

# Is it time to stand up for our bogs?

**They are wildlife havens, act as carbon sinks and prevent flooding, so why don't we love our bogs, asks Simon Birch?**

The Pennines above Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire are the unlikely location of a new battle between environmental activists and the conservation establishment. Bleak and windswept, they may epitomise the UK's failure to protect an increasingly rare habitat.

The dispute is over Walshaw Moor. The landowner is accused of draining and burning a blanket bog that's home to a wide range of plants, invertebrates and breeding birds such as golden plovers. The motive is to create more heather moorland habitat for grouse, on

which the economic viability of a moorland estate largely depends.

But a campaign group called 'Ban the Burn' is fighting back, claiming that the destruction of the bog has led to an increased risk of flooding in Hebden Bridge – the popular market town was flooded several times in 2012.

The Government's wildlife agency, Natural England, had previously raised concerns about the management activities on the moor and even sought to prosecute the estate over them. But in March 2012 the two sides reached an agreement that placed



This blanket bog in Sutherland in Scotland is protected, but other British peatbogs are not so fortunate.

“Bogs have been seen as a blight on the landscape and best drained.”

controls on heather burning and required the estate to start 'peat-rewetting' to regenerate blanket bog.

Despite the truce, Ban the Burn is not alone in believing that Walshaw Moor has been hung out to dry – the RSPB has now complained to the EC about Natural England's failure to take action over the damage.

And this is not an isolated example: in the past 200 years or so, 90 per cent of the UK's upland blanket bogs and lowland raised peatbogs have been lost, largely to agriculture. In contrast, woodland cover has barely declined in the past 1,000 years, while our rivers are cleaner now than they were 30 years ago. So why do we care for

Golden plovers breed in upland areas of blanket bog such as Walshaw Moor in West Yorkshire.



our rivers and forests, but not our bogs?

“We're apathetic towards bogs because they've been seen as a blight on the landscape and

best drained for farming,” said Dr Richard Lindsay, one of the leading British experts on bogs.

“People think that bogs are wet, midge-infested areas,” added Helen Kirk who, for decades, has championed Thorne and Hatfield Moors in South Yorkshire, one of the largest raised bogs remaining in the country. “But where else would you find 5,000 species of insects and 230 species of birds?”

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, peatbogs were a prominent issue as the Government sought to ban peat-digging on Thorne and Hatfield Moors (this was finally implemented in 2004). Even Prince Charles weighed in, comparing peatbogs to

tropical rainforests because of their species diversity.

On Humberside, peat was dug to be used as a growing medium, and it is still bought in vast quantities by amateur gardeners. But while little peat now comes from British bogs, the problem has merely been exported to other countries such as Ireland and the Baltic states. And some conservationists fear that gardeners do not understand the impact that their purchasing decisions have on peatbogs.

Gardening writer Kate Bradbury says that many gardeners still believe that peat-free alternatives are not as good, but this tends

to be the older generation who have grown up with peat and are unused to the alternatives. Peat-free composts are improving all the time, she says, and in 40 years nobody will use peat.

What eventually saves our peatbogs, however, may be the realisation that we need them intact – their roles as giant sponges to reduce flooding, and as carbon 'sinks' that help to combat climate change, are slowly being better understood.

In the meantime, Lindsay says we need to act: “We're only going to start pouring resources into bogs if we value them. So we need people to start loving our bogs.”

## ▶ BACKGROUND

There are essentially two different types of peatbog:

■ **Raised bogs** develop on marshy, low-lying ground and are like vast compost heaps of undecomposed vegetation made up mostly of sphagnum moss. Over time they can grow in height up to 10m above the surrounding land, hence the term 'raised bog'.

Just 6 per cent of the UK's raised bogs are in a near-natural state.

■ **Blanket bogs** are found in upland areas, where high rainfall means that the ground never dries out. As a result, a 'blanket' of peat forms, again made up mostly of sphagnum moss. Less than 10 per cent of UK blanket bogs are in good condition.

# MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

## Madagascar madness

Madagascar has been top of my 'worry list' for a long time, and I'm certainly not alone. But figures just released, after a new assessment by the IUCN Species Survival Commission, ring alarm bells louder than ever before.

No fewer than 94 of the world's 103 lemur species are now threatened with extinction. That's almost twice as many as the IUCN estimated during the last assessment in 2005, and it means that lemurs have become the most endangered group of vertebrates in the world.

The many species teetering on the brink include the indri, the largest lemur; Madame Berthe's mouse lemur, the world's smallest primate; and the northern sportive lemur which, with just 18 known survivors in the wild, is the rarest of all.

The reason is simple – 90 per cent of Madagascar's original forest has been lost, and it's still being slashed and burned to make yet more elbow room for agriculture, plundered for timber and cut for fuelwood and charcoal.

So it's not surprising that Madagascar's lemurs – and many other endemic forest-dwelling species – are clinging to an increasingly precarious existence in the rapidly disappearing fragments that are left. As if

that's not enough, lemurs are also being illegally hunted – at levels never seen before – for the bushmeat trade.

The situation has worsened considerably since the military coup in 2009, which plunged the country into turmoil, scaring away tourists and unleashing a dramatic rise in criminal plundering of protected areas.

Madagascar is already one of the highest conservation priorities on Earth, and there are some outstandingly good



Madame Berthe's mouse lemur: surely worth saving.

“Lemurs have become the most endangered group of vertebrates in the world.”

conservation groups working there. But it's clearly not enough. Given that virtually all of the wildlife living in this fragile paradise doesn't exist anywhere else, you'd have thought this would galvanise the world into action. And yet it doesn't – so how bad do things have to get?

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.

## ARE WE FAILING OUR BOGS?



**yes**  
David Crawshaw  
Lancashire  
Wildlife Trust

In our area of north-west England, 98 per cent of the lowland bogs have been damaged or destroyed. Initially this was due to conversion to farming to feed the growing population during the Industrial Revolution. But, since the war, the threat to bogs has come from the extraction of peat for compost.

Raised bogs are often tucked away in areas seldom visited, and they perhaps don't compare favourably with more accessible areas such as woodlands. This may explain why peat extraction has been tolerated.



**no**  
Martin Gillibrand  
Moorland  
Association

For 200 years, the incentive to shoot a harvestable surplus of red grouse on moorlands has helped to protect more than 400,000ha of the English uplands from development.

This has helped preserve the carbon stored in the peat soil. Heather burning and predator control have created a mosaic of habitats that supports breeding birds such as golden plovers.

Members of the Moorland Association have blocked 2,000km of agricultural drains to help rewet deep peat, and have a further 1,300km planned.