

Butterflies and birds are top-voted creatures in national survey of wildlife loved in childhood

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The results of a new survey reveal that butterflies were the British wild creatures loved by most people remembering the wildlife they loved as children, with birds coming second by only a single vote.

The Spark survey, carried out by nature and climate charity Heal Rewilding, asked people to recollect real-life experiences with wildlife when they were children. The results provide a fascinating insight into past nature experiences, generational differences and shifting abundance in the natural world.

People were given a list of common British wild creatures and asked to choose all those they loved as children. Butterflies, captivating with their colours and graceful fluttering, emerge as the creature which most people mentioned loving in childhood, selected by 70 per cent of respondents. Birds follow closely at 69 per cent, while ladybirds come a strong third with 65 per cent. Tadpoles (58 per cent) and hedgehogs (54 per cent) round out the top five, with caterpillars not far behind at 52 per cent. At the other end of the list, slugs come last, though still fondly remembered by 31 people (9 per cent). Spiders rank second from bottom, perhaps surprisingly a type of creature loved by 18 per cent of respondents.

When asked to pick an overall favourite from all the creatures they'd chosen, birds top the list resoundingly – with 19 per cent of respondents choosing them as their most-loved creature. Butterflies come second with 11 per cent of the votes, followed by hedgehogs, tadpoles and ladybirds.

Tiny, easy-to-find creatures – such as ladybirds, caterpillars, tadpoles, ants, snails and worms – feature heavily, likely reflecting spontaneous encounters that respondents had when they were children with abundant, everyday wildlife.

Respondents were also given the option to name unlisted loved creatures. Twenty-two people mention badgers, while others pick hares, red squirrels and even, in one case, leeches! One person mentions the corncrake, now lost from most of the UK, highlighting poignant memories of this species.

Only 1.7 per cent of respondents say they didn't love any wild creatures as a child.

Nature-rich childhoods – and who inspired them

The survey asked respondents who had sparked their love of nature as a child, choosing all relevant answers. Intergenerational influence emerges as crucial: 64 per cent say a parent or guardian sparked their love of nature, 27 per cent credit a grandparent, and 16 per cent a teacher. Meanwhile, 39 per cent of people say they discovered nature for themselves as children.

"I was a wartime child and my father was away in the army. He had always loved birds [and] his letters told me all about the birds he had seen in the Middle East. After he came home, he taught me how to find nests and identify eggs. It was the way we bonded again, after all those wartime years." - Marian

Nature in schools: a generational shift

The survey results highlight striking generational differences in how respondents encountered nature at school. Over 40 per cent remember having a nature table – once a staple of classroom life – but this experience was overwhelmingly reported by people aged 40 and above. Younger respondents rarely recall one at all. In contrast, those aged 20–39 were far more likely to have had access to a school wildlife garden or outdoor area, suggesting a shift from indoor observation to structured, designated outdoor spaces. Twenty-one per cent say their school had no space for nature at all.

Abundance to absence over a lifetime hits people hard

As well as answering structured questions, respondents were asked to tell their stories. Over 900 comments were made by people answering the survey, providing a rich picture of respondents' experiences and many participants share vivid memories of exploring gardens, ponds and fields. When asked if there was anything else they wanted to say or tell us, a remarkable 44 per cent of people wrote comments.

A clear theme from these stories is sadness, regret and even anger at how much has been lost: the loss

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of species, the loss of abundance and the loss of access to wilder nature places where children once played. People remember fields full of cowslips, the sound of grasshoppers or plentiful tadpoles which contrast with perceptions of a quieter, more depleted countryside today.

One respondent, Pippa, says:

“Even in the 35 years since I was a child, I have noticed that there is nowhere near as much wildlife. I feel sad [for] my kids.”

Another respondent, Ruth, remembers disturbing a hedge full of red admiral butterflies, and the lasting impact this had on her:

“It really woke me to the glories of nature, and I am very sad that we have so ruined our country that children today will probably never see the same thing.”

Jan Stannard, co-founder and CEO of Heal, says: “We loved finding out more about people’s childhood memories and the results of The Spark were fascinating. We were struck by how many of the stories were amusing, poignant but sometimes heartbreaking because of the loss of so much of our wildlife. Together, the findings paint a rich picture of the spontaneous, abundant and often intergenerational experiences that shaped people’s early relationships with wildlife.

“The findings raise an important question too. As encounters with everyday nature become more managed and formalised, are we losing some of the spontaneous curiosity that once came from children discovering wildlife on their own, free-roaming in their neighbourhoods or the countryside? We must make sure that there is more space for nature and access for all to wilder places.”

Who took the survey?

The survey was open to anyone aged 10+ but it attracted predominantly older respondents: 83 per cent were aged 40–79, with the largest group aged 60–69. This may reflect the audience who saw the survey – or may point to a widening disconnect between younger people and everyday nature.

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