire last year.
- The Sussex Kelp Recovery Project became the first global kelp rewilding project. Three years after a bylaw was passed to protect 300km² of seabed, monitoring revealed giant mussel beds, greater diversity of fish and increased numbers of lobster.
- Numerous shallow pits were discovered in the seabed in Lyme Bay in Dorset. Investigations confirmed the presence of porpoises that may be foraging for sandeels.
- Volunteers measured a snakelocks anemone and coral weed bed the size of five Olympic swimming pools in Kimmeridge Bay, Dorset.
- The first record of a rainbow sea slug was made in Devon, found by a student at Wembury Beach. It is one of five UK recordings since 2022.
- A spiny lobster was found in the shallows of Wembury Bay, Devon, for the first time in living memory. The species has made a comeback thanks to conservation measures.
- Alderney Wildlife Trust welcomed marine scientists to do new research on the island, including assessing the genetic connectivity of pink sea fans.
- Volunteers recorded marine habitats and species for the inaugural Alderney State of Nature Project. Surveys included eelgrass, pacific oysters, and seawater chemistry.
- Devon Wildlife Trust recorded the longest green leaf worm to be found at Wembury (30cm) on an extreme rockpool safari. They are normally 15-20cm.
- Red-rust bryozoan – a dark-red invertebrate that forms leaf-like structures on rocks – was recorded along the south coast.
- Pom-pom weed – a seaweed native to Asia that forms red tangled 'pompoms' – was found across Devon. It could displace macro-invertebrates, like barnacles.
- Hundreds of mauve jellyfish washed up in Cornwall and on the Isles of Scilly. They are normally found in warmer waters such as the Mediterranean.
- Very dense aggregation of invasive pacific oyster was recorded at Hope Cove in Devon. They can alter ecosystems through reef formation and displacing native oysters.
- St Piran's hermit crabs were recorded in great numbers in multiple places along the south coast. They were wiped out by the Torrey Canyon Spill of 1967.
- A rarely seen sea mouse was seen in Sussex moving through the sands at high tide. The worm is normally found on the seabed.

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- Over 30 humpbacks were recorded off Cornwall last winter, including 'Ivy' who was freed from entanglement by lifeboat crews.
- A black bream caught at Poole Bay contained 38 seahorses – baffling experts.
- Dozens of conger eels – the largest eel in the world – washed up on a beach in Dorset. It is suspected they were discarded by fishers as bycatch.

CELTIC SEA & BRISTOL CHANNEL

- Shoresearch volunteers embarked on a new research project on the distribution of the climate change indicator topshell, *Phorcus lineatus*, along the Bristol coast.
- Shoresearch volunteers spent time on Steep Holm Island to create an updated flora and fauna report for the Island.

IRISH SEA

- North Wales Wildlife Trust is leading the Ocean Literacy Coalition and designing first national Ocean Literacy Strategy. A Festival of the Sea will take place in 2025.
- In an unusual sighting for the region, a humpback whale was seen in Liverpool Bay in October.
- Manx Wildlife Trust noted the highest number of seal pups since recording began in 2009. Thermal imaging helped to record 98 pups on the Calf of Man.
- A marine enthusiast in Cumbria was recognised for her efforts to support wildlife conservation. Cat Bell leads Shoresearch surveys and other events across the county.
- Cumbria Wildlife Trust collected DNA samples from seagrass beds in the Walney Channel, revealing that at least 135 species are found in just one small part of the beds.
- Cumbria Wildlife Trust celebrated 10 years of grey seal pups successfully breeding at South Walney. Numbers increased from single digits in the 1980s to over 500 in 2021.
- Ulster Wildlife engaged with 10,000 people across Northern Ireland through events, beach cleans and maritime festivals, raising awareness of marine protected areas.
- Ulster Wildlife bolstered their marine capacity through new recruitment. This is invaluable for their work on blue carbon and oyster restoration.
- An event to collect shark egg cases in North Wales saw over 750 egg cases collected from five species.
- A loggerhead sea turtle was found in Cumbria and released in the Azores.
- Cheshire Wildlife Trust carried out extensive work to remove invasive vegetation at Red Rocks Nature Reserve to boost breeding of natterjack toads.
- The discovery of small-headed clingfish on the Isle of Man was confirmed as new species for the island. It was found by a volunteer in Douglas Bay.



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