

Conservation Review 2005

[Hampshire Heathland - Thames Basin Heaths - What is the future for our shorebirds?](#)
[Agri-environment funding - New National Parks - Avian influenza \(bird flu\)](#)

In contrast to many other countries the word *conservation* in Britain means more than just maintaining the status quo. Here it includes intervention and the active manipulation of the environment. This Conservation Review summarises some of the different approaches and legislation which have been applied to protect bird species and habitat in Hampshire during 2005 and beyond.

Perhaps on a more personal level, don't forget that putting out food for our garden birds is a practical act of bird conservation. I'm encouraged in my garden by the thriving groups of House Sparrows and Greenfinches that have survived through the winter from regular visits to our bird feeder.

Hampshire Heathland

The Hampshire Heathland Project is led by Hampshire County Council and is currently funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund under English Nature's national 'Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage' programme. The project was awarded £1.5 million in 2001 in order to undertake heathland restoration work on 68 sites across the county.

The end of the project in 2006 will see the restoration of over 1000 hectares of heathland by the removal of scrub, secondary woodland and bracken. Conservation grazing to a further 500 hectares of heathland will also have been introduced. This management work will help to reverse the decline of the quality and quantity of Hampshire's heathlands which have suffered greatly from a lack of suitable management in recent history.

Much of the work is focused upon sites that have been designated under the European 'Birds Directive', and will aid the breeding success of species that rely on heathlands including the Dartford Warbler, Nightjar and Woodlark. With the end of the project, maintenance of the restored areas will continue to be the responsibility of the site owners but, in the interim, new ways to help ensure the future of these rare and special places are being investigated.

A full report of the Hampshire Heathland Project will be included in the 2005 Hampshire Bird Report.

Thames Basin Heaths

The Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA) was formally classified in March 2005. The SPA includes 13 heathland sites in north-east Hampshire, Surrey and Berkshire and held 28% of Britain's population of Dartford Warblers, 10% of Woodlarks, and 8% of Nightjars when it was proposed in 2000. Under European and UK law, planned housing and other developments which could significantly damage the SPA, for example through increased levels of recreational disturbance, must be subject to an assessment of their effect on the bird populations of the SPA.

With the high demand for new housing in the Thames Basin region, English Nature, with support from the Countryside Agency, the Government Office for the South East, and the South East England Development Agency have proposed a strategy to protect the SPA.

Their Delivery Plan is aimed at establishing planning procedures to mitigate against potential disturbance where new developments are close to the SPA boundary. Proposed developments in close proximity to the SPA would not be given planning permission. The

Plan is currently being assessed by Local Authorities.

An interesting news item related to the above concerns George Wimpey, one of Britain's biggest builders. It is proposing to build new homes on a site close to heathland in Berkshire. In an attempt to get the housing development approved by the local council it is offering to ban cats from the apartments. I'm not sure that Wimpey's intentions are totally altruistic!

What is the future for our shorebirds?

The Hampshire coast supports significant numbers of the world population of several species of shorebirds, both in winter and on passage. In fact the Solent's shorebirds, especially the waders, are our only wildlife of really world class proportions. Making sure they have a continuing future with us will be tricky. The coast is a place of change – both planned and unplanned – and how we respond to the challenge of keeping sites for these species will be a true test of our commitment to conservation. With the right data, which is where HOS can help, and imagination from government and others it should be possible for our grandchildren to continue to see thousands of waders in the Solent.

Agri-environment funding

The most significant change for many years in agri-environment funding took place in August 2005 with the introduction of Environmental Stewardship schemes. Two new schemes are available to landowners - the Entry Level Stewardship Scheme and the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme. I do not propose to describe these schemes in detail but instead refer the reader to the paper 'Agricultural Change and Hampshire Birds' by Glynne Evans in the 2004 Hampshire Bird Report. Early intelligence suggests that, while the majority of Hampshire farmers and landowners will be participating in the Entry Level Stewardship Scheme, support for the Higher Level Scheme is less enthusiastic. It is too soon to determine how Hampshire compares to the rest of the UK but the overall picture for bird conservation is likely to be positive.

With the projected decline in agricultural subsidies for food production and pressure to lower international trade barriers the abandonment of marginal farmland has accelerated. This has provided an opportunity for private reserves to be set up by nature charities in close proximity to existing reserves. Their view is that larger uncultivated tracts will generate greater biodiversity than more widely scattered plots of land. This new development of transforming cultivated land into nature reserves has been slow to take off due to the relatively high price of farmland but the upward trend is expected to increase, especially over the south of England.

New National Parks

The New Forest became Britain's smallest national park in 2005 and is the first new national park for nearly 50 years and the first ever in the South East of England. The South Downs National Park inquiry formally closed during March 2005 and the report is expected to be published soon.

The prospect of two new National Parks in the UK, partly within Hampshire, may have initially seemed attractive to many conservationists. However the level of protection offered by a National Park to wildlife is considerably less than that offered by National Nature Reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation. Furthermore, the area of both parks is likely to be considerably smaller than many would have liked.

The New Forest contains the largest extent of lowland heath in Britain, covering some 15,000 hectares (37,000 acres). This represents nearly a quarter of all heathland in the

UK. Not only are the Forest heaths highly significant for wildlife, but they are also of immense cultural importance in terms of their social history and system of traditional land use rights. Various types of heath are represented here, including extensive areas of wet heath and mire as well as some of the best stands of mature gorse anywhere in the country. Fragmentation remains a major issue in heathland conservation with most surviving heath a shrunken remnant of its former self.

Avian influenza (bird flu)

Since the autumn of 2005 all national newspapers have contained stories with varying degrees of accuracy on the possible impact of avian influenza to the UK human population. It was reported that bird migration from the Far East of Asia would bring the H5N1 virus to these shores. Some tabloids even suggested that a massive cull of domestic and wild birds was necessary to prevent the spread of the virus.

Setting aside the hype and scare-mongering, avian influenza H5N1 is spreading. The disease has now been detected in several countries in the Black Sea area of eastern Europe but the ways in which it is spreading remain unclear. Despite the recent confirmed death of a Whooper Swan to H5N1 in Scotland, the risk to the public with the virus in its current form is very low. Birdwatchers and the public in general have been asked to report any suspicious die-offs of wild birds to the government helpline.

For a balanced assessment on the facts regarding avian influenza refer to the RSPB (www.rspb.org) and BTO (www.bto.org) web sites.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Alex Cruickshank and Bob Chapman. For more details on the work of the Hampshire Heathland Project see www.hants.gov.uk/biodiversity/heathland. To participate in the Solent wader count send your records to robertc@hwt.org.uk.

Please send your views on conservation issues which you see as important to and I will try to follow up as many as I can.

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