

Conservation Progress Report

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

Dibden Terminal: Public Inquiry

(see last year's Progress Report, in Newsletter No. 90, for a brief indication of the background and HOS's particular interest)

The Inquiry, which is likely to run for at least a year, eventually opened on 27 Nov 2001, after a postponement from 30 October due to Esso, post September 11th, withdrawing their offer of the Esso Social Club building as a venue. The first week took place at Applemore College and subsequently it has been held at the Stena Ferry terminal building in the Eastern Docks, Southampton. The Inspector has organised the Inquiry into 23 Topics, covering matters as diverse as "The Proposals" to "Human Rights". Topic 6 on "Nature Conservation", the one where HOS is an Objector, started on 16 April 2002 and is likely to last for 5 weeks.

So far as birds are concerned, and here we are talking primarily of waterfowl (waders and wildfowl), the principal Objectors are English Nature, Hampshire County Council and the RSPB. HOS, whilst strongly supporting the principal Objectors' cases, has taken a complementary approach in which we have emphasised the additional functional interdependence between the Dibden site, now an SSSI, and the surrounding countryside – especially the New Forest.

Two indicative examples of this interdependence, highlighted in the HOS evidence, are summarised in the following paragraphs.

There is evidence that breeding Curlew (and, maybe, other breeding waders), for which the Forest is a major site in southern England, holding up to 100 pairs in the mid-1990s, seem to rely in two poorly quantified respects on the coastal habitats of Southampton Water and the west Solent during their breeding cycle. Early in the season, when food is scarce at their Forest breeding sites, they use the coastal habitat for feeding; later they look to these same coastal habitats for safe refuge when they have free flying young. Dibden satisfies both requirements.

Spring Whimbrel migration shows a night roosting focus at Dibden for off-passage birds. Casual records assembled by HOS over the last 30 years show they can be seen feeding on pastoral habitats across the Forest and along the river valleys in southern Hampshire during the day, and flighting to and from the Southampton Water roost at dusk and dawn from late April to mid-May. Observations indicate up to 150 roosting birds may be using the Dibden Reclaim at any one time.

New Forest National Park

The Countryside Agency, on 24th January 2002, submitted a Designation Order (published 21 Feb 02) for a national park in the New Forest to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for confirmation under the existing National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. It chose not to pursue the new legislation route, which would have made the New Forest a special case, as had been advocated by many. The Agency also submitted advice regarding special administrative arrangements for a national park authority, reflecting the special needs of the New Forest. A copy of the Order and other information is on the Countryside Agency web site: www.countryside.gov.uk

After further representations, which had to be received by 25 March 2002, the Secretary of State may call a public inquiry, to be announced in spring 2002 and held in autumn 2002.

South Downs National Park

A draft boundary has also been issued for the proposed South Downs NP, which will extend from just east of Winchester to Beachy Head in East Sussex. The Countryside Agency Board meets in

late April, after which the proposal goes to Councils for formal consultation during the summer. In addition to the web site noted above, the Hampshire Wildlife Trust has the latest information.

Planning Green Paper

Early in the year, the government issued a Green Paper on the future of planning control in England. Initial consultation finished at the end of March; the nature conservation response was co-ordinated by Bob Page (ex Director HWT; now independent, but heavily involved with the SE England Regional Development Authority) through the Worcester Wildlife Trust. The proposals appear to anticipate the Districts acting as local planning authorities – removing the Counties from the process – and reserving to central government the major planning decisions. [Or to put it crudely, as I have heard it described, for major projects “the government decides what goes where and the locals can determine the paint colour”.] As and when it gets to a White Paper, it will require primary legislation; that’s when the real fight will occur.

Thames Basin Heaths pSPA

In last year’s Report I indicated that a revised proposal to make the area, including the Bramshill complex which received SSSI status last year, a pSPA was about to go to Brussels. In the late summer 2001, the owners/prospective developers issued a High Court challenge to English Nature regarding the designation of Bramshill as an SSSI. The basis of the challenge was largely on the breeding data for Nightjar, Woodlark and Dartford Warbler used in the citation, which relied to a significant extent on HOS data. At the beginning of April 2002 the case still awaited the High Court report.

Avon Valley

The Avon Valley Liaison Group (AVLG), a consortium of representatives of statutory and non-statutory Conservation organisations, has just issued its first Newsletter “Avon Valley Matters” (number 1: winter/spring 2002) for land and riparian owners and managers in the Lower Avon Valley (Christchurch to Salisbury). It so happens this coincides with the tenth anniversary of AVLG. “Avon Valley Matters” contains a short explanation, by Glynne Evans, of the national Breeding Waders of Wet Meadows and the HOS Hampshire River Valleys Survey (an expanded form of the national survey in collaboration with HCC, HWT and RSPB), occurring in the 2002 breeding season.

Breeding wader numbers have declined significantly in the Lower Avon in the last 20+ years (see John Cox’s summary in the 1996 Bird Report). By contrast the latest issue of English Nature’s Magazine (No 60 March 2002) carries an item on the Holkham National Nature Reserve in N Norfolk, extending from Burnham Norton to Blakeney (England’s 3rd largest NNR). Tempted to make some hardly legitimate comparisons, it was interesting to note that both sites were designated for, among other reasons, their breeding wader populations. They both have management plans reliant on a high-(fresh)water-table as the primary control tool. Whilst the habitats are different – Holkham is largely coastal grazing marsh, whereas the Avon is a river floodplain – the areas are similar in extent (Holkham NNR is 4000 ha, with extensive wet grassland; the Avon ESA is also 4000 ha, with just less than 1500 ha of wet grassland between Christchurch and Salisbury).

At Holkham water level control management started in 1986, carried out mainly by the Holkham estate with EN advice. Selected outcomes are (1987) Lapwing 73prs, Redshank 8prs, Snipe 8prs; (1991) 178prs, 51prs, 28prs; and (2001) 355prs, 149prs, 11prs respectively.

Numerical equivalents are less easily determined for the Lower Avon because, as well as numerical losses, there have been range contractions, but the following provide a flavour. For the SPA (Christchurch to Bickton) between 1990 and 1996, for selected sites only where direct

comparison is possible, Lapwing fell from 155prs to 113prs, Redshank from 110prs to 62prs, Snipe from 34prs to 10prs. High water level management was started in the Avon in the mid-1990s, with 2 trial areas. The Hampshire Avon local environment agency plan (LEAP), published by the Environment Agency in May 2000, enacts its actions through Water Level Management Plans. It sets floodplain grazing marsh targets (populations and range) for breeding waders in the SPA to return them to 1990 levels by 2010, primarily by rehabilitating the floodplain to “favourable conservation condition”. This will require the following populations in the SPA: Lapwing 225 prs, Redshank 205 prs and Snipe 53 prs. We shall see.

Biodiversity Action Plans

The partnership we call the Joint Hampshire (Biodiversity Action Plan) Bird Monitoring Group (JH(BAP)BMG) held two meetings during the past year, in September 2001 and February 2002. Although fieldwork was seriously disrupted during 2001 by Foot and Mouth, John Eyre produced 2 Species Action Plans (SAPs) on HOS’s behalf, one on farmland seed-eating birds, the other on birds of wet grassland – the former may be viewed on *hoslist*. Single species SAPs are envisaged for 2 or 3 species in Hampshire. For Stone Curlew, adapting that prepared for the species in Wiltshire (Salisbury Plain), so that the Hampshire population may be enhanced to provide a bridge to their former breeding sites on the South Downs in Sussex. For Dark-bellied Brent Geese, adapting the Brent Goose Strategy for the eastern harbours to provide for the requirements of the species in the Western Solent and Southampton Water. Whether a SAP is needed in the county for Roseate Tern is still under consideration.

The central county repository for biological data, including HOS’s bird data in due course, the Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC) came on stream on 8th April 2002. Data security, best software, central or distributed databases, protocols and best practice, and much more, will evolve with time. It is hosted by HCC with an independent advisory body.

The role of the HOS Sites Register survey in relation to the above is currently under review, not least because it looks very likely that much of the Biodiversity agenda will be delivered through District councils, who will need some interpretative guidance of the bird data at a local level. Eastleigh Borough Council is in the vanguard in this respect.

As always, 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; to Robin Saunders, Jenni Tubbs, Eddie Wiseman (who has achieved well-earned retirement and is replaced by Peter Durnell at Keyhaven) and Russell Wynn for keeping an eye on developments along the NW Solent shore; to John Clark and John Eyre for help with the Thames Basin Heaths pSPA; and to Jess Pain for input concerning the Avon Valley and Blashford Lakes. Mark Edgeller has taken on a BAP role, liaising with Eastleigh Borough Council on bird matters. Background information comes from a much wider range of sources, including the County Council ecologists, Environment Agency and English Nature staff. However, any resulting errors or confusion are mine.

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