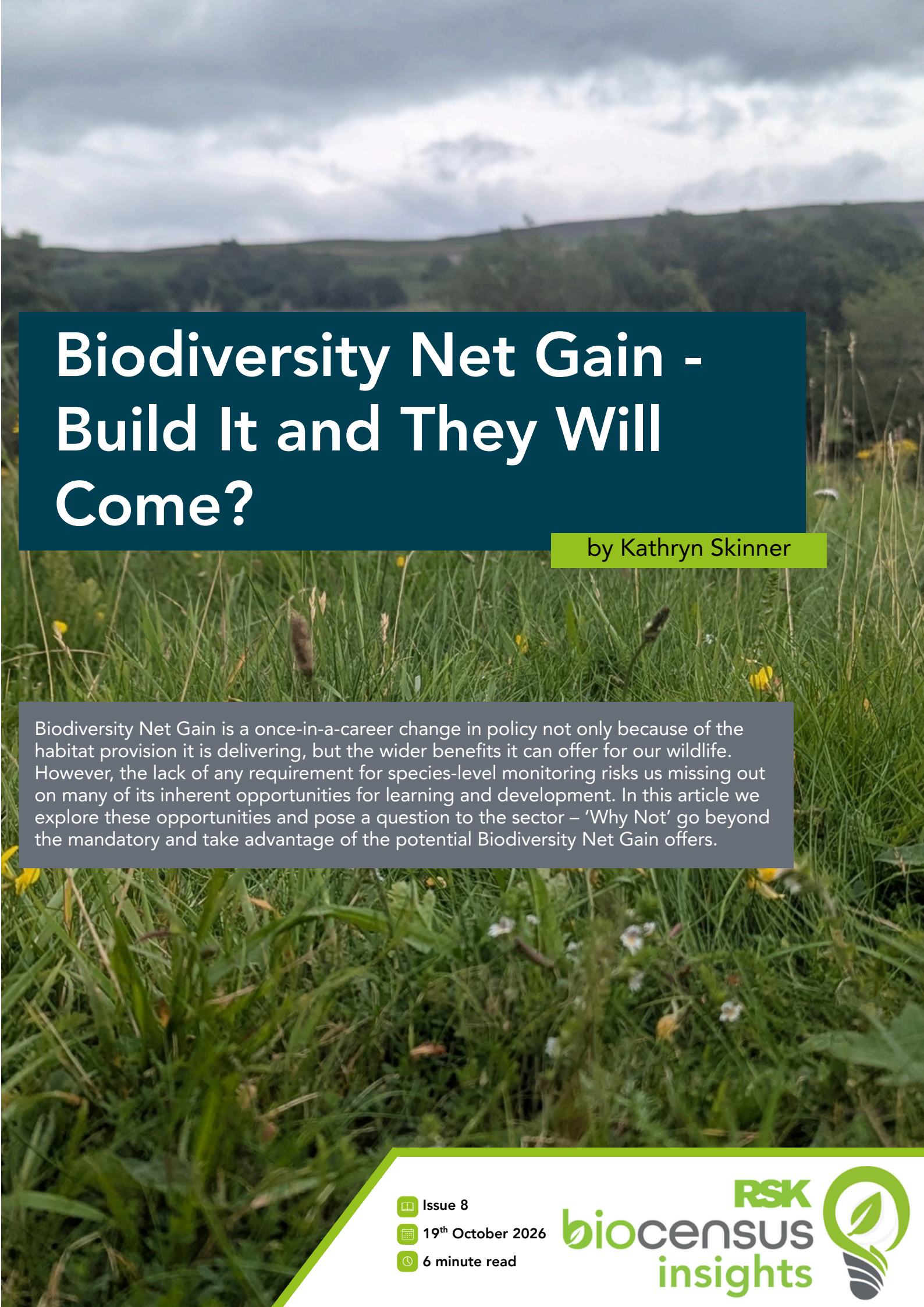

Biodiversity Net Gain - Build It and They Will Come?

by Kathryn Skinner

Biodiversity Net Gain is a once-in-a-career change in policy not only because of the habitat provision it is delivering, but the wider benefits it can offer for our wildlife. However, the lack of any requirement for species-level monitoring risks us missing out on many of its inherent opportunities for learning and development. In this article we explore these opportunities and pose a question to the sector – 'Why Not' go beyond the mandatory and take advantage of the potential Biodiversity Net Gain offers.

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THE BNG QUESTION

Habitat creation in England has been fundamentally changed by the implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) policy. However, while BNG prescribes detailed and long-term habitat management requirements, there is no mandatory requirement to monitor how, when or even if wildlife responds. So, if BNG is intended to restore nature, why do we measure habitats but not whether wildlife actually returns?

The UK has a long and rich history of nature recording: dedicated amateur naturalists recording observations of the natural world around them, often with no end goal or specific research question in mind. Today this information is an invaluable resource, allowing us to investigate questions that may never have occurred to those original data collectors, from changes in the arrival time of spring, to determining long-term species trends and the events which may have affected them.

While many programmes continue in this tradition today, ecological consultancy surveys are typically dictated by legislative requirements, best practice guidance, client budgets and the 'So What' principle. As a result, the nature and scale of data collected are often constrained. While this is understandable, as ecologists our role is typically not to research but often to focus principally on the assessment of impacts, the result is that we are often unable to ask open-ended questions or collect long-term monitoring data. This has meant that many forms of mitigation are based on anecdotal findings rather than detailed evidence.

However, perhaps with the advent of BNG, we find ourselves with a new opportunity. BNG is a once-in-a-career change in policy and offers incredible opportunities for learning and development, many of these falling outside its mandatory requirements.

> "If BNG is intended to restore nature, **why** do we measure habitats but **not** whether wildlife actually returns?"

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME?

BNG focuses on habitat provision, working on the basis of a 'build it and they will come' principle. Indeed, where good quality habitats are created in suitable locations, this will, at least to some degree, undoubtedly be the case. However, within the BNG policy framework there is an absence of any requirement for species monitoring or assessment to ensure this occurs. As a result, even if wildlife does colonise these newly created habitats, we may never know when it happened, how quickly species arrived, or which management approaches were most successful. The absence of such knowledge risks the repetition of ineffective habitat creation or management activities and limits our understanding of how effective BNG interventions really are for wildlife, for example whether there are management activities that will accelerate invertebrate colonisation or the age that woodland planting needs to reach before becoming occupied by breeding birds.

Perhaps, therefore, BNG offers us an opportunity to get back to the roots of the naturalists of old, to undertake long-term monitoring of the wildlife using these sites, not because we have to, but because of the enormous opportunities it provides to maximise the wider benefits of habitat creation.

If we are to do this, then it is vital that we act now when BNG is in its infancy and many habitat banks around the country are still commencing their habitat creation works. If we don't then, while every new scheme will offer a fresh opportunity, we will miss the opportunity to imbed this thinking in the habitat creation process or to capture data from the current large-scale habitat creation works that have resulted from the introduction of BNG policy.

Unfortunately, as with many things in life, simply deciding that something should happen isn't enough. Any form of wider species monitoring will inherently incur costs, and for BNG to remain viable, the extent to which additional costs, particularly those associated with non-mandatory requirements, can be passed on, will be limited.

Figure 1. Upland calcareous grassland secured through BNG. We monitor the condition but not whether this grassland is actually leading to an increase in the species that rely on these habitats (Photo credit: Calum Rennie May).

THE SOLUTION?

Fortunately, today we have a wide range of low-cost survey solutions available for collecting and analysing ecological data. These include increasingly cost-effective acoustic detectors (Figure 2) covering air, soil and water, camera traps capable of surveying everything from mammals to moths, automated species identification software, and continual advances in the accuracy and sensitivity of DNA analysis.

Figure 2. Audio Moth acoustic detectors – an inexpensive method of monitoring species (Photo credit: Kathryn Skinner).

Furthermore, the benefit of such species monitoring falling outside of mandatory requirements means that the monitoring of species on BNG sites does not necessarily need to reflect the scale of survey effort typically associated with ecological consultancy work, nor does it necessarily need to attempt to capture everything associated with a site. Quality data collection on a single or small group of species for which BNG interventions are expected to be particularly beneficial is likely to provide considerable insights, providing that monitoring is appropriately designed so that data is collected in a consistent and repeatable form with accurate record keeping.

It also provides an opportunity to give equal consideration to our more common and widespread species. While recent assessments have indicated that 80% of UK native species are considered to be of Least Concern (as of 2022)[1] [2], this doesn't mean that they are immune from decline. Although ecological consultancy often focuses on species receiving specific protections, it is the common and widespread species that typically form the backbone of a healthy ecosystem. Long-term data on such species, therefore, provides the opportunity for issues to be identified early, allowing us to spot the next decline while we still have time to take effective action.

Even outside the long-term benefits that such data collection may provide to our understanding and learning, there will be intangible benefits to the clients purchasing biodiversity units. Clients are increasingly interested in the wider benefits associated with BNG and other forms of habitat provision. Species records can expand the narrative available, placing potentially obtuse habitat creation practices into a more accessible context for stakeholders and local communities, supporting clients in engagement activities and increasing buy-in and support for such practices.

CONCLUSION

So perhaps, on occasion, when the situation is suitable, we should challenge ourselves to stop asking 'So What' and instead ask 'Why Not'.

Why Not monitor beyond that which is strictly required? Why Not encourage greater interest in our common species? Why Not collect data without always knowing the questions it might one day answer? BNG provides us with a unique opportunity for study on a national scale, so Why Not take advantage of it?

Key Takeaway:
BNG can deliver far more than habitat creation alone. By incorporating proportionate, long-term species monitoring, we can learn which interventions genuinely benefit wildlife and build a stronger evidence base for future nature recovery.

"BNG provides us with a unique **opportunity** for study on a national scale, so why not take **advantage** of it?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathryn Skinner BSc (Hons) MSc MCIEEM is a Principal Consultant with RSK Wilding and has worked in ecological consultancy for the last 13 years. Originally focusing on bats, Kathryn has specialised in BNG for the last four years, providing BNG technical advice to projects at a range of scales and supporting the development of strategic approaches to BNG delivery. Kathryn has a particular interest in long-term ecological monitoring and the application of BNG-derived understanding to novel applications.

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