
Conservation Progress Report

[This contribution is the eleventh in an annual series (beginning in 1989 - Newsletter No.42) reporting on aspects of conservation affecting Hampshire's birds].

Attention is concentrated in this report on some of the thorny perennials, the Lower Avon Valley, Dibden Bay and the New Forest. A new topic, which is likely to occupy HOS's attention for the foreseeable future, concerns Hampshire's Biodiversity Action Plan.

Avon Valley

Concern about the continuing decline in the breeding wader populations using the wet grasslands of the Avon floodplain continues, now with added worries about the prospects for wintering waterfowl. Comments on breeding waders appeared in the Spring 1998 Newsletter. A summary account of some conservation aspects of the wintering waterfowl situation has just appeared in the *Hampshire Bird Report* for 1997, based on a Report written by John Clark for the Environment Agency.

It may be of interest to reflect on the main points resulting from the summary account. Three species which traditionally have relied on the Avon floodplain during the winter are Bewick's Swan, White-fronted Goose and Wigeon. All three species have declined in number over recent years, but almost certainly for different reasons, some local, some European in scale. Artificial feeding of Bewick's Swans at other sites in the UK have attracted birds away from the Avon

and milder recent winters have resulted in less of the population moving westward from the continent each winter, even though the global population of the species has increased. A similar story of distraction applies to the White-fronted Goose. Better protection in northern Europe, coupled with general climate warming, has resulted in the UK harbouring only some 1% of the European wintering population in the 1990s, compared to 16% in 1969/70. Although the European population of the White-front has increased some 6-fold in the foregoing period, only a small number now use the Avon Valley. For Wigeon, which has retreated from major use of grassland both north and south of Ringwood to the Avon Causeway area, the likely adverse factors are different and probably include lowering of the water table and increased disturbance – both local factors which must also exacerbate the decline of the Bewick's and White-fronts.

Whatever the reasons for the recent decline in numbers of these species, it is likely that the Avon Valley floodplain will remain a hard weather refuge.

Recommendations for action include improved monitoring, research to determine the precise reasons for the declines and range contractions witnessed in the recent past, and the setting of targets for future conservation management. Fortunately, with the imminent publication of the Environment Agency's "Local Environment

Agency Plan” for the Avon catchment, to which the Avon Valley conservation liaison group (HOS is a member) has provided input, the present time is a particularly opportune one in which to pursue remedial measures and enhance the biodiversity of the Avon Valley.

Dibden Bay

This time last year planning applications for dock development at Dibden Bay were anticipated to be forthcoming last Summer. In the event they did not appear last year and are now expected between May and August this year. It appears there will be three applications: a Harbour Revision Order; an application under the Transport and Works Act; and a Planning application to New Forest District Council. Given the level of opposition likely, it is anticipated that a Public Enquiry will ensue, probably in 2000, with an Inspector’s report in 2001/02. There are two matters which the Planning application will have to address: one is an outcome of a recent planning decision affecting docks at Harwich which also abuts a Special Protection Area, that compensation outside the SPA is required rather than mitigation within it; the other is an environmental assessment of the impact of the necessary infrastructure along the Waterside on the New Forest Special Area of Conservation. We await developments with considerable interest!

New Forest

At the time of writing a government announcement on the future status of the New Forest is imminent and is likely to be known by the time this is

read. The anticipation is that the status of a National Park will be granted to the Forest, probably covering the Heritage Area. Maybe not quite what some conservation groups wanted, but never-the-less potentially a significant improvement in protection for the Forest compared to the status quo. More after the government announcement, when we have seen the detail.

Biodiversity Action Plan for Hampshire

First, a few words to provide some context. Volume One of the document carrying the above title, published late last year, is the “local” outcome of the Convention on Biological Diversity (sometimes referred to as the “Earth Summit”) signed by 150 heads of government, including the UK government, at Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. In the UK, to quote from Lord Selborne’s Foreword to the Hampshire Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), “we are now committed to pursuing a policy of sustainable development with the monitoring of biodiversity as an essential element.” The UK BAP of 1994 proposed national targets which, to quote further from Lord Selborne, “could be used to measure the impact of development and highlight cases where policies are unsustainable”, while “at the national and international level there has been only moderate progress in adopting sustainable policies. Much more progress has been made at the local level.”

The Hampshire BAP has been produced by a Steering Group, comprising eleven (including the County Council, English Nature, the

RSPB and Hampshire Wildlife Trust) of the 29 current members of the Hampshire Biodiversity Partnership which was initiated in July 1997 and consists of a range of organisations that “have an influence on the conservation of biodiversity”, whose “goal is to conserve and enhance biodiversity in Hampshire”. It will provide a strategy for action in two volumes: Volume 1 (to which reference is made here) provides a strategic framework and main courses of action; Volume 2, the detailed action required for priority habitats and species in the county. Local (ie county) BAPs provide a disciplined approach to auditing and target setting. Readers wishing to obtain a copy of Volume 1 should contact either the County Council Planning Department.

Local Action Plans are required for habitats (of the 38 priority habitat types identified in the UK, 21 occur in Hampshire) and species (1288, including 489 national priority species, are on the UK list of species of conservation concern; of these 766, including 196 national priority species, occur in Hampshire). The priority list of birds for Hampshire comprises 23 national priority species, 38 other birds of national concern, 1 additional species (Little Egret) of local concern, but no Biodiversity Challenge species. The Hampshire Wildlife Trust has been delegated responsibility for developing Action Plans for priority species. A suggestion currently being explored is that HOS should be sub-contracted to make a major contribution to Action Plans for the birds on the priority list, which includes Grey

Partridge, Stone Curlew, Turtle Dove, Nightjar, Woodlark, Skylark, Song Thrush, Spotted Flycatcher, Tree Sparrow, Linnet, Bullfinch, Reed Bunting and Corn Bunting.

Information emanating from the Sites Register Survey (re-launched last year, as detailed by John Wood in the Spring 1998 newsletter) will become increasingly important. Action Plans for birds inevitably require data from monitoring, as well as site specific and habitat information. Can I encourage readers to consider contributing to the Sites Register Survey. The current status of this exercise is that of the 40 Priority Sites on the initial list, 31 are covered and 9 are currently without volunteer observers. A list of Sites then not covered appeared on p11 of the Spring 1998 Newsletter. All the largest sites can be subdivided; subsequently parts of Ringwood Forest and Alice Holt Forest have been covered. John Wood would welcome offers of help – ‘phone 01264 710518. Suggestions for additional Sites would also be welcome.

My thanks for help during the past year go to many people, but especially those in the Hampshire Wildlife Trust, in the RSPB’s South-East England Office and Robin Saunders/Roger Harris (the latter took over from Robin during the year) for keeping an eye on developments along the NW Solent shore. Any resulting misrepresentations or errors are mine.

Norman Pratt