

Wildlife Survey based on Land West of Alexandra Road, Great Wakering, Essex



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*** Front page photographs comprise a small selection taken by residents in and around the borders of WG3 over the past 18 months. Pictures include: ~ Badger, Cuckoo, Grass Snake, Turtle Dove, Lizards, Slow Worm, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Green Woodpecker, Cinnabar Moth and Sparrow Hawk.**

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to present the findings of an informal wildlife survey conducted among the residents of Alexandra Road and others who use this land for recreational purposes.

It has been produced over the last 6 weeks to put on record what wildlife has been observed and recorded by the residents over the last 12 to 18 months. It has been done to demonstrate the richness of the wildlife that exists in this area.

It provides evidence of sightings of Protected Species and Species of Principal Importance during that period, including photographs, clearly showing that the land is in use by such species now!

It is being presented to Rochford District Council (RDC) as the Planning Authority for the area, to help inform their current considerations and discussions regarding the potential change of use of this land from greenbelt to residential development, as proposed under Option West Great Wakering 3 (WGW3) in the Core Strategy Allocations options assessment.

It also demonstrates the value of this land to RDC in enabling RDC to meet its biodiversity obligations and targets.

Thank you to all residents and others who have contributed their observations to this survey.

Why it has been produced now

It has been produced now for three reasons:

1. as a result of partial clearance of this land by the current landowners that took place on 12th March 2012.
2. because this piece of land has been identified by RDC CS Planning Allocations DPD Discussion and Consultation document (dated February 2010) as one part of option WGW3, where it is understood that detailed consideration of these options is to take place during the rest of this year.
3. because an Outline Planning Application (12/00044/OUT) for this land (or part thereof) was lodged with RDC in February 2012. Although this application was subsequently withdrawn, it indicates a clear intention by the landowners to develop this land for residential purposes.

Environmental Characteristics of this land

Location and Designation

The field to the west of Alexandra Road extends down from Exhibition Lane to the northern edge of the properties in Milton Hall Close. Its use is defined as agricultural land. It is designated as "Greenbelt".

Allocations Option

It is one of the three separate pieces of land defined as forming Allocation Option WG3.

Its area is defined as 2.8Ha under option WG3 referred to previously.

It has distinctly different biodiversity characteristics than the other two areas identified as comprising this option. A fact that has not been clearly referred to in the Biodiversity Assessment for this option.

Biodiversity Characteristics

This land was last cultivated over 30 years ago. Since then it has returned to nature. A variety of protected and unprotected wildlife have moved in. A diverse and in places dense mixture of vegetation (trees, bushes, flowers) have taken over the land and have grown and matured.

Mosaic Site

The site conforms to at least two separate types of environment identified on the Natural England (NE) Habitats and Features Decision Tree, which forms part of the Protected Species area of the NE website. This decision tree is used to identify features on application sites that are likely to be associated with protected species:

Woodland (including scrub and hedgerows) on, adjacent to or linked to the application site,

Ponds or slow flowing water bodies (e.g. ditches) on or within 500 metres of the site and linked by semi-natural habitat (e.g. grassland/pasture, woodland, hedgerows)

The Decision Tree can be accessed using the following link:

http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/Decision-tree_tcm6-21619.pdf

Local Wildlife Site (LWS)

The western border of the southern part of the site, directly borders for several 100 yards the Local Wildlife Site (LWS) R35 - Star Lane Pits, identified in the RDC CS as a site of "significant wildlife value".

It is difficult to detect on the ground the actual boundary between this land and the LWS. Wildlife uses these areas interchangeably.

Survey Results Summary

Key Findings

The survey has identified that a broad range of species currently live, breed, feed, sleep, hibernate, etc. on the natural environment provided by this land, including:

Protected Species as defined by Natural England, including Bats, Badgers, Slowworms, Grass Snakes

Species of Principal Importance as defined by Natural England, a total of 18 already identified including Hedgehogs, Lizards, Cuckoo, Yellow Hammer, Turtle Doves.

A variety of **other species** including Woodpecker, Kestrel, Sparrow Hawks Kingfisher, Crested Newts, were also noted together with a wide variety of more commonplace species were also recorded.

Links to the relevant pages on the Natural England website follow:

Protected Species

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/planningdevelopment/spatialplanning/standingadvice/specieslinks.aspx>

Species of Principal Importance.

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/biodiversity/protectandmanage/habsandspeciesimportance.aspx>

The Survey also includes Back Garden observations i.e. land which backs onto the site, including the presence of badger, many bird species including Jay, Blue Tit, Collard Dove, Song Thrush, and a variety of Finches, etc.

Survey Results Attached

A fuller version of the Survey Results, noting the availability of photographic evidence, is presented in the separate paper that accompanies this document.

Survey to Continue

The survey provides a snapshot of the current situation. Given that we are at the start of the migratory bird season, it is the intention to continue to monitor and record the position and to provide periodic updates to inform RDC and other interested parties of the ongoing position regarding this site.

For example, in recent days Cuckoos have been heard and Swifts have been seen over this land. Turtle doves have recently returned

Other Observations

In addition a visit to the site by a representative of the Essex Wildlife Trust (EWT) has recorded separately the existence of blackbird, song thrush, robin, dunnock, bullfinch, chaffinch, greenfinch, goldfinch, house sparrow, blue tit, great tit, long-tailed tit, jay, starling, green woodpecker and great spotted woodpecker.

Results will be Shared with Interested Parties

As this survey has identified the presence of Protected Species and Species of Principal Importance on this land, these results are being shared with the relevant wildlife and biodiversity conservation bodies to help inform future communications between those bodies, the landowners, and RDC.

Biodiversity Value of this Land

Unique area

This is a unique area within West Great Wakering (and possibly Rochford District).

Of the various sites identified by the Allocations document for the WGW area for both business and / or residential development, it is the only one that is not either a brownfield site or a site under current cultivation or active management. None of these other sites have gone back to nature.

Essex Wildlife Trust Observations

In an email to RDC EWT have described the land including Star Lane Pits LWS and the adjoining scrub habitat as representing "a biodiversity 'hotspot' in an area which is predominantly composed of residential developments and agricultural land. The land comprising Option WG3 is an area of dense hawthorn/blackthorn scrub and young and semi-mature trees, which forms an important extension and valuable buffer habitat adjoining Star Lane Pits Local Wildlife Site."

EWT go on to say that "the clearance and development of site WG3 would not only result in a major reduction in biodiversity on the site itself; the loss of this site would result in an additional adverse impact on the biodiversity of the adjoining local wildlife site, leaving it isolated and severing the habitat network connecting it to the wider landscape."

CS Allocations Options Assessment

Assessment Criteria

The Allocations Sustainability Appraisal criteria produced by RDC define the Biodiversity Objective as "*To conserve and Enhance biological and geological diversity of the environment...*".

Under the Decision Aiding Questions produced as part of the Allocations Sustainability Appraisal, it asks whether the option will "*conserve / enhance natural /semi-natural habitats?*", will it "*conserve and enhance species diversity, and in particular avoid harm to protected species and priority species?*" and finally "*would a new development integrate within it opportunities for new habitat creation,*" etc.

Reference is also made in the Decision Aiding Questions to the proximity of option WG3 to the LWS, and the need for a "*buffer to be created between that site and residential development and dwellings*".

Survey Implications for RDC Biodiversity Obligations

The results of the survey provide tangible evidence that this land already supports both Protected Species and Species of Principal Importance.

It is demonstrably a precious wildlife resource, directly contributing to the biodiversity objectives for the District.

It shares a common boundary with the LWS. It is therefore within the 500 metre neighbouring habitat criteria referred to in the Ponds and Slow-Flowing Water habitat as defined in the NE Protected Species Habitat Decision Tree.

It provides a clear buffer between the existing residences in Alexandra Road / Milton Hall Close and the LWS.

Implications for Planning Process

Dealing with Protected Species / Species of Principal Importance

It is assumed that the standing advice provided by Natural England regarding "**Dealing with Protected Species in the Planning Process**" will be applicable in the case of this land.

The Species and Planning Flowchart can be found using the following link:

http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/FlowchartFINAL_tcm6-21596.pdf

In addition given the presence of Species of Principal Importance it is also assumed that the NE guidance relating to "**Other species of conservation concern**" will also be applicable.

NE link as follows:

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/planningdevelopment/spatialplanning/standingadvice/faq.aspx - q3a>

Enhanced level of scrutiny

In view of the results of the survey showing the presence of these protected and important species, an enhanced level of scrutiny by interested parties of any actions on or proposals involving this land, can be anticipated throughout the planning process.

For example, to ensure that any changes made to this land both prior to and during the formal planning process, will take place in a way that ensures that all parties adhere to the requirements and protections defined by the NE guidance, particularly for the Protected Species and the Species of Principal Importance identified by this survey.

Such scrutiny will apply not just to this land, but also to any changes that might be proposed regarding the adjoining LWS, particularly where such proposals would result in a reduction of the biodiversity value of either or both of these sites.

Other Points

Landowner Surveys

It is understood that the current landowners have carried out wildlife assessments to cover the areas upon which they will be putting forward planning proposals.

The results of these assessments have not been placed in the public domain, so it has not proved possible to compare their findings with the results of this survey.

It is to be hoped that in the light of the findings presented here, any future assessments are conducted to a suitable level of completeness and thoroughness, for example sampling at different times of the year to reflect the migratory and transitory populations that make use of the site, as well as those species that are permanently resident.

It is also hoped that these assessments will be placed in the public domain at the earliest opportunity to show the transparency and openness of the findings.

Danger of further clearance

In an informal meeting held on 14th March 2012 between a representative of the landowners (Ian Beatwell), a local councilor (Councilor Seagers), and a local resident (Marion Sawyer), the intention of the landowners / developers to clear this land was mentioned.

Whilst this clearance cannot take place during the nesting bird season, it is a serious concern that the landowners will clear and hence destroy the biodiversity value of the rest of the site once the nesting season is over.

Any such clearance would significantly increase the "biodiversity deficit" faced by RDC, making it more difficult for RDC to meet its biodiversity obligations and targets.

Conclusion

In producing and publishing this survey what we have sought to do is provide current information about the richness and diversity of the wildlife habitat provided by this piece of land.

It has also been produced to counter claims made by those who consider that this land is of little biodiversity value.

It is to be hoped that the evidence provided by this survey proves beyond reasonable doubt that Protected Species and Species of Principal Importance are present on this land, and that its proximity to the LWS provides a complementary habitat to the LWS as defined in the Natural England Decision Tree.

It is being presented for the information and consideration of RDC and other interested parties, including those with a responsibility for overseeing the wellbeing and safeguarding of wildlife in this country.

These findings clearly demonstrate the biodiversity value of this land. They show the contribution this land is **already making to support RDC** in meeting its stated commitment to "*the protection, promotion and enhancement of biodiversity throughout the District*" as described in para 8.4 of the Local Development Framework Core Strategy (CS).

The recording of both Protected Species and Species of Principal Importance on this land provides strong reasons for this land to be removed from the list of possible Allocations Options development sites. Its development would represent a major reduction in the biodiversity of the District.

We are happy to share this information with interested parties to help inform any future consideration of RDC planning allocation options, and to any planning applications to develop this piece of land.

We look forward with interest to receiving comments as to how the results and implications of the survey findings will be addressed by Rochford District Council and other interested parties, including how the results of the survey are to be taken forward in the Allocations Assessment.