

Conservation Progress Report

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

Dibden Terminal: Public Inquiry update

[Background notes and brief indications of HOS's particular interests may be found in previous Progress Reports, notably in Newsletters Nos. 90 and 94].

This long running (and expensive) public inquiry eventually concluded its public hearings in mid December 2002. From an ornithological standpoint the evidence presented by the major objectors – English Nature, Environment Agency, Hampshire County Council and the RSPB – demonstrated the considerable, and recognised, international importance of the Solent and Southampton Water for waterfowl and shorebirds in general, but especially for the migrant waders and over-wintering wildfowl populations, respectively, of the East Atlantic flyway and Northwest Europe. There were two particular aspects, raised by objectors, which found resonance with the writer: the need to consider “assemblages” of birds, different numbers of different species using the whole area in a dynamic way with significant seasonal variations; and the implausibility of predicting long term impacts of change (such as the loss of the Dibden foreshore and Reclaim). ABP's attempts to justify its proposed mitigation/compensation measures – a conservation area at Church Farm for the loss of the Reclaim, and recharging the intertidal area of the Hythe to Fawley saltmarshes for the loss of the Dibden foreshore – require much faith in the current ability to model the outcomes of such schemes over long timescales (10-50+ years). This is quite separate from the absence of like-for-like mitigation in ABP's proposals. One hopes the Inspectors – there were three present for the Nature Conservation topic – will favour the precautionary principle and appreciate the lack of capability to make credible predictions for very far into the future.

However, it has to be recognised that even if the scientific case of the objectors is accepted, there is still the small matter of the political input which will come from the government.

Anticipated docks developments nationally suggest to the writer that there is no over-riding case to support the Dibden proposal, however much it may be in ABP's commercial interest. At the end of the public part of the Inquiry, the chief inspector stated his hope that the report would be available by October 2003. We shall see!

New Forest National Park

The public inquiry into the boundary and administration of the proposed National Park, which began earlier this year, is expected to end in April 2003. One of the hopes of the nature conservation lobby is that a more sensitive policy will be developed for the recreational use of the Forest.

South Downs National Park

Comments on the proposed boundaries and administration of this National Park, which stretches from just East of Winchester to Beachy Head in East Sussex and includes Woolmer Forest, were due at the Countryside Agency by the end of February. It is understood the CA received some 5000 comments. Another public inquiry will follow, probably at the end of 2003 or beginning of 2004. One of the concerns has to be how it will be properly funded, given that several of the affected local authorities are lukewarm at best! From an ornithological viewpoint, one of the potential opportunities the NP should provide is the ability to encourage the Stone Curlew to spread back on to its former South Downs breeding

sites from the Hampshire “arm” of the current Wessex population.

Thames Basin Heaths pSPA

Last year I reported the Bramshill site owners’ High Court challenge to English Nature’s proposal to designate the Bramshill site an SSSI and thence forward the Thames Basin Heaths pSPA to Brussels for confirmation. Eventually the High Court threw out the appeal and the owners’ intention to proceed to the Court of Appeal was withdrawn. Well done those who allowed their data on the Schedule 1 species involved to be used by English Nature.

Avon Valley

In an effort to rescue the breeding waders of the Lower Avon Valley from extinction, a site has been identified for possible purchase by the conservation bodies “to help set the ball rolling”. This could probably only be achieved with the help of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, which of itself should not prove difficult because lowland wet meadows are “in vogue” currently. However, the site will only be realistically viable for such a purpose if the Environment Agency’s flood defence responsibilities for the local human population can be adapted without significant resource implications. Time is running short for the birds of the Lower Avon. Watch this space.

Fortunately Defra’s latest agri-environment payments should encourage more landowners to join schemes aimed at restoring (or re-creating) and maintaining wet meadow status to areas such as the Avon flood-plain. Those who heard Andrew Fielder – Defra’s local ESA project officer – speak at last autumn’s HOS conservation conference will be aware of these opportunities (see the last Newsletter pp12-17).

Biodiversity Action Plans

Delivery of national Biodiversity Action Plans is via local Action Plans. There are of two kinds of Action Plans – Habitat Action Plans (HAPs) and Species Action Plans (SAPs) – at two levels of “local” – county and district/borough. Unitary authorities do their own thing. Point of delivery is often through the lower level. HOS, in taking the initiative to set up the network we now call the Joint Hampshire (BAP) Bird Monitoring Group, has recognised this by encouraging the most progressive (in this respect) second level “local” authority in the county, Eastleigh Borough Council, to join the BMG as an observer, with Mark Edgeller acting as the local HOS link. Those attending the semi-annual meetings of this group include representatives from the BTO, HWT, HCC, RSPB, Eastleigh BC and HOS.

At the most recent meetings of the BMG, which provides input to the HOS Scientific Committee, a wide range of topics were reviewed. In addition to the one alluded to in the previous paragraph, an excellent briefing on the Game Conservancy Trust’s current work on farmland birds was given by GCT’s Peter Thompson. SAPs for birds considered included one on Shorebirds, prepared by John Eyre, which is about to be published and probably will be scrutinised in the context of the Hampshire coastal HAP at a Coastal BAP workshop on 11 April being organised by HCC and the Solent Forum.

To conclude this section it might interest readers to be aware of a recent Defra publication (October 2002) entitled “Working with the grain of nature” (sub-titled A biodiversity strategy for England). It contains 11 chapters and 5 “essays”. The chapter titles give support to the introductory claim that the document provides a new biodiversity vision for England: chapters on water and wetlands, the engagement of business, biodiversity and sustainable tourism, and education and understanding, with examples of several large scale habitat creation or re-creation schemes are worth a look – its on the Defra website.

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Norman Pratt