Conservation Officer's report 2024

Mags Cousins

Projects by the Society and by individuals continued to add knowledge and promote the conservation of molluscs throughout 2024.

In 2019, Keith Alexander initiated a re-survey of all known historic sites for *Ena montana*, now a relatively scarce species of old deciduous woodland and hedgerows (Alexander 2020). Surveys have continued as Society field visits each year and in 2024 included sites in Somerset (figure 1). This snail has a scattered and fragmented distribution across southern England, running from the Mendips to east Suffolk with a stronghold in the Cotswolds and a cluster of populations on the South Downs and Chilterns (Willing 2019). The Mendip woodlands are proving to be as productive for *E. montana* populations as the Cotswold woodlands, although there are fewer potential sites overall. Continued recording in the Cotswolds has become more problematic with the resignation of the county mollusc recorder, John Fleming, but liaison with the Gloucestershire Invertebrate Group continues and future field meetings may be feasible.

figure 1: *Ena montana*. The single live animal found in Long Wood nature reserve, Mendip. (photos: Daniel Tustin)

Hampshire appears to be a key area where little is currently known about *Ena montana*. Surveys will continue in 2025 in the North Wessex Downs. The area does however appear to be a black hole for gaining permission for recording on private land and the last hope lies with the local Hampshire Wildlife Trust having some landowner contacts. Failing that, a private exploration may be attempted using the public right of way network. A visit to further Somerset Wildlife Trust reserves on Mendip will be a fall-back position for a Society field meeting later in the year. The most recent British non-marine molluscan status review (Seddon *et al*. 2014) assessed *E. montana* as Near Threatened and being in a slow decline, probably close to meeting the criteria for Vulnerable. The data acquired from the re-survey for *E. montana* will prove extremely valuable in a reassessment of the threat status of this species.

Mary Seddon's non-marine mollusc status review is ten years old and due for revision, the International Union for the Conservation for Nature (IUCN) recommending that threat assessments or red lists are reviewed every ten years. Natural England contacted the Conchological Society last year to see if the Society would be interested in conducting a review of the non-marine red list. Some funds are likely to be available for such a revision via Defra, which needs up-to-date red lists for the taxa that are included in the target (D5) for reduction of extinction risk set by the Environment Act 2021.

How to tackle this detailed piece of work was discussed at some length at the Conservation and Recording Forum in November 2024, held at the National Museum Cardiff. Teamwork will be essential and several Society members expressed an interest in assisting with the review. The starting point will be getting the database into a more malleable form (see the Non-marine Recorder's report). Data analysis is key to applying the threat status criteria in order to derive the threat category.

The Conservation and Recording Forum 2024 was an enjoyable event, where various members shared the findings of their own conservation and independent work projects. Terry Crawford gave a very interesting account of his involvement with the records-based assessment of the 'state of Yorkshire's nature' for molluscs (Fitter *et al*. 2024). Of 13 taxonomic groups considered, non-marine molluscs have the highest percentage (82%) of native British species recorded in Yorkshire; the mean is 67%. Furthermore, the proportions of extinct and threatened species are the lowest of all the taxonomic groups considered. In the overall conclusions it was noted that non-marine molluscs tend to be associated with wet and calcareous habitats and could be important indicators for the health of those habitats. To quote the publication: 'These very preliminary summary statistics suggest that a more detailed analysis of molluscs in Yorkshire would be valuable'. Terry is hoping to look into this further with other Society members based in Yorkshire. This method of assessment for the state of nature in the county of Yorkshire will be as useful for conservation as it was robust in methodology. It is something other counties would do well to emulate, particularly in forming their Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs).

LNRSs are another statutory initiative arising out of the Environment Act 2021 and the Society has been consulted for advice on molluscs for several already (Cousins 2025). Martin Willing inputted into the Sussex (both East and West counties) LNRS by invitation of the Sussex Wildlife Trust and attending a discussion meeting in December 2024. The ensuing adoption of all his recommendations demonstrates the value of Society members becoming involved in the LNRS for their area so that Mollusca are well represented in these strategies.

The Conservation and Recording Forum followed the Society's Regional Meeting at the same venue. Mike Howe (Invertebrate Officer for Natural Resources Wales) presented a talk on terrestrial and freshwater mollusc conservation in Wales focusing on the conservation of ten 'Welsh species in peril', these being *Abida secale*, *Conventus conventus*, *Margaritifera margaritifera*, *Myxas glutinosa*, *Paludinella globularis*, *Pseudanodonta complanata*, *Vertigo alpestris*, *Vertigo angustior*, *Vertigo geyeri* and *Vertigo moulinsiana*. Martin Willing's talk focused upon the history of three Welsh 'conservation priority' species: the narrow-mouthed whorl snail *V.*

angustior (figure 2), Geyer's whorl snail *V. geyeri* and Desmoulin's whorl snail *V. moulinsiana* (with conservation histories starting in 1830 [*sic*], 1985 and 1998 respectively). The talk covered numerous sites throughout Wales and concluded with a very brief summary of the Welsh conservation prospects for the three species, suggesting a positive picture for *V. angustior*, a mixed picture for *V. moulinsiana* but a tale of worrying decline for *V. geyeri*! The talks included the most recent results of Martin's surveys as an independent conchologist on the Gower Peninsula in September 2023 (Willing 2024).

figure 2: *Vertigo angustior*. (photo: Derek Rands archive)

The Government has had mixed reviews so far in terms of the environment and there has been no response yet on the recommendations for QQR7 (the 7th Quinquennial Review of the Wildlife and Countryside Act schedules) which were submitted to the previous incumbents. Matters may be moving along for pending environmental decisions if the recent (28 February 2025) announcement that Government is committed to reintroducing beavers into the wild is anything to go by. The advice provided by the Conchological Society (Willing 2022) on amendments to the schedules in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) for the QQR7 may yet be heeded, which will be welcome news to all the experts who spent so much time collating data and advice.

The current data collation exercise issuing from Government, and also relating to the Environment Act 2021 commitments for species recovery, are the Threatened Species Recovery Actions (TSRA) and the Species Evidence Base (SEB). By way of explanation, taxon experts are currently working their way through the spreadsheets for the TSRA and SEB. Buglife are leading on this for invertebrates on contract to Natural England and turned to members of the Conchological Society for molluscan input on a paid basis as independent experts. The intention is that the resulting information will be utilised to prioritise species and their recovery actions as laid out in the TSRA, and that the SEB will be a fulsome repository of data sources to facilitate those conservation initiatives. These will be published and made available to the conservation community to facilitate nature recovery. We have seen many previous initiatives but at least this time the underappreciated groups, the invertebrates and in particular molluscs, have been included in greater numbers than before. There are 57 non-marine mollusc species on the SEB, and the TSRA is being completed in tranches with molluscs appearing alongside other invertebrates in each tranche. Thank you to all those who have inputted into these initiatives, paid or otherwise.

The somewhat more enjoyable side of mollusc conservation is, of course, field work and finding new records. Clive Walton wrote about the rediscovery of *Omphiscola glabra* at Bavelaw Marsh, part of Balerno Common SSSI in the Pentland Hills, Scotland, for *British Wildlife* magazine (Walton 2024). The old record of *O. glabra* at Bavelaw, in 1931 by malacologist A.R. Waterston (1912–1996), was not reconfirmed until 2017. Clive found further populations of the snail by extending survey work into other areas of Bavelaw Marsh during winter, the premise being that higher water levels would make detection easier. The approach paid off, with the snail being detected more or less continuously across the site, meaning that Balerno Common SSSI holds one of the largest populations of the 11 known sites for this species in Scotland.

Southill estate in Bedfordshire owns land that was associated with the Cistercian Warden Abbey established in 1135. Peter Topley was invited to survey the estate, including the medieval fishponds, for molluscs to inform the biodiversity improvement plans. Peter discovered *Aplexa hypnorum* (figure 3) in three of the fishponds, the first record of this species in the area for 35–40 years (Topley 2024). Provision of new ponds and wetlands could offer a positive future for this and other mollusc species at the estate where, in phase 1 alone, the plan is to create 400 acres of wild land within the arable area.

figure 3: *Aplexa hypnorum* (height 11 mm), Southill. (photo: Peter Topley)

Bioblitzes continue to be popular and Natural England organised a series of recording days in March 2024 on land recently purchased from the Hexton Estate in the North Chilterns National Landscapes Area (figure 4). The new acquisition will connect existing National Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Chalk grassland, forestry plantation, secondary woodland, streams and flushes were searched for molluscs on some rather damp days. Peter Topley and Mags Cousins had a reasonable haul of molluscs compared to some of the other invertebrate recorders, who struggled to collect in the soggy conditions.

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figure 4: Habitat at Hexton Estate, North Chilterns.
(Photo: Peter Topley)