

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT **LOCAL WILDLIFE SITES REVIEW**

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Introduction

This report has been produced by Essex Ecology Services Ltd. (EECOS), the ecological consultancy of the Essex Wildlife Trust, on behalf of Epping Forest District Council. It comprises the results of a review of existing and potential Local Wildlife Sites (LoWS) intended to contribute to the Local Development Framework evidence base. It includes a register of all those sites now considered to be Local Wildlife Sites (LoWS) within Epping Forest District, some 222 in total, along with the identification of a few Potential LoWS for which there is a lack of information or a need to bring about reasonable improvements through active management.

1.2 Background

A previous survey report, produced by the Essex Wildlife Trust in 1992, incorporated a basic land use survey with an exercise to identify the most important wildlife habitats present within the district. These important wildlife habitats were identified as “Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation” [SINC], with the results summarised in “Nature conservation – A Reference Guide” produced in individual district volumes. A few years after this review (May 1996 and August 1998), a small number of grassland and woodland sites were surveyed and added to or deleted from the Site register, following suggestions from Paul Hewitt at Epping Forest District Council’s Countrycare team. This was partly driven by changes to the county boundary between Essex and Hertfordshire that saw land transferred to/from Epping Forest District and its neighbours in Hertfordshire.

In the intervening years these SINC sites have been referred to as County Wildlife Sites and, in some places, Wildlife Sites, but in Essex the term Local Wildlife Sites has now been adopted and is used throughout this report to refer to sites of this designation, irrespective of the terminology that was used at the time. Notwithstanding this, it should be stressed that Local Wildlife Sites should be viewed as being of county importance, reflecting the natural variation in type and quality of woods, grasslands, water bodies heaths and other habitats across the county.

There will remain, of course, many places that are of importance to wildlife at a more “parochial” level, that are not afforded LoWS status. These should still be given due consideration by a local authority when determining planning applications, with LoWS status not being a convenient short-cut to deciding whether or not a planning application has environmental impacts. Many local authorities have policies which state that there will be a presumption against granting planning consent for applications which have an affect on LoWS. However, there will be many other sites with implications for wildlife and the environment that will require a preliminary ecological assessment of some sort when determining the impact of a planning application and some of these may be of sufficient merit to refuse planning consent. Wildlife implications on these sites may take the form of the presence of legally protected species (e.g. Badgers, bats, Water Voles and nesting birds), or small fragments of habitats that might, if larger or less ecologically isolated, have qualified for LoWS status.

1.3 Objectives of the Review

The principal objective of this review is to update the LoWS network within Epping Forest District in the light of changes in available knowledge and by application of the new site selection criteria for Essex. This updated information can contribute to a robust evidence base as required of each local authority as part of its Local Development Framework.

1.4 Review Process and Methodology

The basis for this review has been a comprehensive field survey, in conjunction with a desk study and consultation exercise to identify potential new Sites and to validate or delete existing Sites. All of these sites were then assessed against the current LoWS Selection Criteria to determine whether or not they qualified for LoWS status. Species and habitats now afforded attention via county or national Biodiversity Action Plans were specifically considered and their representation within the LoWS network ensured. The LoWS Selection Criteria have been developed through reviews in other Essex districts and modified in line with national guidelines and following a wide consultation exercise. The LoWS selection criteria were published early in 2009, with minor amendments in January 2010, and have been used in this current review. They are reproduced in a separate Annex to this LoWS review report, as well as being available via www.localwildlifesites.org.uk from where updated versions will periodically appear.

For some groups, such as invertebrates, the state of our knowledge concerning their distribution and ecological requirements is still quite limited, so that whilst criteria are now in place to select sites on the grounds of their invertebrate interest, the actual ability to do so is still at an early stage, particularly for the less well-studied groups. However, development of the various biodiversity initiatives across the county and the production of a draft Essex Red Data List have helped in focusing on the needs of these populations and identifying their key population localities. These data should continue to feed into subsequent LoWS reviews, improving the effectiveness of their nature conservation role.

Desk Study

The starting point for the focus of field survey work was the existing suite of LoWS (originally SINCS), to determine whether or not they still satisfied the current selection criteria. Added to these were a number of potential sites that have been brought to the attention of EECOS or Essex Wildlife Trust staff since 1992. Reference was also made to aerial photography, most notably that available via the Google Earth web-site, to identify other areas of land of potential interest. This last tool is particularly useful for locating areas of semi-natural habitat not visible from public rights of way or other public vantage points that might otherwise have gone un-noticed or required much more labour-intensive field-by-field survey work to discover. Clarification of site boundaries, most notably ancient woods and hedgerow patterns, was assisted by reference to the First Edition 6" Ordnance Survey maps of the early 1880s accessed via the web-site www.old-maps.co.uk. Reference was also made to the 1777 Chapman and André map of Essex, although it is recognised that a good deal of interpretation and caution is needed for this very early mapwork.

Alongside this, a consultation process has sought comments from relevant local experts on the existing suite of Sites and also the draft suite of Local Wildlife Sites as this was developed. These comments have been incorporated as far as possible within the final list of sites, while maintaining the rigour of the published Site selection criteria. Some suggested sites, for which insufficient information is currently available, have been identified in this report as Potential Local Wildlife Sites pending further survey work or improvements to the habitat conditions.

EECOS gratefully acknowledges the input from the following persons and organisations, which were consulted as part of this review process (in alphabetical order):

Cath Patrick – Lee Valley Regional Park

Essex Amphibian and Reptile Group

Ian White – Epping Forest District Council, Planning Dept.

Jeremy Dagley, Imogen Wilde and others – City of London

Ken Adams – Essex Field Club

Patrick Bailly – Essex Wildlife Trust warden, Roding Valley Meadows nature reserve

Paul Hewitt – Epping Forest Countrycare team

Peter Harvey - Essex Field Club

Tim Gardiner – formerly Essex County Council, now Environment Agency

Opinions were also sought from Gordon Wyatt (Natural England) and the Ongar Wildlife Society.

Field Survey Work

In order to facilitate site access as part of the field survey work, EECOS surveyors were issued with warrants of entry onto land under Sections 324(1) and 325(1) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. These warrants effectively gave rights of access at reasonable times of the day and week and by using reasonable routes and methods to land not otherwise accessible via the public rights of way network.

Notwithstanding this, there are clearly a number of scenarios when it would have been neither appropriate nor even legal to try and exercise such rights of access. Such situations include private residential gardens, sites subject to mines and quarries regulations, open landfill sites, railway land and the like, and all surveyors used their discretion in applying the general principle of gaining access to areas of open countryside for the purposes of this survey. Where possible, surveyors still attempted to make contact with the relevant landowners and EECOS wishes to thank all those people who have actively assisted this survey by orally granting permission to enter onto their land.

Any areas of land adjudged to be of significant wildlife value were assessed in more detail, as conditions permitted, with a short description and plant species list compiled. Other nature history notes, such as bird life and insects, were also noted, if appropriate. The threshold of what constitutes a “significant” wildlife value is to an extent a matter of experience and judgement, but key habitat qualities include possible ancient status for woodland, flower-rich

grasslands, potential to support reptiles and amphibians, the micro-topography and weedy flora characteristic of post-industrial “brownfield” sites and the ecological relationship between adjacent sites. Given the strong link between UK/Essex Biodiversity Action Plans and the site selection criteria, any site associated with a BAP habitat or species was evaluated as a matter of course. All surveyors engaged on the project have had previous experience of Local Wildlife Site identification in other districts/counties and so had a working knowledge of the site selection criteria and what might intrinsically qualify for inclusion.

1.5 Limitations of the Survey

For many of the sites there is still a lack of data available regarding invertebrate populations and other species information. Every reasonable effort has been made to obtain the additional information necessary to fully assess existing and proposed sites, but this information will be continually updated which may affect the status of some sites. In general terms, new information about sites is becoming available all the time. This would make a rolling programme of Site monitoring and review more useful than the “once every ten years or so” approach that has been the norm up to now. For Epping Forest district, it has been 17 years since the original suite of SINC’s was identified.

The scope of the review limited the process, in many cases, to a single visit to each site. While efforts were made to visit each site at the most appropriate season, inevitably some features of some sites were not visible at the time of the visit. It is hoped that the additional consultation with local naturalists has filled many such gaps in the knowledge base.