



Isle of Wight Biodiversity Action Plan

Newsletter Number 5

August 2003

Habitat Action Plans an update on progress.... **Action for biodiversity**.... Mammal survey work well underway.... **Glorious Mud at Newtown**.... **A new SSSI to protect coastal biodiversity**

Progress to date.....

The Steering Group* has been meeting regularly since September 1999 and during this time the focus of our attention has been on the production of a series of Habitat Action Plans to ensure that our rich biodiversity is protected into the future. All of the Habitat Action Plans have common aims and objectives:

- Ensuring no further loss or degradation of the habitat
- Improving the biodiversity value of the habitat
- Increasing the extent of the habitat and reversing the effects of isolation and fragmentation
- Ensuring that the needs of species occupying the habitat are being met
- Improving knowledge of the habitat
- Raising public understanding of the habitat

The reason that the process is taking so long is that we have to ensure that each one is accurate, adequately reflects what we have and what needs to be done to conserve it. The targets need to be realistic and achievable and all the key partners must agree the plan. This is vital if we are to be able to put the plan into action.

The first action plan, relating to Maritime Cliffs and Slopes, was produced in December 2001 and we have subsequently been assessing how it is performing. Progress was reported in 21 out of the 26 actions, and completion of a number of actions is expected during the coming year. Some of the actions will take longer to achieve, as they require actions by Government, or other groups over whom the Steering Group has no direct influence.

A set of plans relating to grassland habitats that are considered to be of national importance (Calcareous Grassland, Heathland and Acid Grassland, and Lowland Meadows) was

launched in June 2002, and progress towards their targets is currently being assessed.

During the second part of 2002, a Wetlands Action Plan was agreed. This ties in strongly with a number of strategies being developed by the Environment Agency in relation to the management of water resources on the Island.

The most recent plan to be developed is the Woodland Action Plan, and a Red Squirrel Species Action Plan has recently been finalised.

Now under discussion are plans for estuaries and for farmland. They will be finished by the end of this year, thus completing the suite of key Habitat Action Plans for the Island.

The final plan in the series will relate to Community involvement in Biodiversity. This will be far more wide ranging in terms of involvement and we look forward to working with many representatives of the Partnership in taking this forward during 2004.



When all the sections of the Biodiversity Action Plan have been completed, they will be available in folders in public libraries.

In the meantime, if you would like an electronic copy of any of the plans produced so far, please contact Anne.Marston@iow.gov.uk

* The Steering Group has representatives from the AONB Unit, Country Landowners Association, DEFRA, English Nature, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, Island 2000 Trust, Isle of Wight Council, National Trust, NFU, RSPB, and Wight Wildlife.



Wight Wildlife – Biodiversity Plans in Action

The local and national Biodiversity Action Plans identify which species of animal and plants are endangered and require our help to continue to thrive. However we need current information on the population and distribution of these species across the Island. Over the past 15 months, we have co-ordinated three surveys on rare and endangered mammals to give us more information on the whereabouts of these animals, so we can inform land managers and landowners of the best way to conserve them.

IW Hare Survey 2002

Last year, The Isle of Wight Natural History and Archaeological Society, a member of the Wight Wildlife Partnership, undertook an Island-wide survey of the Brown Hare (*Lepus europaeus*), a national priority Biodiversity Action Plan mammal species.

Two hundred records have been received so far, from 108 locations. A total of 467 hares were seen and reported from all parts of the Island. Ninety-eight records were of single animals, but the highest total at one time was 21, seen on fields around the Newtown Estuary.

The best time to see hares was May. After this time, the vegetation is taller and they are harder to see, so sightings in the summer months were fewer. The best areas seem to be in north-west Wight, between Parkhurst Forest and Bouldnor, and the intensive arable farms along the Military Road and in the vicinity of Wellow. Interestingly, no records were received west of the western Yar.

We believe that the Brown Hare has continued to thrive in the Isle of Wight as the perceived threats that have caused the decline of this species generally in Britain were not reflected here.

Red Squirrels and Dormice Survey 2002/03

The Wildlife Trust was sponsored by English Nature and the Mammal Trust UK to undertake a repeat of the 1996/97 Red Squirrel Survey. All 249 woodlands over 1 ha in extent were revisited and surveyed for the presence of both Red Squirrels and Common Dormice. As well as the previously surveyed woods, we managed to gain access to further 28 woods.

The original survey found red squirrels present in 179 woods (71%). In 2002-2003 red squirrels were present in 86% of the 283 woods surveyed. Fifty-one of the 70 woods that did not have red squirrels in 1996 now have them present, and the majority of these are in the Undercliff area between St Lawrence and Bonchurch.

Dormice were found in 25% of the woods surveyed, and 65% of the woods had both red squirrels and dormice. In only 10% was neither species detected.



Surveys for 2003

Wight Wildlife is surveying the Island's rivers for water voles and requesting more information about the whales and dolphins around our coastline. Both these surveys will be happening over the summer.

Richard Grogan, Wight Wildlife

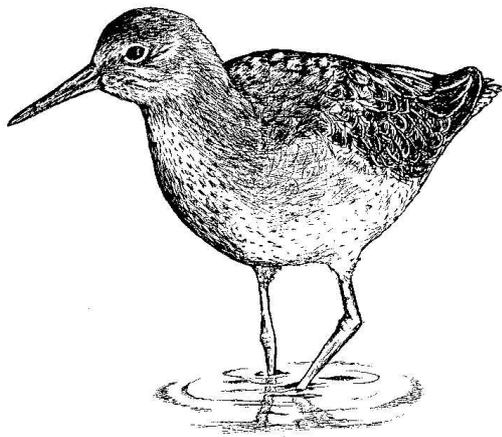
GLORIOUS MUD!

During the autumn, huge flocks of birds depart from their summer breeding and feeding grounds around Iceland and the sub-Arctic to avoid the onset of winter. Migration is essential - they cannot survive the northern winters, and they cannot find enough food to rear their young further south. The UK lies directly in the path of their migration route and so our estuaries are vital to the survival of these birds.

Many birds such as Brent Geese, Teal, Wigeon, and Black-tailed Godwits will find their way into the Solent. Some will end their journey in the Newtown Estuary, and during the winter months, the sight and sound of these birds lend something special to the atmosphere of the bleak marshes.

Newtown makes a very important contribution to the internationally important populations that visit the Solent in winter. This is one of the reasons that Newtown is a National Nature Reserve and why it has been designated as part of the Solent SPA (Special Protection Area) and RAMSAR site.

The main reason for the birds coming is the abundant supply of food found in the estuaries and along the shores. But what do these birds feed on?



Once the tide starts going out, you will notice the wildfowl and waders leave their high tide roosts on nearby fields to go on to the mudflats where they can be seen feeding. Some feed by probing for worms and molluscs, taking prey

found at different depths, according to their beak length, while others find food on the surface but one thing is clear - the mud is very important to them. It has been estimated that the food resource present in a square metre of mud is, on average, equivalent to the energy in 15 Mars Bars!

There have been problems with the estuary in the past as a result of the use of a toxic anti-fouling paint (tributyl tin or TBT). It had also been suggested that sewage pollution from the streams that feed into the estuary and from visiting yachts might also be causing a problem. The National Trust, who owns and manages the National Nature Reserve, decided to have a close look at the mud to see what sort of condition it was in, and to find out what really was living there.

A survey was commissioned last year to look at the life that existed in the mud - the technical term for this is a 'Benthic' survey. Experts from Southampton University were commissioned to carry this out, with the help of grant aid from English Nature and the Environment Agency. They collected samples of mud to a depth of 15 cm using a device something like a large apple corer. The mud was analysed for any form of residual pollution, and the animals collected by washing and sieving so they could be identified.

Many different species were found, like bristle worms, shrimps and cockles. Overall, the results demonstrated that life in the mud at Newtown has remained relatively unaffected by human activity, particularly when compared to many other areas and harbours within the Solent. However, the former use of TBT anti-fouling (now banned for use on yachts) has had an effect on one particular species of shellfish, as only dead specimens were found.

So, the essential mud which provides such an important source of food for so many birds, as well as being home to many species of creature, is in good heart. However, we must be ever vigilant to new threats, to ensure that the wildfowl and waders that travel to Newtown every year from the north find an abundant food source for their winter stay.

Tony Tutton, Property Manager, National Trust.

Compton Chine to Steephill Cove protection of maritime cliffs and slopes

English Nature has re-notified the Hanover Point to St Catherine's Point Site of Special Scientific Interest, extending the existing boundary, both along the coast and inland. The name is now Compton Chine to Steephill Cove SSSI, which reflects the extent of the designated area.

As a consequence of the geology, and erosion by the sea, the cliffs of the former Hanover Point to St Catherine's Point Site of Special Scientific Interest have slumped beyond the inland boundary, so in some sections the nature conservation interest for which the site was notified is no longer protected by the SSSI designation. It was decided to re-notify and extend the SSSI to include sufficient land to allow for the cliffs to erode back over a 50-year period.

The likely rate of cliff retreat over the next fifty years between Compton Chine and Steephill Cove was studied and the predicted maximum rate of retreat of the cliffs is 67m between Compton Chine and Walpen Chine; 104m between Walpen Chine and Rocken End; 60m in the St Catherine's area, and 27m between Binnel Point and Steephill Cove. The proposed boundary has been drawn to the nearest identifiable feature which is not less than the maximum projected rate of cliff retreat rates from the present cliff edge. In general, along the Back of Wight, this corresponds to the Military Road.

Recent survey work has shown that the cliffs between St Catherine's Point and Steephill Cove also have remarkable scientific interest and so should be included in the SSSI.

The nature conservation interest between Compton Chine and Steephill Cove includes extensive lengths of cliffs and slopes colonised by a mosaic of plant communities, which together form the broad habitat type known as vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic Coasts. This habitat is internationally important and listed in Annex I of the EC Habitats Directive. The cliffs and natural processes are also scientifically important, showing different cliff forms as a result of erosion and the different type of geology.

Pioneer vegetation colonises the cliffs and slopes relatively rapidly, followed by grassland communities. Other characteristic elements of soft cliff systems are produced by water draining from the adjoining land. These features enhance diversity considerably, with swamp, standing water, reedbed and areas rich in marsh orchids. Cliff top ruderal plants, grassland or heathland can be of critical importance as nectar sources to invertebrates that may nest on the cliff itself.

The site also supports chalk grassland, 4 nationally rare plants including the largest population field cow-wheat (*Melampyrum arvense*) in Britain and the endangered triangular pigmy moss (*Acualon triquetrum*) and nationally rare and scarce intertidal habitats. The site also supports a large number of nationally rare e.g. Glanville fritillary (*Melitaea cinxia*) and scarce insect species e.g. chalkhill blue (*Lysandra coridon*), as well as an assemblage of nationally scarce plants including Nottingham catchfly (*Silene nutans*).

Traditionally, the land adjoining sea cliffs would have been maritime grassland managed by low-intensity grazing but post-war intensification caused much of this habitat to be converted to arable, or improved grassland. Maritime grassland is now largely restricted to a narrow band, about 5 m in width, at the cliff-top. In places, the rapid rate of cliff erosion has meant improved grassland extends to the cliff face, and there is no semi-natural buffer habitat along the cliff top. When mudslides or landslips occur, the arable land or improved grassland becomes part of the soft cliff slippage, which adversely affects diversity. Localised eutrophication may occur from fertiliser run-off from arable land, which encourages coarse, vigorous 'weed' species at the expense of the maritime species.

Management recommendations seek to provide a buffer strip where no intensive agricultural operations such as use of fertiliser, herbicide and cultivation are carried out, to ensure that semi-natural habitat develops and will form part of the soft cliff interest as soft cliff slippages occur. The aim is to create 20 m margin from the active cliff top to form wildlife buffer strips, which is in line with the Countryside Stewardship Scheme for Coastal Areas - 'the schemes objectives for coastal land are to.....recreate flower-rich pasture on cultivated land along the coastal fringe or cliff-top'.

Andy Gordon, Conservation Officer, English Nature

