Despite over 50 years of effort to halt its decline, the Large Blue butterfly was pronounced extinct in Britain in 1979. Today the butterfly can be found on 33 sites in the south-west of England. This is a tribute to a large-scale conservation programme underpinned by innovative science and implemented by a determined and broad partnership.

**THE SOLUTION**

In the 1970s, the Large Blue Butterfly became extinct in Britain and was the focus of a reintroduction programme, made more complex because of the symbiotic relationship the butterfly has with a grassland ant (Myrmica sabuleti). In the 1990s, a population was discovered to have spread onto a railway embankment owned by Network Rail. A landside on this site required major engineering work to be undertaken. A plan was devised by the company and the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (UKCEH) to translocate the Large Blue Butterfly colony and its habitat to two new sites on the lineside. The design of one of the sites included slopes with different aspects and soil depths providing a range of micro-habitats for the ant species to compensate for the effects of climate change in the future. One of the Network Rail sites now boasts one of the biggest populations of Large Blues in northern Europe. For this work Network Rail was awarded the prestigious Marsh Award for conservation.

**Outcomes**

As in the UK, the partnership is keen to replicate the landscape-scale metapopulations of the butterfly which occupy parts of Somerset. Work is now underway in the Cotswolds, Dartmoor, South Devon, as well as the North Atlantic coasts of Devon and Cornwall. The success of this project led to a major, European-funded research programme, MacMan. It used the approach pioneered by the Large Blue project to understand and then conserve four other species of Large Blue, which exist outside of Britain, across Europe.

Since CEH began work on the project in the 1970s, it has monitored the effect that managing a site for Large Blue habitat has had on other species. It quickly became apparent that other rare species of plants, insects and birds had suffered from the same changes in agricultural practices, and also benefited from scrub management and grazing. Several species listed as endangered have increased dramatically on Large Blue sites, contrary to their national trends. Conserving Large Blues has become a paradigm for insect community conservation.

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