

Press release: Working to save England's rarest ant from extinction

The narrow-headed ant is England's rarest ant, with the only English population remaining on a small nature reserve run by the Devon Wildlife Trust and the A38 trunk road verge near Chudleigh Knighton.

Highly territorial, this rare woodland creature might be tiny at 10-12mm long but has big importance to the entire ecosystem with the seeds of many plants dependent upon them in areas of newly regenerating forest.

The nests, which can contain several queens and up to 1,000 worker ants, are nestled on a lush A38 verge and adjoining land. We've joined forces with Devon Wildlife Trust and charity Buglife to try and secure a future for these miniature heroes in the UK's ecosystem.

Highways England ecologist Leo Gubert said:

People might think it strange that a road authority would get involved in the survival of a rare ant but they are so endangered every nest counts.

We carry out regular surveys at the nest sites and have an ongoing habitat management plan including scrub and grass clearance as these ants are very particular about where they live.

As more areas of wildlife habitat are lost a wide variety of insects, plant and mammals are finding a safe haven on our roadside verges and by ensuring our network is as wildlife friendly as possible and by enhancing habitats alongside our roads, we might, ultimately, be able to contribute to the halt of biodiversity loss in the UK.

In the South West, we're working with partners including Devon Wildlife Trust, Buglife and Natural England on the 'Back from the Brink Project'. The aim is to conserve and enhance the overall status of narrow-headed ants as part of an overarching project to save 20 species from extinction and benefit over 200 more throughout England.

Andrew Bakere, Devon Wildlife Trust's nature reserve officer for Chudleigh Knighton, said:

We're proud that the narrow headed ant's last refuge in England is on the nature reserve we manage at Chudleigh Knighton Heath. The presence on the roadside verge of one of Devon's busiest roads is a reminder just how precarious the state of much of our wildlife is. We hope that in the future it will spread to find a secure home

elsewhere.

We're committed to a national Biodiversity Plan which is being supported by a £30 million national investment programme over the next five years. The plan recognises road verges and associated land can be managed to provide areas of habitat, relatively free from human access, that may be scarce in the surrounding landscape.

These road verges can also be used to connect fragmented habitats in the wider landscape, enabling plant and animal populations to move and interact, and so become stronger and more resilient.

Narrow-headed ant facts

- You can identify the Narrow-headed ant by the deep notch at the back of its head.
- The narrow-headed ant lives at woodland edges, heathlands and open areas within forests, and is associated with areas of forest regeneration.
- High territorial narrow-headed ants stalk other invertebrates, and will cooperate to take prey larger than themselves.
- When attacking prey or if threatened, they have a secret weapon – acid! A gland in their abdomen produces formic acid, which they can fire up to 10cm, with great accuracy.
- They have also been known to jump on the backs of other species of ants and rip their heads off.
- This ant once lived throughout the UK, including the New Forest, Dorset, the Isle of Wight and Cornwall.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.