

MEDIA RELEASE

Groundbreaking project successfully returns orchid on the brink of extinction to Yorkshire

A lifelong quest to return one of the UK's most spectacular and rarest wildflowers to the wild has shown its first signs of success.

Last summer, a team led by Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and supported by partners Natural England, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the National Trust, Plantlife, and the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) were delighted to discover the first new lady's-slipper orchid to appear in the wild for nearly 100 years.

Over-collecting and habitat loss meant the lady's-slipper orchid was believed to be extinct in the UK by the early part of the 20th Century. When a single plant was then discovered in a remote location in the Yorkshire Dales in 1930, its location was kept a closely-guarded secret with decades of dedicated volunteers providing round-the-clock monitoring to prevent the plant being dug up and stolen.

Two years ago, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust secured a grant from Natural England's Species Recovery Programme to continue and extend the work protecting the habitat of the remaining wild plant, rearing lots of new orchids and planting out many of these hand-reared orchids into former haunts.

Last June, the project team was delighted to discover an entirely 'new' plant at one of these reintroduction sites – which meant the orchids planted out by the project had managed to produce seed that had settled and germinated.

Jono Leadley, managing the project on behalf of Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, said, "This was a truly thrilling moment. To see a healthy population of lady's-slipper orchids back in their native area that are now reproducing themselves gives us real hope for the future.

"This first sign of success is a result of decades of dedication and commitment shown by many volunteers and the staff of the various organizations involved. We are particularly grateful for the support of Natural England's Species Recovery Programme, which has enabled the team to ramp up our efforts in the last two years, and to the leadership of the Cypripedium Committee who have blazed the trail to bring this beautiful flower back from the edge of extinction."

Orchids were propagated in Kew's laboratory in London, using techniques which gave a much higher number of successful seedlings to sprout than in the wild. These young plants were then nurtured for several years by a volunteer network of orchid-specialists managed by the National Trust. Suitable wild sites were then identified by Plantlife and Yorkshire Wildlife Trust where the young orchids were then planted, under botanical expertise from BSBI who also closely monitored and assessed each site.

Mike Fay, Senior Research Leader at RBG Kew said, “Trying to save the lady’s slipper orchid in England has been one of RBG Kew’s flagship conservation projects for many years. It is a long-lived species, with seedlings taking many years to grow to the stage where they can flower and produce the seeds that will give rise to the next generation. We have been watching the reintroduction sites for signs of seedlings with baited breath ever since the introduced plants first flowered in 2004. The appearance of a seedling is incredibly exciting and offers us hope that this project could successfully result in a self-sustaining population of this iconic species.”

Kevin Walker of BSBI said “The discovery of this naturally regenerating seedling represents a significant turning point for one of our rarest and most threatened plants and is testament to the dedication of 100s of volunteers and enthusiasts who have carefully nurtured it back into the wild. It provides evidence that this beautiful plant can, with a bit of help from us, re-establish itself across its former range.”

Elizabeth Cooke, Botanical Specialist from Plantlife said, “Lady’s-slipper are the crowning glory of Britain’s wildflowers – one of the rarest and most impressive. Its rescue from the brink is one of the UK’s most fascinating lost and found stories, and a hopeful symbol of what can be regained when partners work together to carefully reintroduce plants back into the wild.”

Karen Shelley-Jones from Natural England said, “We are delighted to see that our support for this Yorkshire Wildlife Trust project, the latest instalment in a decades-long recovery programme for this critically endangered species is proving successful in increasing the number of plants, which over time, will create a more sustainable wild population. Recovering this enigmatic species has been over 30 years in the making and would not have been possible without the involvement from a range of partners across the environmental sector”.

The project team will continue their work to help lady’s-slipper orchids, and it is hoped that if more funding is secured the project will be able to expand and create more self-sustaining populations across the whole former range of the lady’s-slipper orchid, which once stretched from Cumbria to Derbyshire.

People wishing to see a lady’s-slipper orchid can do so by visiting Kilnsey Park near Grassington in the Yorkshire Dales in late May and early June. Details can be found at www.kilnseypark.co.uk

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Photos can be found [here](#): for use with this press release only.

Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (ywt.org.uk) : Yorkshire Wildlife Trust is the only charity entirely dedicated to conserving, protecting and restoring wildlife and wild places in Yorkshire. Our vision is for a Yorkshire that is abundant in wildlife, with more people having a genuine and

meaningful connection with nature. We were established as a charity in 1946, and are part of The Wildlife Trusts movement.

Yorkshire Wildlife Trust looks after 111 nature reserves across Yorkshire, from the wilderness of the Southscales limestone pavements in the Dales to the urban Potteric Carr in Doncaster. We are a partner in over 40 projects both large scale and small, including the Yorkshire Peat Programme restoration of an area of peatland blanket bog the size of Bradford (so far); the multi-partner 1200 hectare Wild Ingleborough project; conserving willow tits in reserves near Barnsley; restoring rare Wolds dew ponds; working to improve specific river catchments like the Esk, Calder and upper Aire; and much more. Our work inspires people to understand the value of nature and to take action for it.

About Kew Science: [Kew Science](#) is the driving force behind RBG Kew's mission to understand and protect plants and fungi, for the well-being of people and the future of all life on Earth. Over 550 Kew science staff work with partners in more than 100 countries worldwide to halt biodiversity loss, uncover secrets of the natural world, and to conserve and restore the extraordinary diversity of plants and fungi. Kew's [Science Strategy 2021–2025](#) lays out five scientific priorities to aid these goals: research into the protection of biodiversity through **Ecosystem Stewardship**, understanding the variety and evolution of traits in plants and fungi through **Trait Diversity and Function**; digitising and sharing tools to analyse Kew's scientific collections through **Digital Revolution**; using new technologies to speed up the naming and characterisation of plants and fungi through **Accelerated Taxonomy**; and cultivating new scientific and commercial partnerships in the UK and globally through **Enhanced Partnerships**. One of Kew's greatest international collaborations is the Millennium Seed Bank Partnership, which has to date stored more than 2.4 billion seeds of over 40,000 wild species of plants across the globe. In 2023, Kew scientists estimated in the *State of the World's Plants and Fungi* report that 3 in 4 undescribed plants globally are already likely threatened with extinction.

BSBI: The Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) is the leading charitable organisation promoting the enjoyment, study and conservation of wild plants in Britain and Ireland. We aim to build a diverse community of skilled and enthused botanists, provide data and science to help address biodiversity loss and climate change and disseminate information to drive a passion for plants. We provide opportunities for involvement through a range of participation projects, surveys, events, training opportunities and the production of books and other resources. Our Distribution Database holds over 52 million plant records, making it one of the world's largest biological recording databases.

About Plantlife: Plantlife is the global charity working to enhance, protect, restore and celebrate the wild plants and fungi that are essential to all life on earth. With two in five plant species at risk of extinction, biodiversity loss is now the fastest it's ever been and Plantlife's work has never been more vital. Plantlife champions and accelerates conservation action, working at the heart of a global network of individuals and organisations, to influence and inspire landowners and land managers, public and private bodies, governments and local communities. As time begins to run out, Plantlife's position as the global voice for wild plants and fungi will help to bring lasting and positive change to our natural world – for everyone's sake