

The Royal Zoological Society of Scotland

IMPACT REPORT

January-December 2025



INTRODUCTION



NATURE NEEDS US ALL, MORE THAN EVER

Working towards three key pledges, RZSS is connecting even more people with nature and reversing the decline in species worldwide

Since 2022, everyone at the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS) has been working to deliver on an ambitious strategy that will see us through to 2030. At its heart, the strategy has a mission to save wildlife and empower people in Scotland and around the world to protect, value and love nature.

Right across this incredible charity we hold so dear, we've made progress towards three headline pledges: on conservation, engagement and community. Each pledge has a number of key objectives, and as you'll see in this report, the work to meet each of these continues at pace.

In conservation, we're working in Scotland and globally to reverse the decline of at least 50 species by 2030. Our expert conservationists are already making an impact on 33 species, through initiatives that include conservation breeding, advancing species recovery science and working with strategic partners around the world.

Closer to home, every visit to Edinburgh Zoo or Highland Wildlife Park is an opportunity to create stronger connections with nature. In 2025, Edinburgh Zoo attracted 20% more visitors than in the previous year, with many drawn in through the charisma of our animals – including viral sensation Haggis the pygmy hippo – and events such as our Giant Lanterns. Not only are we seeing more people through the doors, we've also learned through exit survey data that the wonderful Scotland's Wildlife Discovery Centre at Highland Wildlife Park is bringing visitors closer to nature. The centre was also key to the park being named Best Visitor Attraction in Scotland at the Thistle Awards.

Wider communities are benefiting from opportunities to work with RZSS and connect with each other and nature. In 2025, we initiated 27 new partnerships, taking the total number of communities RZSS is supporting to 71. A new Pathways to Nature Framework will enable our teams to understand the true impact of this hugely important work.

These are just some of the stories and successes that emerged in 2025. Many more are told in this report. As ever, these achievements have only been made possible through the generosity of our supporters, and the knowledge and tenacity of our staff and volunteers. We would like to thank everyone involved for all that you do.

David Field
RZSS Chief Executive Officer



CONSERVATION

**Reverse
the decline
of at least
50 species**

ENGAGEMENT

**Create stronger
connections with
nature for more
than a million
people**

COMMUNITY

**Enable more
than 100
communities to
better protect
nature**

CONSERVATION

Working in partnership to save wild species

RZSS PLEDGE

Reverse
the decline
of at least
50 species

RZSS is working towards four key objectives in its pledge to reverse the decline of at least 50 species by 2030:

- | | |
|--|-----|
| OBJECTIVE 1
Restore species | p8 |
| OBJECTIVE 2
Support conservation breeding in our zoos | p9 |
| OBJECTIVE 3
Advance species recovery science | p10 |
| OBJECTIVE 4
Care for biodiversity at our sites: our wilding responsibility | p11 |

18 wildcats were released into the Cairngorms in 2025, taking the total number released to 46

99 Critically Endangered flapper skates were sampled by RZSS veterinary surgeon Dr Georgina Cole

Nearly 450 samples from 100 species were donated to the RZSS WildGenes Biobank including 51 species added for the first time

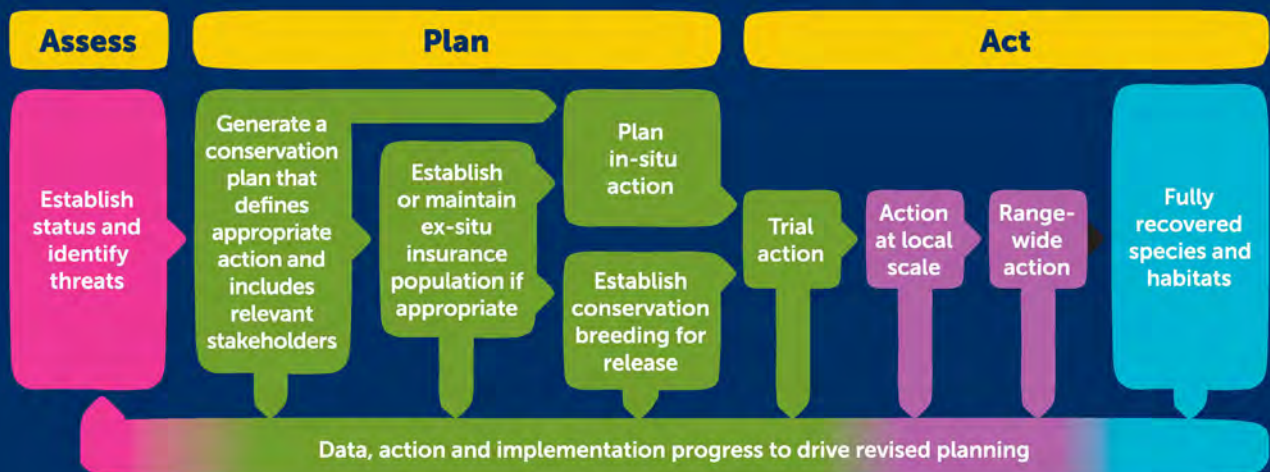
ASSESSING SPECIES RECOVERY AT RZSS

As highlighted overleaf, RZSS is working on interventions across 33 species worldwide to help reverse the decline of 50 species by 2030.

The conservation team measures species recovery using the model outlined below, which recognises the full cycle of recovery and aligns with similar tools used across the wider conservation community.



RZSS measures species recovery via these steps:



Monitoring and diagnosis

Steps of species recovery involving monitoring and research. These are steps that allow RZSS to diagnose species decline.

Planning and testing the solution

Steps of species recovery involved in identifying the appropriate management action, which allow RZSS to reverse species decline. The steps include constructing a multi-stakeholder action plan, establishing ex-situ insurance and conservation breeding for release populations (if appropriate), and trialling management action in the wild (in-situ action). These steps form an important part of the International Union for Conservation of Nature 'One Plan' species recovery approach.

Full deployment of the solution

Steps of species recovery involved in replicating actions across the initial wild trial site, measuring success against population, range and, where appropriate, genetic diversity targets.

Sustainable management

Steps of recovery involving increasingly minimal intervention until a species is fully recovered.

CONSERVATION

Working in partnership to save wild species

RZSS
HIGHLAND
WILDLIFE
PARK

RZSS
EDINBURGH
ZOO

PINE MARTEN

UK

Nearly driven to extinction in the UK, the European pine marten has been bouncing back in Scotland but remains Critically Endangered in England and Wales, with only a handful of small populations. In partnership with Natural England, Wildwood Trust and Kent Wildlife Trust, RZSS WildGenes is supporting pine marten recovery throughout Britain by working to provide a better understanding of the animal's genetic diversity. By September 2025, the WildGenes lab had received more than 100 samples from across the UK and Ireland.



NORTHERN MURIQUI

BRAZIL

This Critically Endangered monkey is found only in Brazil's fragmented Atlantic Forest, where around 1,000 individuals remain in scattered, isolated populations. Through its longstanding collaboration with the Wild Animal Conservation Institute (ICAS), RZSS is supporting a small local conservation organisation, Primatas PERDidos (Lost Primates), to expand its work monitoring canopy-dwelling northern muriqui, including through the use of drones and thermal cameras. RZSS is providing international conservation mentorship and organisational support.

NORTHERN ROCKHOPPER PENGUIN

SOUTH ATLANTIC AND
SOUTHERN INDIAN OCEAN

The Northern rockhopper penguin breeds on the Tristan da Cunha islands in the South Atlantic and on two islands in the Southern Indian Ocean.

The RZSS WildGenes team is working on genetic analysis to understand the relationships and movements between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean populations of this Endangered species. Recently published research has revealed that the two populations are genetically distinct – a vital insight that will inform conservation decisions.



POND MUD SNAIL

SCOTLAND

In autumn 2025, more than 3,500 pond mud snails were released at three sites in the Pentland Hills outside Edinburgh in the largest release of the species to date. Once widespread in Britain but now found at only a few sites, these tiny invertebrates contribute to a healthy freshwater ecosystem. RZSS has been breeding the species successfully since 2017 and undertook a previous release in the Pentlands in 2018. The pond mud snails project was supported by the Scottish Government Nature Restoration Fund.



To reach its goal of reversing the decline of at least 50 species worldwide by 2030, RZSS has been working with:

- 🐾 Addax
- 🐾 Asian elephant
- 🐾 Bengal florican
- 🐾 Blood red longhorn beetle
- 🐾 Caracal
- 🐾 Chimpanzee
- 🐾 Christy's tree frog
- 🐾 Dama gazelle
- 🐾 Dark bordered beauty moth
- 🐾 Eurasian beaver
- 🐾 Eurasian capercaillie
- 🐾 Flapper skate
- 🐾 Giant anteater
- 🐾 Giant armadillo
- 🐾 Himalayan wolf
- 🐾 Hyacinth macaw
- 🐾 Medicinal leech
- 🐾 Nahan's partridge
- 🐾 Northern muriqui
- 🐾 Northern rockhopper penguin
- 🐾 Nubian giraffe
- 🐾 Nubian ibex
- 🐾 Pallas's cat
- 🐾 Partula snail
- 🐾 Pine hoverfly
- 🐾 Pine marten
- 🐾 Pond mud snail
- 🐾 Red squirrel
- 🐾 Rote Island snake-necked turtle
- 🐾 Scimitar-horned oryx
- 🐾 Siamese crocodile
- 🐾 Small scabious mining bee
- 🐾 Wildcat

CARACAL

TURKMENISTAN

This striking yet secretive cat is considered rare in Central Asia and little is known about its range. In 2024, RZSS partnered with local conservation organisation Team Bars Turkmenistan of Conservation X labs to help monitor small feline species, including caracal. Team Bars' camera traps yielded some exciting sightings in 2025. A kitten caught on camera confirmed that caracals are reproducing in Turkmenistan and an individual was spotted in Badkhyz State Nature Reserve for the first time in 15 years – extending the species' known range within the country.



NAHAN'S PARTRIDGE

UGANDA

Surveys for the elusive forest-dwelling Nahan's partridge began in the Budongo Forest in late 2024 – part of a conservation project with longstanding RZSS partner Budongo Conservation Field Station (BCFS) and supported by the World Pheasant Association. In mid-2025, master's student Samson Esie Mwin captured the project's first photo of the species, with two birds in the frame. Then in September 2025, RZSS WildGenes staff delivered DNA sequencing training for the BCFS team... and were fortunate to spot the little birds for themselves, too.



Information about these conservation projects can also be found online at rzss.org.uk/conservation

GREAT FOR APES

Chimpanzees are the flagship species for the Budongo Conservation Field Station, supported by RZSS since 2005

OBJECTIVE 1

RESTORE SPECIES

BUDONGO PARTNERSHIP HITS 20-YEAR MILESTONE

With RZSS support, this Ugandan conservation project is boosting chimpanzee populations

In 2025, RZSS celebrated its 20th year of supporting the Budongo Conservation Field Station (BCFS) in Uganda. Over the course of two decades we have contributed more than £1.2 million in direct funding to the project. RZSS also raises awareness of BCFS through the Budongo Trail chimpanzee habitat at Edinburgh Zoo, where the chimps act as ambassadors for their wild cousins.

The Budongo forest is one of the most biodiverse areas in Africa, containing more threatened vertebrates than any other region on the continent. BCFS and RZSS take an umbrella species approach to the conservation work carried out there. This means that while chimpanzees are the flagship species, and act as charismatic figureheads for BCFS with zoo visitors and others, the project focuses on boosting and protecting a habitat that is home to thousands of different species.

A key element of the partnership comes through the sharing of skills and knowledge. RZSS has offered BCFS staff the opportunity for development through training, university scholarships and exchange visits. Likewise, RZSS has been able to take lessons learned through the work carried out by BCFS and apply them to Scottish recovery projects, including those related to beavers and wildcats.

Throughout the 20 years of the RZSS and BCFS partnership, the hard-working team has helped to boost chimpanzee numbers to 800 individuals. More than 54,000 wire snares have been removed by the snare patrol team and 172 individuals have given up hunting in exchange for two goats each, enabling them to take up goat-rearing as an alternative livelihood. The BCFS vet team has provided support to local villages, treating 6,893 goats and other livestock from more than 2,000 households.





OBJECTIVE 2

SUPPORT CONSERVATION BREEDING IN OUR ZOOS

WILDCATS IN THE WILD

2025 was another important year for the Saving Wildcats conservation project

RZSS leads the Saving Wildcats partnership and has been managing the UK's wildcat conservation breeding programme since 2015. In 2023, the first releases into the wild of cats born in the conservation breeding for release centre at Highland Wildlife Park took place.

Eighteen wildcats were released into the Cairngorms National Park in 2025, bringing the total number of released animals to 46. The Saving Wildcats team continued to track the wildcats via GPS-radio collars and camera traps, which have captured over 2.5 million pieces of wild footage.

In another step forward for restoring the species, 2025 also saw a second consecutive year of wild births from released females. Litters arrived throughout spring and summer, bringing the total recorded number of wild births to over 40. This natural increase in the newly established wild population is a very positive sign, especially when you consider that the species was declared functionally extinct in the UK in 2019 due to habitat loss, disease and interbreeding with feral domestic cats.

In January 2025, the Saving Wildcats project was the focus of the BBC ALBA documentary, *Wildcats: Cait ann an Cunnart*.

This two-part programme chronicled the revival of wildcats in the Cairngorms National Park. Later, wildcats became stars of the big screen with the September 2025 premiere of *Clinging by a Claw*. Created by Saving Wildcats, produced by SCOTLAND: The Big Picture and narrated by *Outlander*'s Sam Heughan, the film charts the journey of Scotland's wildcats from the brink of extinction to their return to the wilds.

With each achievement, the Saving Wildcats project moves closer to securing a future for Scotland's wildcats. A study published in a special edition of IUCN's *Cat News* in December found the first year of Saving Wildcats to be highly effective. It concluded that breeding for release is a good strategy for wildcat conservation, with 95% of released cats surviving their first 10 months in the wild.

THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE RIGHT PLACE

The Saving Wildcats team's feline expertise was vital when it assisted with the humane capture of a group of lynx illegally released into the Cairngorms in early 2025. The team later worked with keepers to help settle the three animals into life at Highland Wildlife Park.

STAR PAWS

Two different 2025 documentaries shared the success story of the Saving Wildcats project



CONSERVATION



RZSS WORKING WITH RUPP
Processing genetic samples in the Cambodian capital

OBJECTIVE 3

ADVANCE SPECIES RECOVERY SCIENCE

CONSERVATION BREEDING IN CAMBODIA

RZSS and partners have conducted the first-ever genetic study of the Bengal florican

The Bengal florican is a species on the edge in more ways than one. It is on the verge of extinction and is classified as Critically Endangered on a global scale. It is also on the edge in a genetic sense. With so few close relatives, it is classified as evolutionarily distinct.

As the flood plains that Bengal florican rely on to breed have been taken over by agriculture and infrastructure, their numbers have been heavily impacted. Having undergone drastic declines in recent decades, there are now thought to be fewer than 1,000 Bengal floricans remaining in the world. These are found in the Terai region on the Nepal/India border and the flood plains of the Tonlé Sap in Cambodia, where conservationists estimate that fewer than 100 wild individuals now remain.

In 2025, working in partnership with the Angkor Centre for Conservation of Biodiversity (ACCB) and the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), RZSS carried out the first-ever genetic study of Bengal floricans in Cambodia.

The study used 22 blood and tissue samples provided by ACCB from their captive-reared population of Bengal floricans, aiming to better understand the relatedness of the conservation centre's birds and then to establish optimal breeding pairs. The samples were collected by Alex Ball and Elizabeth Heap from the RZSS WildGenes team and used as part of the capacity building programme at RUPP.

Since 2016, the WildGenes team has been developing Cambodia's first

conservation genetics laboratory at RUPP, where the university's scientists processed the 22 Bengal florican samples, assisted by the WildGenes experts. Sadly, following analysis of the samples, Cambodia's Bengal florican population is now understood to be even more vulnerable than first anticipated, with the October 2025 study revealing very low genetic diversity.

Genetic data processed and analysed by RZSS and its partners will help with planning breeding programmes for the Bengal florican. The WildGenes team has made eight key recommendations to enable the partnership to make decisions for the next steps in the ongoing race to secure the future of this Critically Endangered species.



STRIDES FORWARD
The Critically Endangered Bengal florican

OBJECTIVE 4

CARE FOR BIODIVERSITY AT OUR SITES: OUR WILDING RESPONSIBILITY

AN ACTION PLAN FOR BIODIVERSITY

Highland Wildlife Park is uniquely located within the Cairngorms National Park – an important biodiversity hotspot that houses many native species thanks to the variety of the site's wide range of ecosystems. As part of the Scotland's Wildlife Discovery Centre project, the conservation field team at the park developed a five-year Biodiversity Action Plan to guide conservation efforts via a structured framework to identify, protect and enhance the park's biodiversity.

In 2025, at the end of the five-year period, objectives were assessed to have been achieved or exceeded across nearly all workstreams: grasslands, lichen, fungi; invertebrates including the small scabious mining bee; and wading and ground-nesting birds. Progress was also tracked against objectives for woodlands and for invasive species and bracken removal, half of which have also been achieved or exceeded.

A Woodland Management Plan for Highland Wildlife Park has now been approved by Scottish Forestry, providing a 10-year framework of activities to promote conservation, biodiversity enhancement and long-term resilience. This will be essential to RZSS' work to bolster habitat diversity, enhance resilience to extreme weather, support

a broader range of native species and maintain the unique microclimate within the 25 acres of woodland at the park.

A key focus of the Woodland Management Plan will be to increase the abundance of broadleaf and coniferous species, including Scots pine and aspen. This will help secure habitat for the near-threatened red squirrel, which depends on coniferous woodland for shelter and Scots pine for a food source, and support the nationally rare lichen, *Candelariella superdistans*, which relies on mature aspen.

Last year also marked a reflective next chapter in Highland Wildlife Park's fungi surveys. The park's habitats are home to a diverse range of fungi that help maintain healthy soils, support plant and animal life and sustain balanced ecosystems. Between 2022 and 2024, mycologist Liz Holden conducted surveys annually, identifying a total of 176 species as well as training RZSS staff. The charity has now moved to a biannual fungi survey pattern to allow for a longer-term assessment of trends.

A key priority for fungi will be to protect and sustain existing mature woodland, ensuring that trees can complete their natural life cycle and benefitting the fungi involved in decomposition, soil health and nutrient cycling.



LICHEN WALK

Members of the team
examining species at
Highland Wildlife Park

ENGAGEMENT

Connecting people and nature

RZSS PLEDGE

Create stronger connections with nature for more than a million people

RZSS is working towards four key objectives focused on creating stronger engagements with nature:

OBJECTIVE 1

Create wild opportunities for more people

p14

OBJECTIVE 2

Increase emotional connections with nature

p15

OBJECTIVE 3

Empower through learning

p16

OBJECTIVE 4

Influence to support nature

p17

Engagement in numbers

648,809

visits to Edinburgh Zoo in 2025,
a rise of 20% compared to 2024,
with **56,818** people attending
Edinburgh Zoo's Giant Lanterns



122,963

visits to
Highland Wildlife Park



135,693

visitors joined the daily talks, deepening
their connection with animals and
nature, an increase of 67% on 2024

1,690,340

people used the
digital learning
environment
ZOOdle, with
each person visiting
an average of
9.5 pages

4,989

people had the opportunity
to get closer to nature by
taking part in keeper experiences

9,814 votes were placed in
the Edinburgh Zoo animal
of the month contest, combining
online and on-site engagement

21,837 young people
in full-time education
visited in a school group,
an 18% increase on the
previous year

23,529 individuals took
part in virtual or
online courses

16,486 items of press
coverage and **652,483**
social media followers
spread animal, conservation
and community stories
around the world

ENGAGEMENT

OBJECTIVE 1

CREATE WILD OPPORTUNITIES FOR MORE PEOPLE

A DAY OUT TO REMEMBER

Discounted tickets for recipients of universal credit are benefitting thousands of visitors

In 2025, Edinburgh Zoo and Highland Wildlife Park welcomed 39,000 people who visited via the RZSS discounted ticket scheme for recipients of universal credit and other benefits. The initiative, first launched in 2024, has given nearly 65,000 people the opportunity to be closer to nature and animals.

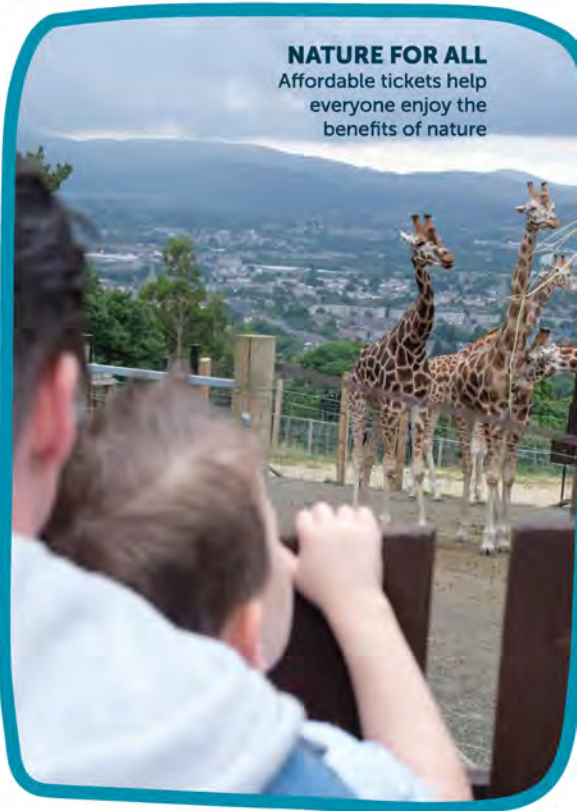
Visitors who are eligible pay £7 per person, which is a 70% discount for adults and a 55% discount for children. Of those surveyed, half said they would otherwise have been unable to visit. Feedback has highlighted the mental health and social benefits of accessing Edinburgh Zoo and Highland Wildlife Park, and that memories made on the

days out had inspired young visitors to take action related to nature.

Evidence shows that shared experiences such as visiting a zoo provide relief from the daily stressors of the cost-of-living crisis for low-income families. Shared experiences also help forge bonds between generations, build children's resilience and improve their social interaction skills.

Connection with animals can elicit a sense of awe, which researchers find promotes altruistic behaviour and increases feelings of connectedness to the wider world.

NATURE FOR ALL
Affordable tickets help everyone enjoy the benefits of nature



SCOTLAND'S BEST VISITOR ATTRACTION

Top award for Highland Wildlife Park



Highland Wildlife Park was named Best Visitor Attraction at the prestigious Scottish Thistle Awards 2025. This huge achievement follows the opening of the £7.6 million Scotland's Wildlife Discovery Centre, which is reshaping how people connect with nature.

Scotland's natural environment is in crisis, with one in ten native species threatened by extinction. Scotland's Wildlife Discovery Centre enables people from a diverse range of backgrounds to connect with Scotland's natural heritage and learn about the actions that they can take for conservation. The centre brings together global ambassador species and native Scottish animals, connecting people, places and wildlife, and taking visitors on a journey from understanding to appreciation to empathy and action.

Scotland's Wildlife Discovery Centre opened in summer 2024. Exit survey data among visitors to Highland Wildlife Park between April 2025 and March 2026 showed that, of those who visited the interactive indoor Gateway or hilltop Conservation Den, 72% felt they had a greater connection to Scotland's wildlife as a result of their visit, while 57% said their visit had inspired them to do more to protect wildlife. In separate research between January and April 2025, 76% of visitors strongly agreed to the statement 'I can support nature' and 74% strongly agreed that they 'have learnt more about Scotland's wildlife'.

OBJECTIVE 2

INCREASE EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS WITH NATURE

CONNECTING PEOPLE AND ANIMALS

Edinburgh Zoo's Dementia Friendly Socials are interactive sessions that connect individuals living with dementia – and the friends, family and loved ones supporting them – to all the diverse animals and work happening across RZSS.

Nature-based activities help to combat isolation by sparking conversation. They strengthen family and social bonds through shared purposeful activity and foster community belonging by bringing normalising external experiences directly into the care environment. Interaction with animals and nature is also proven to lower cortisol levels and reduce agitation, while identity-based activities help people living with dementia to maintain their sense of self.

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Dementia Friendly Socials will run year-round for the first time in 2026

In 2025, Edinburgh Zoo's Dementia Friendly Socials attracted 64 people across six variety-filled sessions, with the focus on a different animal or conservation issue each month. All attendees (100%) praised the sessions for reducing social isolation by connecting them to people who understand the lived experience of dementia, and reported an increased connection to the natural world and their role within it.



More than 40,000 visitors have downloaded the Edinburgh Zoo and Highland Wildlife Park apps. Both apps can be used to plan days out, find animals, exhibits and facilities or discover upcoming talks and events. Printed maps remain available for purchase on-site and the revenue from these sales has covered the costs of developing the apps.



STORY WEAVERS

In 2025, a remarkable 1,112 young people took part in RZSS Zoo Tails events with teams from Edinburgh Zoo and Highland Wildlife Park.

This project sees the RZSS discovery and learning team visiting libraries to read stories, linking nature and animal-based narratives to hands-on craft activities that inspire and deepen connection with learners. These sessions help inquisitive young minds learn about the animals the charity cares for, with 78% of attendees leaving wanting to help protect animals or the planet.

By hosting nature activities in trusted free spaces, Zoo Tails help to turn literacy into a hands-on adventure that can help to bridge the 'nature gap' in communities. This combination fosters social cohesion and emotional wellbeing, transforming the library into a vibrant community hub where reading and environmental connection go hand-in-hand.

ZOO TAILS

Every animal that RZSS cares for has a story to tell

ENGAGEMENT

OBJECTIVE 3

EMPOWER THROUGH LEARNING

SHARING STORIES FROM LIVING LINKS

Compelling new interpretation is helping to bring the work of Edinburgh Zoo's Living Links research centre to a wider audience.

Since 2008, this partnership project between RZSS and the University of St Andrews has explored human evolution and cognition through behavioural and observational studies of the brown capuchins and common squirrel monkeys that live together in mixed species habitats at Edinburgh Zoo.

A new visitor experience has now been created in a collaboration between researchers from the University of St Andrews and the interpretation, learning technology and keeper teams at RZSS. The new interpretation, including videos and interactive displays, shares stories about the monkeys and the conservation challenges their relatives face in the wild, as well as offering insights into the research conducted at the centre.

Citizen science opportunities are now offered on-site, and a six-part ZOOdle online lesson programme for primary schools and families allows children to continue their learning off-site, deepening connections with nature and increasing awareness



A LINK TO OUR ANCESTORS
One of Edinburgh Zoo's brown capuchins



INTERACTIVE
New signage at Living Links

of how our minds affect our health and wellbeing as well as the role of research in scientific development. Impressively, 200 primary schools used this resource in 2025.

Volunteer-led discovery days at Living Links have helped people learn more about the natural world. Dwell time evaluation with the University of St Andrews shows that, since the refresh, visitors are spending around 39% longer engaging and have greater awareness of the research taking place. This is supported by visitor feedback, where agreement that there were opportunities to get involved in research increased by around 1.3 points (out of 5), indicating a clear improvement in perceived research engagement opportunities.

FIVE YEARS OF JOEYS AND ROOS



Edinburgh Zoo's Joeys, Roos and Big Roos groups promote early learning, development and connection to nature in young children. Five years after launching, the programmes remains very popular with local families, with 97.7% of all its tickets sold in 2025 and a total of 177 families participating.

The programmes have created a continuous pathway for engagement with RZSS and nature for some of Edinburgh's youngest residents, with children moving through the stages from Joeys to Roos and then to Big Roos. An amazing 95% of adults reported an increased connection to nature for both themselves and their little ones. One of the earliest participants in the Roos programme has since progressed to become a member of the RZSS Conservation Action Team (CAT).

OBJECTIVE 4

INFLUENCE TO SUPPORT NATURE



ROXIE'S LEGACY

Successful result for fireworks campaign

In 2025, a new fireworks exclusion zone was introduced around Edinburgh Zoo. This action, taken by the City of Edinburgh Council, came in response to a powerful RZSS campaign following the death of Roxie, the baby red panda (pictured). Roxie sadly choked to death on 5 November 2024, and it is very likely this was due to the stress caused by fireworks. It is also thought that the loud bangs may have contributed to the death of her mum, Ginger, just five days previously.

Through 10 outreach sessions, the community team worked with 135 children, 150 young people and 55 adults, with 66.7% sharing they felt more likely to respect the firework control zones following RZSS' input and 66.7% saying they are likely to share what they learned with others. The community team also welcomed local police and their families who had supported policing of the ban to zoo family days.

Firework exclusion zones are one way to help protect animals from the stress of fireworks, not only at zoos but also at farms, in homes and in the wild. RZSS has also supported calls made by animal welfare charities to ban the sale of fireworks to the public, with a focus instead on silent fireworks, drone or light displays at organised events.

FROM RZSS TO THE WORLD

Roles on external bodies enable members of the RZSS team to influence policy and conservation action worldwide.

RZSS chief executive David Field was appointed as president of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) in November 2025, a position that sees him leading WAZA's work unifying zoos and aquariums as a collective voice for nature. It's one of many ways in which the expertise of RZSS staff is reaching out beyond its communities.

RZSS has representation across the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA) and European Association of Zoos and Aquariums (EAZA) from staff in management and on the conservation, animal care, veterinary, communications and learning and development teams.

These include EAZA Ex situ Programmes (EEPs), which are population management programmes for animal species coordinated by experts from EAZA membership. Several RZSS staff, including veterinary surgeon Stephanie Mota and ex-situ conservation manager David Barclay, serve on EEPs for species such as the wildcat, Pallas's cat, gentoo penguin and snow leopard.

The conservation team led by Helen Senn also has representation on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) specialist groups, including the cat specialist group, animal biobanking for conservation specialist group and global species action plan advisory group.

Members of RZSS management and the discovery and learning team also volunteer on the Boards of the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (Lisa Robshaw), Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations (Ben Supple), Bright Green Nature (Becky Angus) and Play Scotland (Phill Matthis).

GLOBAL INFLUENCE

RZSS CEO David Field,
president of WAZA



SHINING BRIGHT

Back by popular demand, Edinburgh Zoo's Giant Lanterns returned in the winter of 2025, with some 52,000 visitors attending throughout November and December. The outdoor trail, which was last held in 2019, took on a marine theme with huge jellyfish, floating sea turtles, leaping dolphins and more.

The winter event welcomed 96,000 people by the time it concluded in February 2026 and was confirmed as a key draw for non-traditional audiences at the zoo. As a festive family attraction, Giant Lanterns resonates with many non-members and those who would otherwise be less likely to visit the zoo for a day out. It also offers an opportunity to raise revenue at a traditionally quiet time of year.

In November and December, an adults-only evening and a quiet night for visitors with accessibility needs were held. For the latter, the capacity and music levels were lowered and a mobility vehicle was made available.

Thanks to the uptake of the 2025 event, a 2026 Giant Lanterns trail has already been confirmed.



NEW AUDIENCES

96,000 tickets were snapped up for the 2025 event



COMMUNITY

Bringing people together

RZSS PLEDGE

Enable more
than 100
communities to
better protect
nature

RZSS is working towards six
key community objectives:

OBJECTIVE 1
Improve wellbeing
through nature p22

OBJECTIVE 2
Volunteer for nature p23

OBJECTIVE 3
Develop our zoos as a
community resource p24

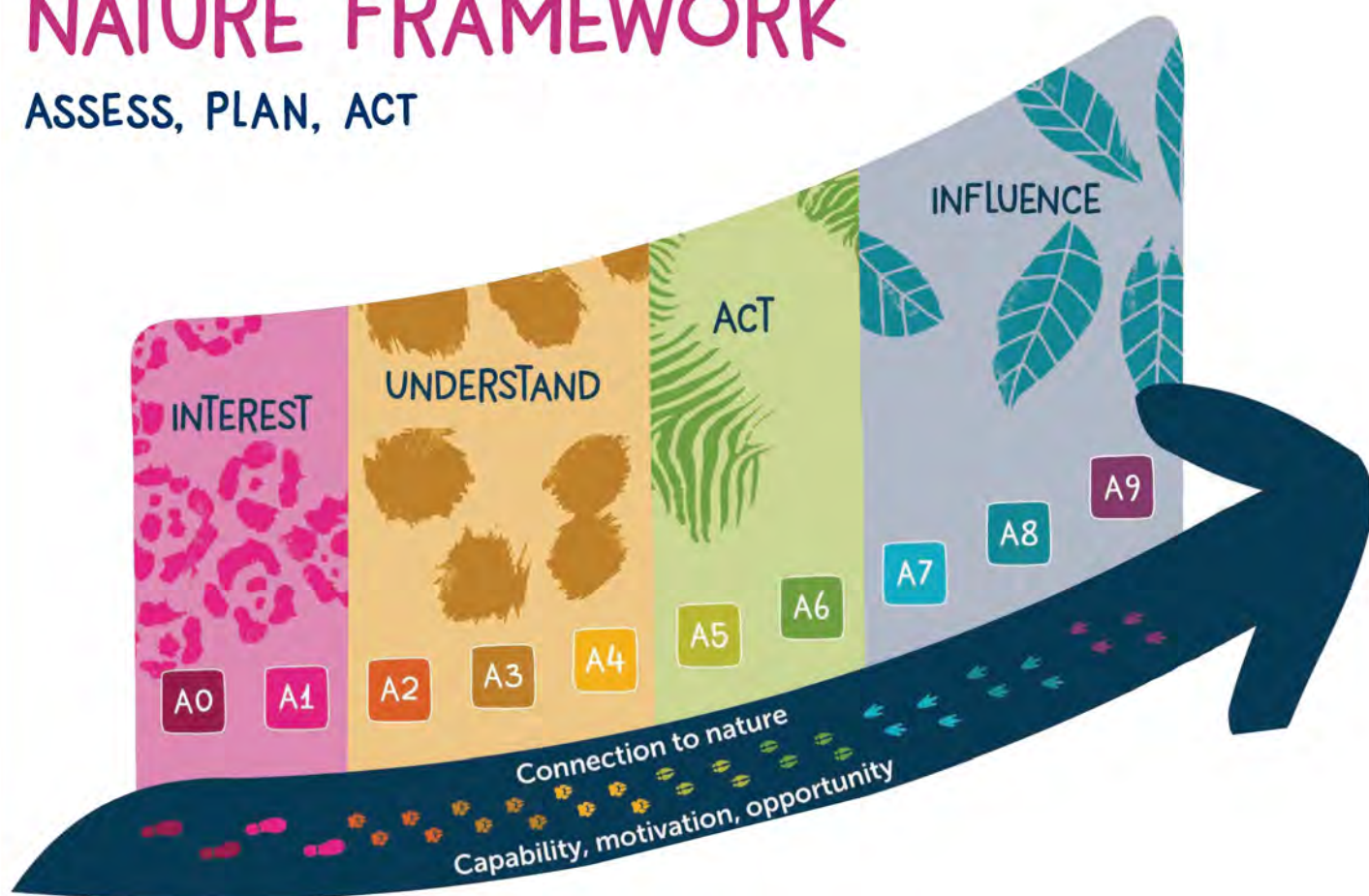
OBJECTIVE 4
Develop our zoos as a
scientific resource p25

OBJECTIVE 5
Achieve (net) zero carbon
zoos and sustainability p26

OBJECTIVE 6
Grow the RZSS family p27

RZSS PATHWAYS TO NATURE FRAMEWORK

ASSESS, PLAN, ACT



Under its 2030 strategy, RZSS aims to create stronger connections with nature for more than one million people, including 100 communities.

The newly developed **Pathways to Nature Framework** provides a structured way to understand how RZSS audiences develop a deeper connection with nature over time. It links strategy, delivery and impact, allowing the charity to track participants' connection to nature before and after interactions with RZSS places and projects.

Grounded in science, the framework uses nature connection measures such as the University of Derby's Inclusion of Nature in Self (INS) scale and the Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS) to measure levels of connectedness via surveys, observations and other opportunities. By 2030, RZSS aims to assess changing levels of nature connectedness across a representative sample of 10,000 people.

The Pathways to Nature Framework maps a progressive journey from initial awareness (**A0**) to active stewardship and leadership (**A9**). It links measurable shifts in identity,

emotion, behaviour and social influence to participants' experiences and RZSS interventions. Using the COM-B behavioural change model, the Framework recognises that it is only possible to move people from one end of the scale to the other if they have the motivation, capability and opportunity to do so.

By creating a shared language for describing impact, the Pathways to Nature Framework allows RZSS to track meaningful changes in how people relate to and act for nature. It can show where audiences are positioned along the journey, how they progress over time and which interventions are most effective at supporting that progression.

Crucially, the framework connects individual change to organisational strategy. It provides evidence of how strategic priorities are translating into measurable outcomes, highlights gaps or opportunities in audience engagement and supports adaptive decision-making. Over time, it builds a robust evidence base that demonstrates not only what is being delivered, but how those efforts are contributing to long-term conservation and social impact.

Community in numbers

52,894

current RZSS members,
up 9% from 2024



Volunteers interacted with

88,414 VISITORS
giving 19% more time than
the previous year, a total of
16,941 hours!



550 PEOPLE

from 20 different
local charities joined
Edinburgh Zoo's seasonal
community days

Nearly
7,000 PEOPLE

across Scotland joined outreach
sessions, allowing people to
connect to RZSS and nature in a
safe and free space they already
felt comfortable in



14,000 PEOPLE

joined 300+ community
sessions, removing barriers
to accessing nature

RZSS WORKED WITH 27 NEW COMMUNITY PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

This takes the total number of
community partners to 71 out of
the target of 100 by 2030



RZSS welcomed and
supported 70 research
students and supervised
two MSc dissertations



CALM PLACE
A quiet, baby care and multi-faith space



OBJECTIVE 1

IMPROVE WELLBEING THROUGH NATURE

ACCESSIBLE ENJOYMENT

To truly welcome everyone to Edinburgh Zoo and Highland Wildlife Park, RZSS recognises that its visitors and staff come with a wide range of needs.

Both parks now have detailed online access statements. Accessibility and sensory maps can be downloaded, matching colour-coded signage around Edinburgh Zoo.

New facilities move beyond basic accessibility and create spaces that offer dignity, calm and inclusion for people of all ages, abilities, cultures and backgrounds, removing barriers that might otherwise shorten or prevent people's visits.

By repurposing a disused animal house, RZSS transformed an underused space at Edinburgh Zoo into a multi-functional prayer and quiet space alongside a dedicated

mother and baby feeding room. The creation of a quiet garden nearby also provides a moment away from busy areas for those who need it, with blue-painted benches across Edinburgh Zoo clearly identifying calm spaces that support neurodivergent visitors, people with anxiety and anyone needing respite.

Inclusion also means practical dignity. Changing Places toilets at both parks enable people with complex disabilities to visit comfortably and safely, while other toilet facilities have been upgraded to be stoma-friendly.

From 2023 to 2025, positive accessibility mentions rose from ~10-15% to 40-50% at Edinburgh Zoo, with reviews noting visitors feel more welcomed, calmer and able to stay longer, turning potentially challenging visits into positive experiences.

A WARM WELCOME TO HIGHLAND WILDLIFE PARK



Over the past two years, the Gateway, Conservation Den and Learning Hive at Highland Wildlife Park have enabled new communities and more visitors to connect with nature. It is clear that they are having a powerful impact, with 75% of visitors feeling a greater connection to Scotland's wildlife from their visit.

The new visitor centre provides a top-quality café, an improved shop, an information desk and additional toilet facilities including accessible toilets for families. A lift connects the centre's two levels and there's now an accessible entrance to the top floor. Positive accessibility mentions in reviews have risen from ~35-40% to 45-55%.

One of the most gratifying pieces of feedback was from an older couple who have visited the park for many years but now needed accessible toilet facilities and wheelchair access. Previously concerned that they would no longer be able to visit with their new access needs, the couple sought out staff to let them know how happy they were to discover that they could continue connecting with nature at Highland Wildlife Park.

OBJECTIVE 2

VOLUNTEER FOR NATURE

FROM VOLUNTEERS TO KEEPERS

RZSS launched a new volunteering programme in animal care in 2025. The opportunity has already led to jobs for two committed and passionate members of the Edinburgh Zoo team

LAUREN'S STORY

Lauren (pictured below) has always been passionate about wanting to work with animals. Focused on that goal, she joined the visitor experience team at Edinburgh Zoo in 2022, working on the admissions desk and driving the zoo's accessibility bus. She started volunteering at the zoo in her spare time to gain more knowledge of the animals that live there.

Last year, for the first time, RZSS started offering volunteering opportunities in the animal care team. Lauren leapt at the chance: "I said I don't care if I have to volunteer all my time and get no rest. I was so adamant to do it!"

As an animal care volunteer, Lauren helped the keeper team for full days, from 8am to 4pm. "You get an idea of how demanding it can be and what it is that keepers do," she explains. However, she absolutely relished being part of the team and representing the charity in RZSS uniform. She learned about the animals' routines and gained valuable experience. When a paid role came up in the animal care department, she aced the interview.

Following an initial eight-week seasonal role, she has since been appointed to a permanent part-time position. "The more experience I had, the more I knew I could do it!" says Lauren.



JAMES'S STORY

RZSS and its work has been a big part of James's life since childhood. He started with Edinburgh Zoo's Conservation Action Team (CAT) at the age of 10, became a youth volunteer with CAT at the age of 16 and later volunteered at Edinburgh Zoo as an adult, as well as working a seasonal post at Highland Wildlife Park.

In 2025, James (pictured above) took on one of the new volunteer roles with the zoo's animal care team, working with penguins and carnivores. He spent a day a week, and later three days a week, feeding and cleaning out the penguins and particularly enjoyed the opportunity to take part in vaccinations as well as the chance to hone his animal observational skills.

Six months after starting his volunteering placement, James was appointed to the staff as a keeper on the carnivores and penguins team. "It made it a very easy transition from being a volunteer to being a staff member, because I kind of already knew everyone and they're very friendly," he says.

Back in his early teens, James had also enjoyed the chance to take part in a Keeper for a Day experience at Edinburgh Zoo. Now, after years of rewarding volunteering, he enjoys working professionally in that very role – and he's no less enthusiastic about it than he was back then.

OBJECTIVE 3

DEVELOP OUR ZOOS AS A COMMUNITY RESOURCE

A PLACE FOR EVERYONE

Inclusivity is at the heart of the RZSS strategy. Edinburgh Zoo and Highland Wildlife Park are vital hubs where people can come together to connect with nature.

In June 2025, 138 young carers enjoyed a free day out at Edinburgh Zoo, arranged in partnership with Carers Trust Scotland and Young Carers Network. Feedback from participants showed that the event provided a vital break from daily activities and a chance for young people to 'simply be children again', with 100% able to see themselves within the zoo by suggesting a job they would like to do, and sharing something they would take away and remember from the day. Following the success of this event, RZSS has set up quarterly opportunities for young carers to engage with the zoo.

RZSS also worked with 20 partner organisations to offer complimentary access to the zoo on seven community days and to the Giant Lantern event. Attendees were asked what they would be doing if they hadn't visited the zoo. Responses showed that 39% wouldn't have engaged in nature-based and cultural activities and 61% wouldn't have been able to visit the zoo without support.



CAIRNGORMS PRIDE
Launch day celebrations were held in the Learning Hive at Highland Wildlife Park



YOUNG CARERS ACTION DAY
At Edinburgh Zoo in June 2025



SHARED MEMORIES
The young carers were given free goodie bags to take home

HUB FOR THE HIGHLANDS

At Highland Wildlife Park, the Learning Hive has provided a dynamic space to encourage community engagement and social cohesion. Some 45% of respondents attended the park for the first time, recognising the social value of the park's spaces through community events.

In March, the free Waders Welcome event celebrated the return of wading birds to the Cairngorms National Park with talks, music and stalls by local makers. This collaboration with the RSPB and Cairngorms Connect linked to the strategic goal of promoting nature through the arts and brought non-traditional zoo audiences to the park.

Highland Wildlife Park has partnered with the newly established Cairngorms Pride to become one of its recognised 'social spaces', where LGBTQ+ people can know they are safe and valued, increasing inclusion and diversity among zoo audiences and affirming the charity's commitment to inclusion. The Learning Hive hosted the launch of the Cairngorms Pride CIC, and RZSS sponsored the Cairngorms Pride art competition.

Also in 2025, Highland Wildlife Park participated in the Badenoch Heritage Festival events, hosted the AGM and a workshop for South Highland Outdoor and Woodland Learning, and started work with the national park authority and local NHS to become a venue for green prescribing.

ANIMAL CARE

RZSS placements give students the chance to get some hands-on training

OBJECTIVE 4

DEVELOP OUR ZOOS AS A SCIENTIFIC RESOURCE

SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE

On a mission to break down barriers for those in formal learning, RZSS provides safe spaces to gain transferable skills in the world of work, preparing participants for successful futures.

As part of Career Ready Scotland the charity offers mentoring and internship to young people who face barriers to pursuing their dream career. This year, two Career Ready mentees completed an 18-month programme, including a four-week

paid work placement, at Edinburgh Zoo. Following successful completion of their mentorships, previous participants have gone on to volunteer and gain successful employment with RZSS.

New pathways have also been created into the world of zoos and aquariums. Working with Scotland's Rural College (SRUC), RZSS staff identified a significant lack of opportunity for those studying animal care vocational

qualifications. Five new placements have provided vital experience within the sector, allowing students to gain key skills for a future in animal care.

RZSS also welcomed a placement in the conservation field team at Highland Wildlife Park. Over eight weeks, this student gained unique insights and skills vital to supporting the restoration of native biodiversity.

BIOBANK BUILDING



SLOW AND STEADY

The Asian forest tortoise has finally made it to the RZSS WildGenes Biobank

Samples from more than 100 species were added to the RZSS WildGenes Biobank in 2025, including 51 species that are new to the collection.

The biobank acts as a library of genetic material, preserving it for conservation research and population management.

Almost 450 samples were donated in total throughout the 12-month period, taking the mammalian species total to 216 and amphibians to 28. Twenty-two invertebrate species were added for the first time, with total invertebrate samples accounting for 22% of those submitted, up massively from 1% in 2024. Eight new reptile species were also received, including the Critically Endangered Asian forest tortoise.

The RZSS WildGenes Biobank is a hub for the European Association of Zoos and Aquariums (EAZA) Biobank and so the Edinburgh location receives materials from both RZSS sites and other UK zoos and aquariums.

RUSHENB, CC BY-SA 4.0, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

OBJECTIVE 5

ACHIEVE (NET) ZERO CARBON ZOOS AND SUSTAINABILITY

SUSTAINABILITY CHAMPIONS

RZSS continues to take major strides towards achieving net zero carbon by 2040, helping to combat the climate crisis. This resolute commitment to sustainability resulted in several awards in 2025.

At the Scottish Thistle Awards in November 2025, Edinburgh Zoo won the Climate Action Award. This accolade was in recognition of the zoo's pledge to cut its carbon footprint by 60% by 2030, for using sustainable best practice when designing habitats and for delivering community programmes that make nature more inclusive and accessible.

Sustainability also lies at the heart of Highland Wildlife Park, which was crowned Best Visitor Attraction at the Thistle Awards. Scotland's Wildlife Discovery Centre – constructed using local materials and with sustainable features such as green sedum roofs – was highlighted for its impact in empowering communities to engage with nature.

Other awards in 2025 included Runner Up in the Sustainability category of the BIAZA Awards for Edinburgh Zoo's solar meadow and Runner Up for RZSS in the WAZA Environmental Sustainability Awards,



which recognise institutions leading by example through innovative and comprehensive sustainability initiatives that reduce environmental impact and advance responsible operations.

SOLAR MEADOW

Edinburgh Zoo has the UK's largest zoo-based solar array



BLACK GOLD

Compost is sent to local farmers



RECYCLE, REFRESH, RENEW

PANEL POWER

Edinburgh Zoo's solar meadow is the UK's largest zoo-based solar array, with over 1,500 bifacial solar photovoltaic panels. It was used to power more of the zoo than ever before in 2025, contributing towards the twin goals of cutting the RZSS carbon footprint by 60% by 2030 and hitting net zero by 2040.

Over the course of the year, the solar meadow generated 941,414 kilowatt hours of electricity, with 74% of this used to provide about 25% of Edinburgh Zoo's electricity usage on site and the leftover power being returned to the grid. The power created by the solar meadow saw a reduction in grid electricity consumption that helped

save Edinburgh Zoo an impressive 130 tonnes of CO₂e, representing a significant step forward in the RZSS journey to net zero.

PLASTIC-FREE PICNICKING

Following the popularity of Edinburgh Zoo's Ape2o 'Big Ape' water refill machine, a second refill machine has been installed. This gives visitors an extra opportunity to avoid buying bottles and to fill up on chilled sparkling or still water. New solar compacting bins have also been installed in one of the zoo's picnic areas.

MAKING WASTE WORK

Edinburgh Zoo's animals produce a lot of waste, some of which is composted for use on the site's flower and vegetable beds. RZSS is now sending this black gold to a local farm to help them grow their crops.

OBJECTIVE 6

GROW THE RZSS FAMILY

INVALUABLE SUPPORT

RZSS has more members than ever before and continues to be supported by generous donors

Over the course of 2025, RZSS membership grew 9% to 52,894, giving even more people regular opportunities to get closer to nature and boosting funds for the charity's important conservation, learning and community work.

Support was shown in other ways too, including through the generosity of individual donors, RZSS Patrons and sponsors. Some £3.9 million was donated to RZSS in 2025, including the kindness of four legacy gifts.

RZSS also continues to be supported by charitable trusts and foundations and corporate partners and sponsors. Postcode Lottery supported the delivery of the RZSS conservation strategy in 2025, while a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund helped to complete Scotland's Wildlife Discovery Centre at Highland Wildlife Park.

Other major donors include the Garfield Weston Foundation, which funded RZSS invertebrates conservation, and the Weir Charitable Trust, which funded animal enrichment and community days, as well as supporting the rescued lynx that now live at Highland Wildlife Park.



JOINING IN

RZSS membership grew 9% in 2025



A FANTASTIC WEE AMBASSADOR



The birth of Haggis the pygmy hippo in October 2024 sparked a year-long campaign that saw the young calf reach global audiences, with items about her on *Saturday Night Live* and BBC Radio One's Breakfast programme. Through social media, TV and radio coverage, Haggis became an ambassador for RZSS and Scotland, as well as for her cousins in the wild. A new Hippo and Friends keeper experience quickly sold out and increases were seen across visitor numbers, membership and adoptions. Hundreds of thousands of pounds were raised for RZSS through Haggis-related gifts, helping to support the charity's work in 2025 and beyond.

YOUR GIFT CAN HAVE A LASTING IMPACT ON THE ANIMALS YOU LOVE

ADOPT AN ANIMAL

at Edinburgh Zoo or
Highland Wildlife Park.
Visit rzss.org.uk/adopt
Email membership
@rzss.org.uk

GIVE A DONATION TO RZSS

Care for the animals in your zoos
and protect them in the wild.
Visit rzss.org.uk/donate
Email supportus@rzss.org.uk

BECOME A PATRON

Enjoy a closer relationship with
RZSS through a programme
of exclusive events.
Visit rzss.org.uk/patrons
Email patrons@rzss.org.uk

BECOME A MEMBER

and enjoy great days
out at both our parks.
Visit rzss.org.uk/membership
Email membership
@rzss.org.uk

A GIFT IN YOUR WILL

to RZSS is a special way
to let your love
of animals live on.
Visit rzss.org.uk/gifts-in-wills
Email supportus@rzss.org.uk

CONNECT YOUR BUSINESS

Meet your corporate social responsibility goals and
inspire your colleagues by connecting with nature.
Email supportus@rzss.org.uk



The Royal Zoological Society of Scotland
Registered charity number: SC004064