

Action for the Wyvern Priority Area

Location

The Wyvern Priority Area is situated to the south of Fair Oak, stretching along a Y shaped stream and its valley. This watercourse, known as Allington Stream, joins the River Itchen further downstream. Much of the Priority Area is set within a farmed landscape with grazed pastures and arable fields. To the east of the Priority Area are the grounds of Wyvern School with much of the land used as playing fields. These are closely mown, even up to their edges and do not support very much wildlife. To the north is the edge of Fair Oak with houses and gardens adjacent to the woodland. To the west are larger houses with extensive grounds.

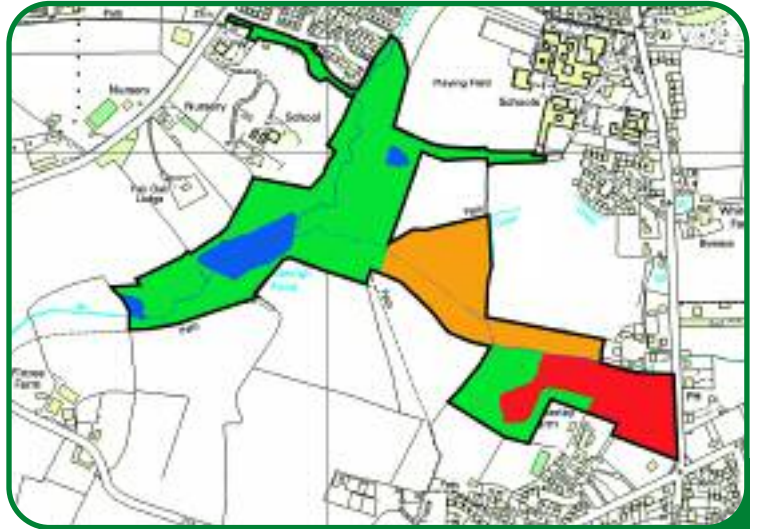
Quick facts

Total area: 19ha
(9 Swan Centres could fit in the same area)
Designations: SINC – 53%

Description

The Wyvern Priority Area covers about as much land as half of the town of Horton Heath and is made up of ancient boggy woodland, unimproved meadows crammed full of orchids, ponds that harbour rare species such as the great-crested newts and streams that provide an underwater habitat for many aquatic creatures such as mayflies, fish and otter.

Most of the land was once part of an estate owned and managed by the manor to provide hunting, fishing and recreational opportunities. The large fish pond in the midst of the woodland was artificially constructed in the mid 19th century and stocked with fish for food. Although used on and off since then for informal fishing the pond has developed a diverse and rich flora and fauna both on and in the water and along its edges. Dragonflies patrol the area using their huge goggle eyes to spot flies which they catch in their front legs whilst on the wing. Ducks and other water



birds breed along the pond edges, using the dense vegetation as cover from marauding foxes and even the otter has been known to visit the area in search of a carp in the pond.

Over the years, the wear and tear on the pond walls caused by the weather and by tree roots growing on the earthbank of the wall has led to the inevitable. Cracks and large splits have appeared and water has drained from the pond leaving a muddy expanse of silt which was once underwater. The fish in the pond were rescued by the Environment Agency and the wet mud has begun to be colonised by plants that specialise in growing in such conditions. Areas of reed, iris and other water-loving plants will slowly change to alder and willow scrub and eventually wet woodland if the pond wall is not repaired.

Much of the woodland along the stream and adjacent to it is very boggy and impenetrable with areas of tall herbs such as hemlock water-dropwort and willowherb growing to the height of a man. The trees that make up the woodland are mainly ash and oak but in the very wettest areas these are replaced by the smaller growing alder and willow. These species are adapted to the wettest growing conditions, being able to tolerate water-saturated soil around their roots.

In the past, woodlands were a very valuable source of products that were used by the local community. Firewood, timber for building and slender saplings for fencing were all harvested from the local wood and the very practices that sustained this supply encouraged wildlife. Nowadays the market for

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such traditional wood products has dwindled and so has the management that supplied them. This has been much to the detriment of wildlife. Many woodlands are now left neglected and have actually lost much of their special value to wildlife.

Many areas of the woodland have also been invaded by alien species such as rhododendron and laurel. Once planted extensively in woodlands especially by the Victorians for their floral display, these evergreen plants now pose a threat to our native woodland species. Their vigorous growing habit shades out other plants and alters the acidity of the soil so much so that native species cannot grow.

To the east of the main block of woodland is Wyvern meadow, an area of grassland that would neatly fit a running track with little room to spare. Although small the meadow is a jewel in the schools crown. Every spring it puts on a staggering display of white and pink orchid flower spikes often growing in groups of 50 plus and reaching to the height of a man's knees. As well as the common-spotted orchids and southern marsh-orchids, the meadow also harbours other flowering plants, many of which are seldom seen in our countryside nowadays. The spikey purple head of the saw-wort, a relation of the more familiar creeping thistle can be found alongside the

compact lilac flower of the devils-bit-scabious. Rushes, sedges and grasses grow throughout the meadow, but are especially abundant in the boggiest areas with mosses providing a living blanket of green around their bases. The meadow is managed to maintain the wildlife interest with conservation days devoted to clearing developing scrub from the meadow's edges and grazing by cattle. These practices ensure that the open nature of the site is maintained by halting the natural succession of the grassland to scrub and ultimately woodland.



GREAT CRESTED NEWT

Unimproved neutral grasslands such as this meadow at Wyvern School are very rare in our countryside today. Studies show that between 1930 and 1984, 97% of all unimproved grassland was lost, principally as a result of changes to agricultural management. The push to increase food production in this time, for the UK to be able to 'feed itself' encouraged farmers to add artificial fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides to their land. These chemicals however have a detrimental effect on wildlife as previously species-rich meadows have been converted to fields of only a few plant species. Such fields do not provide the variety of feeding and resting opportunities needed by many species and so wildlife gradually dies out or moves away from the site.

Further to the east of the triangular shaped Wyvern meadow is an area of grassland known as Lapstone Farm. This site is owned and managed by Eastleigh Borough Council which has been improving the value of the land to wildlife over the past few years. Native trees and shrubs have been planted on areas of grassland that had been agriculturally improved in the past and other areas have been seeded with wildflower seeds in a bid to increase the variety of wildlife present.

The great crested newt, our largest and rarest newt species has been recorded in the pond towards the north-east corner of the PBA. This colourful amphibian is specially protected under UK and European law as it is rare and you must have a licence to handle one. It is so called as the male sports a ragged crest that runs down the whole length of his body which, in the breeding season, he uses to great effect coupled with his bright orange belly to attract a female. Unfortunately, they have not been seen for a number of years and this is thought to be as a result of the pond becoming overgrown and shaded by willows which has led to the loss of the water weed that the newts use to wrap their developing eggs in.

Ponds naturally dry out over decades and are slowly colonised by a succession of plants as the water diminishes, until finally, it becomes woodland. Although this is a natural process, man has, over centuries, chosen to preserve ponds by cutting down encroaching scrub and this practice, known as pond management is especially important today as ponds are being lost at an alarming rate from our landscape and are not being replaced. Many ponds on farmland that were once used to quench the thirst of livestock have been filled in as more modern mechanisms to deliver water to fields have taken their place. For our native wetland wildlife to survive we must preserve the remaining ponds we have today through pond management.

Like many of our best areas for wildlife in the Borough, the Wyvern Priority Area is effectively an island oasis for wildlife in a sea of more inhospitable habitat. The land that surrounds it is mostly used for intensive agriculture and not managed sympathetically for wildlife. This presents a problem to any wildlife on site that may need to spread out, perhaps to find other individuals to breed with, new sources of food or more room to grow. To reach another suitable site, any species would have to cross fairly large areas of unsuitable habitat that perhaps would not provide very good cover from predators, feeding opportunities or suitable growing conditions. The bid to move to pastures new would very likely fail or at worst, end in death. This is a very real problem for many species, especially those that are not very mobile and have quite specific environmental requirements such as butterflies and plants. They are effectively marooned on islands, unable to spread or increase their population size.



MY LOCAL AREA

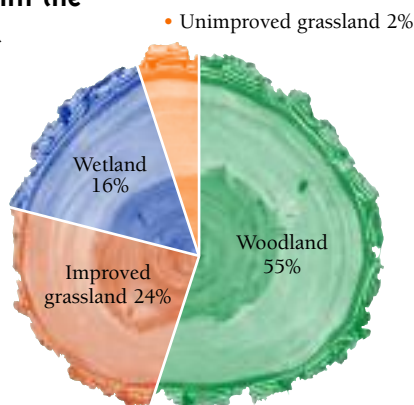
Eastleigh Priority Species recorded within the Wyvern Priority Area

Last recorded more than 10 years ago

- Otter**
- Great crested newt**
- Mole cricket**

*** Priority species in Hampshire and Eastleigh Borough*

Area of habitats within the Wyvern Priority Area



NB: 1.5 km of hedgerow and 1.5 km of stream also within the priority area.



Action

Issue 1 Lack of management

Current action

Many organisations with an interest in furthering nature conservation support projects that promote the favourable management of important wildlife habitats. This may involve, for example providing advice to landowners, setting up practical conservation work days on a site or providing financial support for management work.

Proposed action

Endeavour to secure the future of Quobleigh Pond as a SINCP by exploring opportunities for its long-term maintenance and management.* (LLG)

Identify suitable areas of land within the PBA for sympathetic management work to be re-instated concentrating on areas where priority species and habitats are currently or potentially could be present.* (EBC)

On areas of land as identified in the above action, inform landowners of incentive and grant schemes available and encourage and support applications for the re-instatement of sympathetic management. ** (LLG)

Issue 2 Alien species

Current action

There is little control of rhododendron or laurel taking place within the woodland at the present time.

Proposed action

On areas of land identified for action to address lack of management, provide advice to landowners on management techniques that would improve the biodiversity value of their land including measures to control invasive and alien species where these threaten priority species or habitats.* (LLG)

Issue 3 Island habitats

Current action

New development and land-use change can result in further fragmentation and isolation of habitats and features of importance to nature conservation. Government guidance to local planning authorities expects that land-use planning objectives should be to extend and re-connect sites, patches and areas, ultimately reversing fragmentation.

Proposed action

Seek opportunities to work with landowners and managers to undertake habitat restoration and creation schemes to benefit biodiversity. Focus on areas that will help reverse the deleterious effects of fragmentation and isolation by linking existing sites or by providing stepping stones between habitats or where priority species will be benefited.** (EBC/EA/HCC)

ACTION TIMELINE

* within next 3 years

** within next 5 years

*** within next 10 years

KEY TO ORGNISATIONS

EA
Environment Agency

EBC
Eastleigh Borough Council

EN
English Nature

FC
Forestry Commission

HCC
Hampshire County Council

LLG
Landowners Liaison Group (Comprises FWAG, Hampshire Management Advisory Project, National Farmers Union, County Landowners & Business Association)

Relevant Hampshire species or habitat action plans for Wyvern Priority Area are:

- Pipestrelle bat
- Seed-eating farmland birds
- Ancient semi-natural woodland
- Hedgerow
- Unimproved neutral grassland
- Arable land

Action for the Otter

Why action was needed

Before the 1950s the otter was a widespread animal inhabiting the vast majority of rivers and streams in England.

Between 1950 and 1970 it underwent a population crash and the otter was lost from its previous range in the Midlands and the south-eastern counties.

The cause of this decline is now known to be as a result of increased pollution of watercourses especially with chemicals known as PCBs that built up in the body of the otter and led to poor breeding success and even death. In addition, changes to bankside management resulted in the loss of shelter and breeding sites and increases in road building and road traffic increased the likelihood of an otter being hit.

Action so far

From the 1980s onwards a concerted programme of action has been implemented to restore otter populations in England back to their former numbers and haunts.

Cleaner water is now running in our rivers as stricter pollution controls, better water treatment and restricted use of damaging chemicals in the surrounding countryside have been introduced.

We also have a better understanding of the habitat requirements of the otter and this has resulted in more favourable bankside management, the construction of artificial holts and design of otter crossings on dangerous roads.



Detailed studies utilising the technique of DNA fingerprinting (using otter droppings known as 'spraints') has enabled the identification of individual otters on stretches of river. Using this data we can then find out how many different individuals there are in a population, how they are related, their range and usage of habitats.

Results so far

This action has been and continues to be of great benefit to the recovering otter population in England. Populations that had survived in the southwest of England, Wales and Scotland have slowly expanded back into England.

In Hampshire the otter used to be found on most rivers yet a survey in 1989/90 revealed the presence of otters on only three. Today it is found in an ever-increasing number of areas and within Eastleigh there is a strong population on the River Itchen.

The future

Both the otter and its habitat need to be targeted for action if the otter is to recover.

Within Eastleigh Borough there is potential for the otter to spread out from the River Itchen to colonise smaller streams and the River Hamble to the east.

Action to maintain and increase the numbers and range of otters in the borough:

- The Environment Agency will, with the co-operation of the water companies who supply our water, review levels of abstraction from rivers as well as consents for discharges to ensure that the needs of otters and other riverine species are met.
- Eastleigh Borough Council as a local planning authority will ensure that future development in the borough does not adversely affect existing populations of otters or its ability to spread into further areas.
- Eastleigh Borough Council will use opportunities within the development control process to maintain, restore and create habitats suitable for otters and other riverine species.
- English Nature will review the selection of UK protected riverine sites.
- The South-East Otters and Rivers Project (SEORP) will identify existing otter road crossing sites on the Rivers Itchen and Hamble and, in conjunction with Eastleigh Borough Council, implement measures to reduce kills at these sites.

Action to help us gain a better understanding of otters in the Borough:

- SEORP will investigate possible factors limiting the expansion of otters within the Borough such as prey availability, habitat management and accidental death.

What you can do to help the otter

To help to maintain and increase the numbers and range of otters in the borough you can:

- Cut down on your water use by putting a 'hippo' in your toilet cistern which is available from your water supplier. The water we use in the borough is pumped from underground supplies that also feed rivers. The more water we use, the more is pumped out leading directly to lower river flows and increased problems of pollution. This is especially true in the summer months when the rivers are at their lowest.

- If you own or manage a stretch of river or wetland consider the needs of otters and other riverine species in any management work that takes place. Specialised advice on management for otters is available from the South East Otter and Rivers Project, the Environment Agency and the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. Advice on incentive schemes such as Countryside Stewardship and Woodland Grants are available from DEFRA and the Forestry Authority respectfully.
- Come along to a practical conservation task along a river that may involve habitat management work to benefit the otter and other riverine animals and plants. You may even find yourself building an artificial holt.
- If you walk your dog on footpaths beside rivers and streams, please keep it on a lead to prevent possible disturbance to otters and their habitat.

To help us gain a better understanding of otters in the Borough you can:

- In the unfortunate event of hitting an otter or spotting an already dead one, please report the incident to SEORP so that important information can be collected to assist in our understanding of their ecology.
- Inform SEORP of any sightings of otters.

Where to see it

The otter is an elusive, nocturnal animal that frequents rivers in search of fish, its favourite prey. Sometimes it travels overland between streams but uses dense cover to keep hidden. To see an otter in the wild you have to be very lucky. Even people who spend day after day on the river or are actively looking for them for research purposes rarely see the animal itself. They rely instead on field signs left behind such as muddy footprints or its distinctive droppings to confirm its presence. In Eastleigh, it is found along the River Itchen and a few lucky people have reported seeing it at Itchen Valley Country Park.