

## CHAPTER 3 WILDLIFE

### Introduction

The council, concerned at the loss of valuable wildlife areas, commissioned Reading Urban Wildlife Group (RUWG) to carry out a survey of Reading in the mid 1980's. The most important sites for nature conservation were identified and designated as Wildlife Heritage Sites (WHS). These sites were mapped, details entered onto the 'Recorder' data-base and included in the Local Plan. Specific policies were written to protect the WHS's from development which could adversely effect them, via the planning process.

Between 1990 and 1993 the rest of the county was surveyed by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Naturalist Trust (BBONT) to identify WHS's and a system of numbering devised incorporating Reading's sites. A list of the distribution of Reading's forty two WHS's are included, with Local Plan and 'Recorder' numbers (See Table 3.1). In July 1998, a set of revised criteria for WHS's, was approved by the Berkshire Nature Conservation Forum, and, as sites are resurveyed to check current nature conservation value they will be reassessed against these new criteria. Any sites not meeting the standard will be de-designated, and any new sites found can be considered for WHS status.

Some WHSs of particular value for educational purposes, or for public enjoyment of wildlife were submitted to English Nature for conservation as Local Nature Reserves (LNR). Reading currently has two LNRs - Clayfield Copse in Peppard Ward and West Reading Woodlands which incorporates five separate sites in Tilehurst, Kentwood and Norcot Wards.

Wildlife links have also been designated in the adopted Reading Borough Local Plan as green areas linking these important sites for wildlife, and a policy included to protect them from adverse development. In addition, a Woodlands Plan has been prepared for the management of twenty-two woodland sites in Reading and a detailed ecological assessment was carried out at five of these sites by the council. RUWG was commissioned by the council to carry out an Aquatic Invertebrate Survey of the Kennet Valley.

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### Legislation and Guidance

#### International policies and designations ratified by the UK Government

- **The Berne Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats**

Ratified by the UK in 1982, legislates for the protection of habitats and certain listed species of plants and animals, especially migratory species.

- **The Bonn Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species**

Ratified by the UK in 1985, safeguards sites for certain listed species including protection for important bat feeding areas.

- **The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance**

Ratified by the UK in 1976, legislates for the protection of wildfowl habitats and allows for the designation of RAMSAR sites.

- **The European Community Council Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds, 79/409/EEC 1979**

Sets out general rules for habitat protection and legislates for the designation of Special Protection Areas (SPAs).

- **The European Community Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora 92/43/EEC 1992**

Identifies habitats and species of special interest within the European Community, and legislates for the notification of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).

### **Acts of Parliament**

**The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981** is the main piece of legislation protecting Britain's flora and fauna together with the Amendment of 1985 and subsequent Variation of Schedule Orders. Part 1 of the 1981 Act deals with the protection of plant and animal species, the first eight sections dealing solely with birds which are the most comprehensively covered group.

All wild birds (defined as species which are resident or are visitors to Great Britain, but generally not game birds) are protected by law. Within this blanket protection there are variations which allow hunting of certain birds at specified times of year, and the killing of pest species by authorised people, subject to the issue of a special licence. As far as planning and development is concerned, it is an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take any wild bird or to take, damage or destroy its nest or eggs. Some species, listed in Schedule 1 of the Act, receive special protection because of their rarity and it is an additional offence to disturb them whilst they are nesting.

The legal protection afforded to other animals is not as comprehensive as that for birds, with only certain species, listed in Schedule 5, receiving full protection. Mammals receiving protection both for themselves and their habitat are: all bats, dormouse, pine marten, otter, red squirrel, wild-cat and all cetaceans. Water voles were added to Schedule 5 in 1998 to protect their habitats. Badgers receive similar protection under the 1992 Act described below. Schedule 5 also includes insects, reptiles and amphibians.

Plants receive blanket protection in that no unauthorised person may uproot any wild plant, and that anyone picking, destroying or uprooting or offering for sale a Schedule 8 plant is guilty of an offence. Schedule 8 plants are the very rare species which are listed in Appendix 1. The original Schedules in the 1981 Act have changed and are periodically updated.

This Act and the 1985 Amendment also relate to the notification and subsequent protection of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

**The Protection of Badgers Act 1992** consolidated the previous legislation and makes it an offence to wilfully kill, injure or take a badger or to cruelly ill-treat it. It strengthens previous legislation by making it an offence to interfere with a sett by any of the following:

- damaging a badger sett or any part of it
- destroying a badger sett
- obstructing access to a badger sett
- causing a dog to enter a sett
- disturbing a badger when it is occupying a sett.

**The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000** requires owners to trim back overhanging vegetation to footpaths and bridleways and excludes mechanically propelled vehicles, such as quad bikes. It also empowers the courts to deal with obstructed rights of way and provides for the mapping of the four million acres of open countryside in England and Wales (one ninth of the land surface of the country).

Other provisions include powers to:

- make traffic regulations on roads to conserve natural beauty
- strengthen the nature conservation agencies' role in protecting Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)
- promote the conservation of important habitats and species
- revise and clarify the definition of town and village greens.

### **Statutory Instruments**

#### **The Conservation (National Habitats, & c.) Regulations 1994**

Brings into force the European Community Directive outlined above. This contains additional requirements for certain species and habitats.

### **National Guidance**

- **Planning Policy Guidance Notes (PPGs)**

#### **PPG 9 – Nature Conservation**

Covers England & Wales and sets out the Government's objectives for nature conservation, and the framework for safeguarding natural heritage under UK and international law. It emphasises the importance of both designated and undesignated areas for nature conservation and advises on the treatment of nature conservation in development plans. It sets out development control criteria especially for SSSIs and sites with additional national and international designations.

### **Regional Guidance**

- **A Sustainable Development Strategy for the South East (1998)**

This document, produced by SERPLAN, puts forward an overall strategy for the development of the region, and will lead to the publication by Government of revised Regional Planning Guidance. It contains policy EE2 for local authorities to protect designated areas and to draw up Biodiversity Action Plans for their areas in conjunction with statutory and voluntary agencies. Policy EE4 states that local authorities should work with other agencies to safeguard and enhance wildlife features.

## Local Policy and Initiatives

- **Berkshire Structure Plan 1991-2006 (1995)**

The Plan contains Policies EN8 and EN9 to protect statutory nature conservation sites including Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), SPA's and SSSI's. None of these have been designated in Reading. Development will not normally be permitted which would be detrimental to LNR's, WHS's or protected species.

- **Reading Borough Local Plan**

The Plan contains policies to protect LNRs and WHS's from development which would destroy or adversely affect them. Trees, hedges and woodlands are protected against damage or removal and wildlife links have been identified and similarly protected. Another policy promotes habitat creation and enhancement.

## Wildlife Habitats In Reading

The range of habitats designated as WHS's is wide-ranging from the town's waterways to an old railway branch line. There are some interesting woodlands, including Clayfield Copse LNR, which is included in English Nature's 1995 Inventory of Ancient Woodland and noted as supporting 20 Ancient Woodland indicator species. These are plants strongly associated with land which has been continuously wooded since at least 1600 AD (the definition of 'ancient woodland'). Other woodlands surviving in Reading include Lousehill Copse, Blundells Copse, The Rookery, Prospect Park and Round Copse in West Reading and the Warren Woodlands in Caversham. These woodlands have been taken into management by the council, assisted by local volunteers. A programme of coppicing and clearing has been carried out where appropriate to create the best conditions for local flora and fauna.

Number	Site Name	Recorder File Code
C 44.1	Mclroy Park	SU67S01
C 52.1	Round Copse	
C 52.4	Scarp woodland, Norcot Road	SU76W02
C 53.1	Blundells Copse, The Moor	SU67R04
D 41.2	Thames towpath, opposite Appletree Eyot	SU67X06
D 53.1	Lousehill Copse N	SU67W02
D 53.2	Lousehill Copse S	
D 61.1	Meadway Fringe Woodland (two sites)	SU67W03
D 62.1	The Rookery, Prospect Park	SU67W01
D 64.1	Devils Dip, Bath Road	SU67W04
D 73.1	Meadows east of the Burghfield Road	SU67V02
D 74.1	Meadows north of Kennet and Avon canal	SU67V03
D 74.2	Meadows north of Southcote Lock	SU67V04
E 33.1	The Warren Woodlands (Chalkpit)	SU67X02
E 33.2	The Warren Woodlands (Chalkpit Wood)	
E 33.3	The Warren Woodlands (Long Drain)	
E 34.1	The Warren Woodlands (Chazey Woodland)	
F 41.2	The Warren Woodlands (Grass Hill Woodland)	
F 42.4	The Warren Woodlands (Warren Court Woodland)	SU67X02
E 41.1	Little John's Farm	SU67X01
E 41.2	Little John's Farm	
E 73.3	River Kennet/Southcote Lock plus unmanaged Farmland at Southcote (Southcote Lock South Kennet Meadows)	SU67V08 SU67V09
E 74.1	Kennet & Avon canal plus River Kennet (part)	SU77A02
F 22.1	Gravel Hill Hedges	SU77D03
F 24.1	Hemdean Bottom Public Footpath	SU77D04

F 43.3	Cow Lane Verges	SU67X05
F 51.3	Cow Lane Depot	SU77B03
F 63.1	Coley Park, Wensley Road	SU77B04
F 71.1	Fobney Meadows	SU77A03
F 71.2	Holy Brook	SU67V07
F 71.3	Coley Branch Line	SU77A04
F 71.4	Heron Island	SU77A06
G 21.1	Furzeplatt, Hemdean Bottom	SU77D05
G 22.1	Reading Golf Course	SU77D02
G 23.1	Chalk Grassland, Highdown School	SU77D06
G 23.2	Beech Wood/Highdown Wood	SU77D08
G 24.4	Rotherfield Way Copse	SU77D07
G 31.3	Victoria Road Cemetery	SU77C04
G 61.4	Holy Brook	SU77B02
G 61.5	River Kennet	SU77B05
G 61.6	River Kennet	SU77B06
G 63.1	Holy Brook	SU77B01
G 63.4	River Kennet	SU77A05
G 73.1	Rose Kiln Lane Meadow	SU77A03
H 21.1	Clayfield Copse LNR	SU77I02
H72.1	Whitley Park Farm	SU77F01
H 84.1	The Cowsey	SU77F02
J 21.1	Milestone Wood North	SU77I04
J 51.4	Kennet Mouth West	SU77G03
J 53.1	Reading Cemetery	SU77G04
J 71.1	Whiteknights Park (part)	SU77F03

**Table 3.1 – Wildlife Heritage Sites in Reading**

Besides woodland, hedgerows and individual trees are an important part of the town's landscape. Hedgerows of native species are vital to wildlife - offering nest sites, food and shelter to birds, small mammals and invertebrates.

Reading has several trees of national value including a British champion willow, *Salix pendulina* 'excelsior' near Napier Road with the largest girth in the country. The weeping purple beech in Reading Cemetery is also one of the largest in the UK. In 1993 the Borough Council planted 1000 trees to enhance the town, and each year about 300 more are planted in schools and parks to mark National Tree Week. This work is co-ordinated by the Caversham Court Environment Centre. A new hedge was created along The Warren woodland, and another in Prospect Park. Schools are involved closely with schemes to plant shrubs and trees across the town.

The council has set up a project in partnership with the Urban Wildlife Group called 'Trees for our Future'. Local seeds, cuttings and saplings are being collected and brought to the Caversham Court Environment Centre. Volunteers transplant the seeds and young trees, taking care of them with the ultimate aim of planting out 6000 locally sourced trees for the Millennium. These will be mainly sited in public open space, but some may be on private land in the Reading area.

Trees of particular value or interest are protected from being felled or damaged by Tree Preservation Orders (TPO). By 1995, 361 such orders had been issued and if work is proposed that could affect a protected tree, permission must be obtained from the council. This topic is also mentioned in Chapter 2 – Landscape and the Built Environment.

Although Reading is famous for its Thameside setting, just as important for wildlife are its other waterways. The Kennet Valley in the southwest of Reading contains several WHS's and TPO's. The aquatic environment supports a range of insects, which in turn are food for birds and fish. Bats are often seen at dusk flying low to take insects emerging from the water and there are several notable bat roosts in the town. Club-tailed dragonflies are found along the Thames to the west of Caversham Bridge. Sand martins nest in a brick wall next to the river and canal in central Reading and kingfishers are often seen along the watercourses in Reading. It is hoped that one day otters will return, and artificial holts have been constructed

near quiet stretches of water. The marginal plants such as purple loosestrife, orange balsam, water forget-me-not and reed sweet-grass growing along rivers and canals are attractive to human residents, and offer food and shelter to butterflies, moths and other invertebrates. The Red Data Book plant, Loddon lily, grows within the Borough near the Thames. Red data plants are those considered to be nationally rare or threatened.

Near to the waterways and frequently flooded, are meadows which are often cattle grazed and contain a range of interesting and unusual plants. Examples are Rose Kiln Lane meadows and meadows east of Burghfield Road, north of the canal, north of Southcote Lock and Fobney meadows. Grazing is the best management as cattle keep coarser plants down allowing less competitive species to survive. The "poaching" effect of trampling creates ideal conditions for seeds to germinate. Across these meadows are drainage ditches, many of which hold a wide range of aquatic invertebrates, many being nationally rare. The Aquatic Invertebrate survey carried out by RUWG, at the request of the Borough Council, has produced some very interesting results. In Fobney Meadows alone, five sampling sites all had locally rare species, two had notable species and one had a nationally vulnerable species. This illustrates the importance of specialist surveys, carried out regularly, to monitor the town's wildlife resource.

As Reading is a predominantly urban area, it is not surprising that some of the designated WHS's were originally man-made, although nature has partially taken them over. Cemeteries include Victoria Road and Reading, where over 60 wild plants were recorded with a range of native and cultivated trees. Because the grass is mainly allowed to grow long outside the paths, small mammals, insects and birds are resident or visit the site. Coley Branch Line is a disused railway line, track having been removed, between Rose Kiln Lane and Wensley Road. There is a clinker and granite chipping bed, with grassy and scrubby banks raised above the surrounding meadows. Unusual plants include Alexanders, small toadflax, thyme-leaved sandwort and ploughman's spikenard. Again, butterflies, moths and dragonflies abound and it provides the best nest sites for birds in the area. Devils Dip on the Bath Road at Southcote is an old quarry site which became part waterlogged and a pond was created, trees planted and a butterfly meadow sown to improve its value to wildlife.

### **Species of Fauna**

Reading has a thriving fox population, which formed the basis for detailed study in 1986. Particularly in the suburbs, it is not uncommon to see foxes crossing roads, foraging in parks or even raising a litter of cubs under the garden shed. The area around the University turned out to be Readings fox 'hot spot' with up to 5 families per square kilometre. Badgers are less often seen, but still occupy traditional setts in the woodlands and hedgerows, often venturing into gardens where householders enjoy feeding them. Badgers now receive legal protection and it is an offence to disturb them or damage their setts. As their main food is earthworms, areas of short grassland such as playing fields or parks are sought after.

Bats are seen at dusk, often around street lights where they take the insects attracted there. Areas of open water also attract them, and on an evening walk along the river 3 or 4 species may be seen. Commonest is the pipistrelle, a Biodiversity key short list species, normally roosting in buildings, often modern houses. New housing estates are popular with pipistrelles which have been known to start breeding in the roof void before the new owners move in. Long-eared bats are frequent in older houses, barns, farm buildings etc. and Daubenton's bats are normally associated with water. Noctules use holes in trees, usually natural splits or old woodpecker holes as they are unable to excavate their own holes. Several WHS's have tree noctule roosts. Natterers, serotine and the very rare Nathusius pipistrelle bats have also been recorded in Reading.

Water voles were recently added to Schedule 5 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 to protect their habitat. These animals are less frequently seen, but still inhabit the banks of Reading's canal and rivers. Even the rare otter has been recorded within 6km of the town centre!

Grey squirrels, although considered a pest species, are enjoyed by visitors to Reading's parks and open spaces and mink have been seen on the waterways. The little muntjac deer has spread into parks and gardens as it needs less cover than the larger roe deer. It was the subject of a recent survey by the Thames Valley Mammal Group. However, roe deer are relatively abundant in the south-west corner of the town.

Voles, woodmice and shrews are seldom seen but live in suitable areas of hedgerow, scrub and woodland and are a food source for birds of prey and foxes. Surveys for small mammals are carried out in the grounds of the University and four or five species are regularly found.

In terms of birds, Reading is well served with keen ornithologists who note any rare species nesting or visiting. Tawny and little owls are all present and three woodpecker species have been observed around the town. Well over 120 species of bird have been recorded in Reading, including unusual species such as hobby, whooper swan and even a bittern at Southcote Lock one December. Biodiversity key species known to be present include bullfinch, skylark, reed bunting, song thrush and spotted flycatcher.

Migrant birds arrive in Reading both to overwinter and to breed. The flooded fields adjacent to the Kennet can contain many thousands of golden plover, lapwing, various gulls and often wading birds (snipe, ruff, etc). In summer, songbirds such as sedge warbler and reed warbler, blackcap and whitethroat can be found, and recently nightingales have returned and can be heard in two parks managed by the council.

Grass snakes have been seen around the water courses and slow worms are found in undisturbed areas of gardens, allotments and parks. Frogs, toads and newts breed in suitable ponds both natural and artificial although frogs appear to be declining in numbers over recent years.

Biodiversity Action Plan invertebrates recorded recently in Reading include short-haired bumble bee, stag beetle (the subject of a national survey in 1998), white-clawed crayfish, and the brown banded carder bee. A recent butterfly survey found twenty-five species in the town including three skippers, seven browns, six vanessids, three blues and a copper and five whites.

## **Management**

The maintenance of land in the ownership of a local authority can affect the nature conservation value of the managed environment. Therefore, by adopting certain principles these areas can be improved and habitats created for wildlife. Most of the regimes are simple; allowing scrub to develop, cutting the grass less frequently, planting native species etc. Already the council has adopted many strategies to improve the ecology of the area.

It is part of the councils' policy to secure additional native tree planting wherever possible to increase biodiversity in parks and play areas. Several areas of grassland open spaces are managed as hay meadows by mowing once a year and removing the cuttings. This allows flowers time to set seed and prevents the cut grass smothering seedlings and enriching the soil. Ponds in Prospect Park and Caversham Park village have been cleared out and restored creating ideal study areas for local schools. Management and maintenance plans are already in operation for West Reading Woodlands and Clayfield Copse LNRs, parts of the Warren, McIlroy Park and Hemdean Bottom.

Other areas of land managed, at least in part, for nature conservation include Embrook Court; Wensley Road, Coley; Balmore House and Balmore Lodge; Berkshire Independent Hospital, Bath Road; Shepherds Lane, Caversham; BBC Caversham Park; Sherfield Hall, Northcourt Avenue and Leighton Park School, Shinfield Road. Private management plans secured through the planning process have been agreed on several areas of land and this is an on-going process to achieve wildlife habitat and protect species via the planning process.

## **Main Issues**

- To protect and manage the nature conservation resource of Reading to ensure that the varied and valuable habitats and species are maintained for the future.
- To ensure that future developments do not compromise the wildlife resource, and where possible, enhance it.
- That management of the council's land holding should fulfil the aim of increasing biodiversity.
- That public awareness of the local natural resource be raised by publicity and education.
- That partnerships be formed to conserve and enhance biodiversity in Reading.

## **Key Contact(s)**

For further information, please contact Adrian Lawson on 0118 939 0376.

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