

Another year has passed by and it seems the world has suddenly started to take notice of the wider meaning of conservation. Today, hardly a news bulletin passes without mention of some aspect of global warming or climate change. Perhaps it's gratifying to know that where some areas of the media belatedly recognise the significance of conservation, HOS recognised this at its inception.

This article looks at some recent events that affect bird conservation and reports on the ongoing issues that may take a while to resolve.

HM Naval Base Portsmouth

Her Majesty's Naval Base Portsmouth has been confirmed as the proposed base port for a new generation of aircraft carrier that will be introduced in 2012. To accommodate the new vessels, deepening and widening of the existing approach channels and inner harbour is required.

An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been conducted by an independent consultancy group to determine the impacts of the proposed deepening.

A preliminary scoping study has been produced to identify the potential environmental impacts of the proposed scheme. These impacts include air quality, traffic and access, underwater archaeology and several other issues, but HOS's main interest is with the possible impact on marine ecology and ornithology.

The removal of sediment from the approach channel by dredging is likely to generate a significant increase of sediment in suspension. This will affect the local shellfish waters to an unknown extent and a survey of the water quality has been undertaken to determine if any mitigation measures can be recommended.

Contaminated sediments that have lain at the bottom of the harbour for many years may be disturbed and distributed further around the harbour. The impact of changes to existing tidal flows caused by sediment removal is not known. This may result in some inlets becoming flooded whilst others may dry up. During dredging of the channel, disturbance of sediment is expected to affect shellfish beds and the nursery area for juvenile fish.

Portsmouth Harbour is of national importance for the populations of grey plover, black-tailed godwit and dunlin and is of international importance for over-wintering brent geese. Although most birds are extremely adaptable some bird populations in the area may be affected by increased noise and movement during dredging operations and harbour construction. Birds are also likely to suffer from changes to their feeding resources caused by sedimentary deposits on inter-tidal areas.

The EIA will use existing WeBS data to measure bird usage of the harbour and hydrodynamic modeling will show possible changes to the harbour currents and sediment deposits.

As an interested party to the proposed scheme HOS has been invited to make any observations and concerns to the independent consultant. I believe the proposed widening of the approach channel will not significantly reduce the existing area of inter-tidal mudflats that is available to feeding waders.

Thames Basin Heaths

As reported last year the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA) was created to include 13 heathland sites in north-east Hampshire, Surrey and Berkshire. It is here where 28% of Britain's population of Dartford Warblers, 10% of Woodlarks, and 8% of Nightjars are found. European and UK laws governing planned housing and other developments which could damage the SPA must be subject to an assessment of their effect on the bird populations.

During the past year the high demand for new housing in the Thames Basin region has led to an increased number of planning applications by developers, and a corresponding increase in objections to these applications. A large number of these houses are proposed via allocations in local development plans, structure plans, and the South East Plan. There is also a large number of planning applications being made for infill development and redevelopment of existing residential areas close to the SPA.

The Planning Inspectorate has to deal with an increasing number of appeals, some of which relate to small scale housing proposals, because local planning authorities are refusing planning permission partly due to representations from English Nature (EN).

In some cases EN has objected to any proposal which would result in an increase in the housing stock within an area up to 5km from the SPA boundary. EN believes research shows this to be the distance that many people will travel to visit the heaths for leisure and recreation, especially for dog-walking, thus potentially increasing the disturbance of the birds and pressure on their habitats. For developments closer to the SPA, EN's concerns also relate to increases in the number of cats that may hunt on the SPA.

A neighbour of mine recently discovered that a small housing development that would overlook his property was being put on hold by the local council. He is delighted! I think the moral to this story is that if we conserve the habitat and take care of our indigenous birds then they will reward us later by taking care of our habitat.

Agri-environment funding

Last year the existing Countryside Stewardship Scheme and Environmentally Sensitive Area Schemes were replaced by a new two-tier system - Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS). In brief, the former offers payments in return for a basic level of environmental management, whilst the latter offers higher payments for more complex habitat management and creation activities in targeted areas.

The aim of ELS is to encourage a large number of farmers across a wide area to deliver simple, yet effective, environmental management. In return, payments are given per hectare per year across the whole farm. There are over 50 options to choose from, covering all farming types including hedgerow management, stone wall maintenance, low input grassland, and buffer strips.

HLS aims to deliver significant environmental benefits in high priority areas. It is usually combined with ELS or Organic Entry Level Stewardship options, but also includes more complex environmental management where land managers need advice and support.

It would be interesting to know how Hampshire compares nationwide and with other similar counties, but the new funding schemes have taken time to implement and useful data is probably not available yet.

Avian influenza (bird flu)

Despite incidents of bird flu being recorded and reported extensively in the media the scare stories of last year have subsided. It seems inevitable that birds carrying the H5N1 virus will occasionally arrive in the UK through seasonal migration but, according to DEFRA, this will not mean that birds will be needlessly culled.

Wild birds can carry several diseases that are infectious to people, but almost all cases of avian influenza in humans to date have been due to contact with sick or infected domestic poultry.

In contrast, the greatest increase in wild bird mortality is currently happening in our back gardens. Greenfinch and chaffinch are the most affected species that are suffering from a parasitic disease.

Please send your views on conservation issues to hosconservation@tiscali.co.uk