

PRESS RELEASE

Newt Conservation Partnership

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Endangered water plant makes surprise appearance in ponds near Stroud, Gloucestershire

One of Britain's rarest water plants, Tassel Stonewort (*Tolypella intricata*), has delighted conservationists following its recent appearance in ponds near Stroud, Gloucestershire. The plant is extremely sensitive to water pollution and is classified as Endangered. Tassel Stonewort is unusual because it grows in winter, before producing spores in spring and dying back in summer.

Tassel Stonewort has surprised and delighted conservationists after it appeared in three ponds recently restored for great crested newts, near Stroud in Gloucestershire. The plant was found following work by Newt Conservation Partnership where ponds were being managed as part of the NatureSpace 'District Licensing' scheme for great crested newts, which is licensed and regulated by Natural England.

The discovery was made by Dr Pascale Nicolet, CEO of Newt Conservation Partnership, who said: "This is a very exciting discovery, and we are very pleased that work aimed at creating habitat for great crested newts has also led to the resurrection of a population of one of the most threatened water plants in Britain. It shows the importance of clean water and allowing countryside ponds to vegetate naturally after restoration or creation, because each successional phase of a pond's life supports different wildlife communities."

Commenting further, Dr Nicolet noted that: "The importance of ponds for freshwater wildlife has long been underplayed compared to rivers, but new research and practical projects are increasingly showing the critical importance of these special habitats. The discovery near Stroud is an excellent example of how creating and restoring clean water ponds brings quick conservation wins for a variety of freshwater wildlife."

The plant's identity has been confirmed by Nick Stewart, one of the foremost aquatic botanists in the UK and national stonewort referee. He commented: "Stoneworts are connoisseurs of clean water and have suffered due to both pollution and habitat loss. The decrease in grazing has also led to many ponds becoming overgrown or dominated by species which can tolerate pollution, like bulrush. Finding a completely new population of this rare plant is very positive indeed for the survival of this species."

Scientists recently called on the government for more measures to monitor, manage and protect England's smallest freshwater habitats, including countryside ponds, following recommendations by the Government's Natural Capital Committee (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-55150482>).

Prior to this new discovery, Tassel Stonewort has only been seen at a handful of locations in England over the last 20 years. Elsewhere in England, rare water plants have also recently been discovered in other conservation projects in County Durham, and in farm ponds in Suffolk and Norfolk.

The farm where the Tassel Stonewort ponds are located is already managed with conservation in mind. The landowner will continue to work with the Newt Conservation Partnership as part of the NatureSpace District Licensing scheme to ensure the ponds remain in optimum condition for Tassel Stonewort. Further work to restore and create ponds for great crested newts is also planned for the area.

The Newt Conservation Partnership is a not-for-profit organisation that creates, monitors, and manages ponds and terrestrial habitat for great crested newts, as part of the NatureSpace District Licensing scheme. For more information about the Newt Conservation Partnership, please visit: www.newtpartnership.org.uk

The NatureSpace District Licensing scheme is a method of compensating for great crested newts during development in the South Midlands and Gloucestershire. Further information is available here: www.naturespaceuk.com/district-licensing-scheme/

Natural England is the regulatory authority for wildlife licensing in England and has authorised the NatureSpace District Licensing Scheme. Alongside standard licensing responsibilities, Natural England also operates other 'District Level Licensing' schemes elsewhere in England: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/great-crested-newts-district-level-licensing-schemes>

ENDS

Notes to editors:

Stoneworts are an ancient group of giant algae from which the earliest land plants are thought to have evolved. They provide excellent foraging habitat and shelter for many freshwater animals as well as being used by newts as egg laying sites. Stoneworts are early successional pond colonisers as they prefer to root into bare substrate, are poor competitors with other plants and dislike sediment build up. The plants may once have grown unnoticed at this site and the spores could have been dormant in the soil for decades, until soil disturbance during pond restoration stimulated plant growth.

Tassel stonewort requires clean, unpolluted water, and is very sensitive to nutrient pollution, so is an excellent indicator of the cleanest water. They are also special in requiring ponds that dry out for part of the year and are 'wintergreen' (grow over winter and die back in summer). Unfortunately, water quality of ponds and ditches across Britain is often badly degraded by pollution and many of the 25 or so British species of stoneworts are now amongst the most severely threatened group of plants or animals in the United Kingdom. This decrease in water quality is largely caused by agricultural run-off, farming effluent and sewage. Additionally, loss of traditional management practices causes waterbodies which were once open to become overgrown, contributing to the decline in stonewort populations as they are outcompeted by other plants.

List of participating Councils in the NatureSpace district licensing scheme

Bedford Borough Council, Buckinghamshire Council (Aylesbury Vale area), Central Bedfordshire Council, Cheltenham Borough Council, Cherwell District Council, Cotswold District Council, Forest of Dean District Council, Gloucester City Council, Gloucestershire County Council, Milton Keynes Council, Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, South Northamptonshire Council, Stroud District Council, Tewkesbury Borough Council, West Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council.

Photos



One of the restored ponds where Tassel Stonewort was discovered in Stroud.
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Tassel Stonewort (*Tolypella intricata*) is named for its distinct tassel-like appearance.
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Tassel Stonewort (*Tolypella intricata*). Copyright Newt Conservation Partnership