# Conservationists launch £50,000 ant breeding project to save Scotland’s rare narrow-headed ant



Amid the stunning backdrop of Scotland's Cairngorms National Park, a team of conservationists faces a daunting challenge: tracking down the narrow-headed ant, one of the UK's rarest insects. This miniature creature, roughly half an inch in length, may not attract the same attention as larger endangered animals like the rhinoceros or the giant panda. However, its role in sustaining the delicate balance of ancient pine forest ecosystems is vital.

The narrow-headed ant, with its distinctive black and red colouring and unique notch at the back of its head, has been identified as a key species in the region. Conservationists believe that saving it is essential not just for the species’ survival, but for the health of the broader ecosystem. Currently, narrow-headed ants are known to nest in limited locations within the Cairngorms—most notably around Mar Lodge Estate—and their only other recognised population in the UK resides in a single site in Devon. Alarmingly, their numbers have been declining, leading to increased urgency in conservation efforts.

In a proactive move, the Cairngorms National Park authority has dedicated £50,000 to initiate a comprehensive captive breeding programme aimed at bolstering the populations of this endangered ant. The ambitious plan, slated to unfold over the next three years, entails establishing at least 50 ‘farmed’ colonies. The aim is to raise sufficient numbers in captivity before releasing them into new habitats within the wild.

The initial phase of this undertaking is particularly challenging. Conservation officer Hayley Wiswell described the arduous task of locating ant nests, which can blend seamlessly into their surroundings made of pine needles and grass. “It’s tricky because the queens in particular are really fast,” Wiswell explained. Success hinges on capturing both male and queen ants during their brief nuptial flights, typically on cloudy, mild mornings when they emerge from their nests.

In another crucial development, surveys conducted in the Cairngorms have identified 97 nests of the narrow-headed ant, showing that concerted conservation strategies such as rotational muirburning and controlled grazing can enhance the habitat's viability. Highland gamekeepers have been pivotal in these efforts, employing traditional land management techniques that have cultivated the open heather landscape essential for the ants.

The technique for breeding these ants is innovative and experimental. Once collected, queens and males from different nests are paired in controlled environments, where the queens are monitored closely until they begin producing eggs. These young ants are nurtured in specially designed enclosures that mimic their natural habitats, allowing them to develop into self-sufficient colonies over the course of a year.

As the project progresses, conservationists remain hopeful that their efforts will significantly bolster the vulnerable populations of these ants. Because narrow-headed ants perform crucial ecological roles—such as controlling herbivorous insect populations, aiding in soil aeration, and dispersing seeds—they are considered a keystone species. Their abundance supports not only their environment but also the wildlife that relies on them for food.

Despite the challenges ahead, the commitment to rescuing the narrow-headed ant underscores a broader narrative about the importance of biodiversity conservation in the face of changing environmental conditions. As these conservation initiatives unfold in the Highlands, the future of not just the narrow-headed ant, but the intricate tapestry of life in the region, hangs in the balance.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14790303/Is-worlds-toughest-job-catching-tiny-ANTS-1-700-sq-mile-beauty-spot.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[4]](https://www.woodants.org.uk/species/narrowheadedant)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14790303/Is-worlds-toughest-job-catching-tiny-ANTS-1-700-sq-mile-beauty-spot.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.scottishgamekeepers.co.uk/latest-news/2024/2024-06-14-gamekeeper-management-helping-threatened-ant.php), [[5]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-53861750)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-53861750), [[6]](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-explorer/invertebrates/ants/narrow-headed-ant)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.scottishgamekeepers.co.uk/latest-news/2024/2024-06-14-gamekeeper-management-helping-threatened-ant.php), [[4]](https://www.woodants.org.uk/species/narrowheadedant), [[6]](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-explorer/invertebrates/ants/narrow-headed-ant)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14790303/Is-worlds-toughest-job-catching-tiny-ANTS-1-700-sq-mile-beauty-spot.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.scottishgamekeepers.co.uk/latest-news/2024/2024-06-14-gamekeeper-management-helping-threatened-ant.php> - Highland gamekeepers have implemented rotational muirburning and grazing management to preserve one of Scotland's rarest ants, the narrow-headed ant. Recent surveys in the Cairngorms National Park, particularly around Carrbridge, have identified 97 nests of this endangered species. Effective moorland management, including controlled burning and grazing, has maintained open heathland habitats essential for the ants. The Seafield Estate, managed by gamekeepers, has been instrumental in supporting these conservation efforts, highlighting the importance of traditional land management practices in preserving biodiversity.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-53861750> - Conservationists are working to boost the population of the UK's rarest ant, the narrow-headed ant, found in only six known sites, with the Cairngorms serving as a stronghold. The project involves capturing winged male and queen ants during their nuptial flight, mating them in controlled environments, and releasing the mated queens back into suitable habitats. This initiative aims to supplement the existing threatened population and is set to continue in the following year, emphasizing the need for ongoing conservation efforts for this species.
4. <https://www.woodants.org.uk/species/narrowheadedant> - The narrow-headed ant (Formica exsecta) is a rare species in the UK, now found only in the Scottish Highlands and a single site in Devon. It constructs distinctive thatched nests in open areas at the edges of scrub and is associated with various habitats, including grassland, dry heath, and Caledonian pine woodland. The species is listed as endangered on the UK's Red List and is a priority species under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, highlighting the need for targeted conservation efforts.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-53861750> - Conservationists are attempting to boost numbers of one of the UK's rarest ants. There are only six known sites of the narrow-headed ant, with the Cairngorms being a stronghold for the species. Conservationists have been catching winged male and queen ants as they emerge from nests. They are then placed in chambers indoors, protected from predators and bad weather, where they mate before the queens are released back into the wild. The sites where the queens are released have the type of habitat the species thrive in, areas of pinewood with plenty of open space that allows sunlight in to warm the ants' nests. Twenty-one mated queens have been released so far this year in the project in the Deeside area of the Cairngorms.
6. <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-explorer/invertebrates/ants/narrow-headed-ant> - The narrow-headed ant is one of the rarest ants in the UK, now restricted to Scotland and Devon. It constructs small and distinctive mounded nests, topped with a thatch of nibbled grass or heather fragments. Nests are orientated towards the sun, in open areas at the edges of scrub. Narrow-headed ant colonies are much smaller than those of wood ants, numbering around 1000 individuals. They often forage for aphid honeydew on surrounding plants, such as gorse, birch and buckthorn, but also prey upon and scavenge many different types of invertebrates.
7. <https://www.buglife.org.uk/bugs/bug-directory/narrow-headed-ant/> - The narrow-headed ant (Formica exsecta) is a very rare wood ant in the UK, now restricted to the Scottish Highlands and a single site in Devon. It constructs distinctive thatched nests in open areas at the edges of scrub and is associated with various habitats, including grassland, dry heath, and Caledonian pine woodland. The species is listed as endangered on the UK's Red List and is a priority species under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, highlighting the need for targeted conservation efforts.