

# NATURE NOTES FROM THE PLOT

This month, **Tanya Perdikou** of The Wildlife Trusts explains why it is important to save what remains of our peat bogs and how gardeners can help by making the switch to peat-free composts



## Preserving our peat bogs



Picture: Bruce Shortland

Sundews are one of the many specialised plants that thrive in acidic peat bogs

**P**icture a scene. A dragonfly hovers across an expansive landscape. Although it looks barren, where a deer picks its way across, the ground wobbles like jelly under its hoofs. Here is a world where life is thriving just below the surface, a wetland habitat covered in sphagnum mosses that are so acidic they have been used to dress the wounds of soldiers, and have even preserved bodies for more than 2000 years.

The dragonfly advances towards a plant whose coral pink, tentacle-like arms twinkle with drops of sap – an irresistible meal. This will also be the final meal of the dragonfly, which will find itself the victim of this carnivorous plant, the sundew. The sticky sap holds fast to the insect's body, which will be slowly dissolved by the plant to supplement its diet with added nutrients.

### A habitat in peril

This is one of countless dramas that unfold among the UK's peat bogs every day. These unique and fascinating habitats have taken thousands of years to form, and as they do so, they trap vast amounts of carbon, making them one of our most important natural resources in the quest to reduce our emissions. The North West's peat bogs alone have the potential to absorb the carbon emissions of over 46,000 people every year, but if left to degrade could release the emissions of 334 million people.

The qualities of our peat bogs should be admired, valued and protected. Tragically, many of them are now entirely devoid of life, many metres stripped from their surface, left to degrade and emitting many tonnes of carbon in the process.

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Chat Moss, already stripped of many metres from its surface, is at risk from further peat extraction

### Chat Moss – a case study

"The North West's lowland peatbogs once stretched across Cheshire, Cumbria and Lancashire." Says David Crawshaw from the Lancashire Wildlife Trust. "Today, less than two percent is left. And we are still digging them up."

David has been heading up the Trust's campaign to save Chat Moss. Only tiny fragments of this peatland, which used to cover 1100 hectares, remain, and even these are under threat. Lancashire Wildlife Trust has been campaigning to prevent horticultural manufacturer William Sinclair from extending its license to harvest peat from the site for an additional 15 years.

David added: "Within the Chat Moss area, Lancashire Wildlife Trust manages two sites, Astley Moss and Cadishead Moss. We are working hard to improve the condition of the sites – between them they currently support some species of sphagnum moss, along with dragonflies, water voles, newts and sundews. But peatlands cannot survive in isolation like this – drainage in the surrounding areas means there is a constant threat of them dying out. The sooner peat extraction at Chat Moss ceases, the better."

### There's still time

Saving our peatlands and all the specialised wildlife which relies upon them will take effort, but with the combined action of conservation groups, government, industry and individuals it can – must – be achieved.

In March 2010 the Government pledged to phase out the use of peat in compost materials by 2020. And while Lancashire Wildlife Trust fights to preserve Chat Moss, the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust helped to form the Yorkshire Peat Partnership earlier this year, with the aim of boosting peatland restoration efforts in the Yorkshire uplands. Although it may take decades to restore peat bogs to anything like their former glory, wet

and healthy heathlands immediately begin absorbing carbon, so this partnership and other peatland conservation efforts have a key role to play in a low carbon future for the UK.

### Gardeners take action

It's us as consumers who can really assert ourselves as guardians of the UK's ancient peatlands. The compost industry is already under pressure to phase out peat – if the market for peat-based products became less profitable, this would provide real impetus to the process. So there's a clear choice for nature loving gardeners who want to help prevent the complete disappearance of the UK's precious peatlands. Go peat free. Not just when buying bagged compost, but when buying pre-ported plants too.

The standard of peat free composts has been improving, and in 2010 consumer watchdog Which? awarded 'best buys' to three non-peat based composts, after trials showed they gave the best performance. There's also the option of maintaining a compost heap. This not only reduces kitchen waste, but can attract a huge variety of wildlife to the garden, from slow worms to hedgehogs.

### Find out more

The Wildlife Trusts manage around 2300 nature reserves in the UK, so there may well be a peat bog worth a visit near you. Contact your local Wildlife Trust to find out. Details can be found at [www.wildlifetrusts.org/yourlocaltrust](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/yourlocaltrust).

For the latest update on the Chat Moss campaign visit the Lancashire Wildlife Trust website [lancswt.org.uk/index.php/save-chat-moss.php](http://lancswt.org.uk/index.php/save-chat-moss.php). To find out more about the Yorkshire Peat Partnership visit [yppartnership.org.uk](http://yppartnership.org.uk).

The Wild About Gardens website provides a guide to building a compost heap [wildaboutgardens.org/habitats/compost-heap.aspx](http://wildaboutgardens.org/habitats/compost-heap.aspx).

### Attracting invertebrates

One of the joys of having a garden pond is the variety of invertebrate life this can attract. Although during the winter months it may not be so easy to spot them, below the surface of the water miniature monsters are growing in many a backyard pond. The common blue damselfly is one of the UK's most widespread invertebrates, so it's not uncommon to spot them in the garden. With their gossamer wings folded and a slender, blue and black striped body, it is easy to see how this invertebrate might fool people into believing in fairies. But these fairies start life as feisty larvae. The common blue lays its eggs underwater, and when the young hatch they prey on whatever they can get hold of, including bloodworm, water fleas and even tadpoles. Common blues tend to spend about a year in this larval stage, so next time you pass by the milky brown water of your garden pond, consider the life and death struggles that might be unfolding within.



The common blue damselfly is a regular visitor to garden ponds

Picture: Richard Buckner

### Further information

There are 47 local Wildlife Trusts across the UK, the Isle of Man and Alderney. The Wildlife Trusts are the largest UK voluntary organisation dedicated to conserving the full range of the UK's habitats and species whether in the country, in cities or at sea. [www.wildlifetrusts.org](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org)

