



***CARAVAN CLUB ECOLOGICAL
SITE APPRAISAL***

Daleacres
Caravan Club Site
Lower Wall Road
West Hythe
CT21 4NW



General Information

Site Name and County: Daleacres, Lower Wall Road, West Hythe, Kent CT21 4NW

Grid Reference: TR112331

Area: 15 acres

Date: 23 June 2007

Recorder: Rodney West , JUST ECOLOGY Environmental Consultancy

Weather Conditions: Dull, overcast, showery 18°C, light wind

Site Description

The site is on the flat marshlands and has an open aspect, being surrounded by arable fields and grazing marshes.

The site has a number of hard standings whilst the majority of the pitches are based, within mown amenity grassland. All are arranged on either side of the main metalled track which runs as a circuit around the site. A woodland walk and a play area extend the site's northern boundary.

Context

The Romney Marshes Natural Area embraces vast shingle beaches and flat marshland between Hythe in Kent and Pett in Sussex. It is rich in geomorphology, plants, invertebrates and birds many of which are of international importance

The site lies beneath the Lympne Escarpment amidst farmland. The Lympne Escarpment marks the old coastline and the site sits on flat clay-based lands which would once have been saltmarsh. The grassland and woodland of the escarpment are among the best remaining examples of semi-natural habitats on ragstone in Kent.

The surrounding countryside is a mixture of arable and sheep grazed grasslands – few with hedges surrounding. Several hundred metres north is the Royal Military Canal.



Habitat Information

Broad Habitats Present: Amenity grassland, broadleaved woodland

BAP Priority Habitats Present: None

Caravan Club cBAP features: Broadleaved woodland, ditches & banks

Subsidiary Habitats Present: Dead wood, freshwater ditch, hedgerow

Grassland Communities:

The amenity grassland between the hard standings and which covers the majority of the site, is species-poor. Several grass species are present including Perennial Rye Grass *Lolium repens*, Annual Meadow Grass *Poa annua* and Common Bent *Agrostis capillaris*. In some areas a slightly more diverse sward includes perennials such as Daisy *Bellis perennis*, Dandelion *Taraxacum officinale*, Greater Plantain *Plantago major*, Selfheal *Prunella vulgaris*, Yarrow *Achillea millefolium* and White Clover *Trifolium repens*.

In some areas between the grass sward and the gravel-based hard standings there is a ruderal-based (weedy) habitat developing and this includes species such as Perennial Sow-thistle *Sonchus arvensis* and Pineappleweed *Matricaria matricaroides*.

Woodland:

Groups of pitches are divided with areas of planted mixed hardwood species (Figure 1). These were surveyed individually but comprised of species such as Holm Oak *Quercus ilex*, Tamarisk *Tamarix gallica*, White Poplar *Salix alba* sp., Field maple *Acer campestre*, Silver Birch *Betula pubescens* and Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*.

Woodland edge:

Directly beneath the boundary hedges and alongside the planted copses of hardwood species – where the habitat is drier and shadier and where the mowing regime does not reach, other perennial species are present including Ivy *Hederix* sp., Field Bindweed *Convolvulus arvensis*, Cleavers *Galium aparine*, Creeping Buttercup *Ranunculus repens*, Cow Parsley *Anthriscus sylvestris* and Black Horehound *Ballota nigra*. Ruderals (weeds) are common including Common Nettle *Urtica dioica*, Wood Dock *Rumex sanguineus*, Creeping Buttercup *Ranunculus repens*, White Clover, Creeping Thistle *Cirsium arvense* and Hedge Bindweed *C. sepium*.

Hedgerow:

The site has boundary hedgerow on three sides. Species are limited to Hawthorn, Elder *Sambucus nigra* and Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* with some Elm *Ulmus* sp. and Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* in one area.

Wetland:

There is a freshwater ditch that runs along the northern boundary of the main site and divides this from the play area and dog walking area (Figure 2). At the western side the ditch is covered by the adjacent hedgerow canopy whereas on the eastern side it is more open and Common Reed *Phragmites communis* grows on both banks.

**Habitat Evaluation**

The grassland between the pitches is of little biodiversity value, being very closely mown, but will be of value to thrushes, woodpeckers and ground-burrowing invertebrates.

The hedgerow that borders three sides of the site was mature and generally in good condition and this will provide both a feeding and breeding site potential for many species of invertebrates, birds and mammals.

The planted small groups of mixed hardwood trees have grown to early maturity and will provide both a feeding resource and a breeding habitat for a wide variety of birds and invertebrates.



Figure 1: Mature trees are attractive to many forms of wildlife. Young Green Woodpeckers *Picus viridis* were seen on them during the survey visit.



Figure 2: Running freshwater is a biodiversity plus for the site. Its quality needs to be monitored.



Species Information

BAP Species Seen: Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

BAP Species Potential: Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus* and other bat species are priority species listed in the UK and Kent Biodiversity Action Plans. Bats have been seen on the site. Additionally, Water Vole *Arvicola terrestris* are present on Romney Marsh and are listed in the UK and Kent Biodiversity Action Plans.

Caravan Club cBAP species: Song Thrush

Other Notable Species: None

Flora:

The grassland areas contain species indicative of improved and re-seeded grassland such as Perennial Rye Grass, White Clover and Dandelion. There is the opportunity to increase habitat diversity with areas where the grass has been allowed to grow taller, for example, the dog walk area.

Avifauna:

In total 14 species of birds were recorded on the site during the survey period but this is probably augmented by other species including owls and wagtails. During winter the short turf areas would probably attract winter visitors such as Scandinavian Redwing *Turdus iliacus*, Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* and Blackbird *Turdus merula*.

Birds recorded using the site during the survey visit included:

- Blackbird (breeding)
- Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* - (breeding)
- Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* - (probably breeding)
- Green Woodpecker
- House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*
- Linnet *Acanthis cannabina* – UK BAP species
- Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*
- Robin *Erithacus rubecula* - (probably breeding)
- Rook *Corvus frugilegus*
- Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*
- Song Thrush – UK and Kent BAP species
- Swallow (breeding) *Hirundo rustica*- (probably breeding)
- Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*
- Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*- (breeding)

Species identified as using the site and are of particular note:

The **Song Thrush** - is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as all birds, their nests and eggs are protected by law. It is also listed on the Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC) Red List, which holds species whose breeding population has decreased and/or whose breeding range has contracted by 50% or more in the preceding 25 years. Song Thrushes are also listed in the Kent Red Data Book as vulnerable. In Kent, song thrushes remain widely distributed, although in 2000, the Kent Breeding Bird Index for song thrush showed its population at just 48% of the 1977 level. The Caravan Club is also 'species champion' for Song Thrush, for 2006-2007, in partnership with the RSPB),

House Sparrow - populations have fluctuated greatly over the centuries, with a gradual decline over the last 100 years. A change from horse-drawn vehicles to motorised ones caused the sparrow population in many cities to drop by two thirds, with the removal of an important food supply - the cereal fed to horses. Recent declines have been caused by a combination of reduced plant food in winter, reduced insect availability for chicks, and reduction in available nest sites. On farmland, these are attributed to changes in agricultural practices.

Housing of livestock in inaccessible buildings, mechanisation of grain harvest and more effective storage of grain and animal feeds all reduced the sparrow's access to food. Recent cereal hygiene regulations mean that farm buildings are sealed, and therefore offer fewer nesting sites. In towns lack of food and nest sites are contributing to the decline, but we do not yet fully understand the decline.

In the 1950s, the UK house sparrow population was estimated at 9.5 million. They increased to 12 million by the early 1970s, then declined. The population crashed during the 1990s. Over 25 years the population has declined by 62%. Because of this decline in numbers, the house sparrow is now Red Listed as a species of high conservation concern.

The **Linnet** - is a common and widespread species across the UK countryside where it uses weedy fields, hedgerows, gorse thickets, heathland and scrub (particularly near the coast). However, based on the Common Bird Census, numbers declined by 56% on farmland between 1968 and 1991. Their UK range declined only slightly over this period but was most marked in Northern Ireland. The UK population was estimated at 540,000 territories in the New Breeding Atlas (1988-91). A variable proportion of the UK breeding population winters in Spain and western France; the birds remaining in the UK are joined by breeding birds from northern Europe.

The Linnet is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and EC Birds Directive, and is listed on Appendix II of the Bern Convention. It is also a UK BAP species and on the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern.

The recent decline of the linnet has occurred at the same time as decreases in the numbers and/or range of other farmland birds which share its diet of grass and wildflower seeds, and some cereal grains. Linnets are more dependent than other seed-eaters on wildflower seeds during the breeding season, when the chicks are also fed on seeds rather than insects. It is likely that the decline in Linnets may be due to changes in agricultural practice, both in the UK and in their wintering range in south-west Europe. These include the increased use of herbicides and fertilisers, the switch from spring-sown to autumn-sown crops and the consequent loss of winter stubble fields, and the general reduction in farmland habitat diversity due to the loss of mixed farming and increased specialisation.

The removal of hedges, gorse thickets and other unmanaged scrub, combined with the increased frequency and severity of hedge trimming and heavy grazing in some areas, will have led to losses of suitable nesting habitat.

Starling - since the 1830s, their range and numbers increased greatly, making it a common and abundant species, but since the 1960s their population has declined across much of Europe, including the UK. Loss of permanent pasture and mixed farming, and increased use of farm chemicals are probable causes of starling decline in the UK.

Access to the birds main food of earthworms and leather jackets has declined, particularly on arable land. There is also a shortage of nesting sites in many parts of the UK.

Long term monitoring by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) shows that starling numbers have fallen by 66% in Britain since the mid-1970s. Because of this decline in numbers, the Starling is Red Listed as a bird of high conservation concern.

Invertebrates:

The weather during the survey day was not conducive to flying insects. However, several species were recorded and undoubtedly more species use the site, though pollen and nectar bearing plants were generally scarce within the site due to the mowing regime. Insects were attracted to the hardwood plantings within the site and this is an area which could possibly be expanded upon.

Invertebrates recorded using the site during the survey visit included:

- Large White Butterfly *Pieris brassicae*
- Meadow Brown *Maniola jurtina*
- Buff-tailed Bumblebee *Bombus terrestris*
- Rufus-tailed Bumblebee *Bombus lapidarius*

Herptofauna:

No species seen during survey, though the grass compost heaps on the northern boundary could be attractive to Grass Snake *Natrix natrix*. The most recent record for Grass Snake is in the 1980s from about 1km distant.

Mammals:

No mammal species were recorded during the survey but small mammals like Long-tailed Field-mouse *Apodemus sylvatica* and Field Vole *Microtus agrestis* probably use the site as will Stoat *Mustela erminea* and Weasel *Mustela nivalis*.

Certain species of bats use the site; anecdotal evidence suggest they hawk for moths around the electric lights on site. These will probably be Pipistrelle Bats *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*, which are priority species in the UK and Kent Biodiversity Action Plans. Although it remains the most abundant and widespread bat species in the UK, the Pipistrelle is thought to have undergone a significant decline in numbers this century. Estimates from the National Bat Colony Survey suggest a population decline of approximately 70% between 1978 and 1993. The current pre-breeding population estimate for the UK stands at approximately 2,000,000 (see Appendix 1).



Species Evaluation

The grassland around the pitches is species-poor and is kept short by frequent mowing, thus it is of restricted value in biodiversity terms. Grassland around the perimeter of the site and also bordering the small copses, has a slightly higher floral diversity, providing a nectar source for butterflies, bees and other flying insects.

The gravel-based hard stand areas between the mown grass are valuable basking areas for reptiles such as the common lizard and also important for ground-dwelling and burrowing invertebrates such as beetles and ants. These areas are of particularly important if south-facing, as they will provide a warm micro-climate.

A good variety of bird species was recorded during the visit and it is very likely that many other species, not recorded on the day also use the site. The areas of small tree/shrub planting will be of value at blossom time as a resource for pollen and nectar feeding invertebrates, and will also provide useful food source for birds during the winter months when food is scarce. Species such as Rowan, Cherry and Ivy (all found on the site) are particularly valuable in this respect. The addition of several feeding and watering stations around the site would undoubtedly enhance the site's bird interest.

The number of butterflies and flying insects were generally low. This was most likely due to a lack of suitable grassland habitat and associated wildflowers to provide a nectar resource. Around the site's perimeter beyond the mown sward an increase in flying insects was noted. Diversity could be improved by management of the planted tree species using coppicing and some diversification of grassland habitats wherever possible (one metre wide taller grass margins).

Mammal use of the site is low, though mammals such as foxes have access to the site. Although bats were not recorded during the survey, it is highly likely that one or two species are present within the surrounding woodland.

Management Recommendations

- **Nestboxes** – both open-fronted and conventional single hole (32mm diam.) could be added to selective trees in the secluded areas of the site. Nestboxes need cleaning out each autumn.
- **Bird feeding stations** – the warden already has a feeding station by the reception area and this was much in use by young, inexperienced birds during the survey visit. Further feeding stations could be added at two or three additional sites. Two or three feeders at each station could hold a variety of food. One with niger seed; one with husked sunflower seed and a third with general purpose food plus fat balls. Large plastic dishes are available to place beneath feeders to catch most of the fallen debris, these can be cleaned periodically.
- **Fruit** – The west and north boundaries of the play area have small hardwood tree plantings at present, could these be replaced with fruit bearing tree stock? These would be more expensive to purchase but less would be needed. We suggest local Kentish varieties of fruit not necessarily apple – though Grenadier seems a good choice (Military Canal!). Also plum varieties like Kentish Bush and Orpington Prolific. Cherry like Nutberry Black Kentish Red would also give a show of blossom as well as provide food for wildlife. Further advice and information can be found by contacting Brogdale at Faversham, Kent home of the National Fruit Collection, www.brogdale.org
- **Hedgerow (Figure 3)**- We are proposing that the most southerly and eastern boundary of the play area and dog walk boundary is planted with new hedge using such species as Hawthorn, Blackthorn and Bullace *Prunus domestica* var. *institia*. The biological value of hedges to Britain's wildlife is immense. The UK Biodiversity Group have recorded over 600 plant species, 1500 insect species, 65 bird species and 20 mammal species living in hedges at some time.

The reason that hedges and hedge trees are extremely important places for wildlife is that they provide a wide diversity of habitats in a relatively small area. Hedges can provide, shelter, breeding opportunities, nesting sites, song posts, hiding places, ecologically-friendly links between habitats and a range of other opportunities for wildlife.

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- **Gap planting** - On the eastern boundary of the main caravan site the hedge is a little 'gappy' and would benefit from some infill planting. This involves planting young whips into existing gaps in the hedge. There will be less competition between the new plants and the hedge plants. Plant the whips in the centre of the gap to reduce shading and competition.



Figure 3: New hedge planting along this boundary and the southern boundary (top right) would give protection to the site and create further diversity. Note the small whip planting which it is suggested are replaced with fruit trees.

- **Habitat piles** - When cutting grass or hardwood cut and stack in 'habitat piles' in out of the way places – in sunny areas if possible. Try not to burn material. At present the grass cuttings are heaped beyond the most northerly boundary and in this instance would seem to be a good practice as it catches the sun and is near water which might encourage grass snakes.
- **Bats and Trees** - If any mature trees are marked for cutting down it is advisable to get them checked by a bat expert. Any removal should ideally take place outside of the bird breeding season (see Appendix 2).
- **Diversification of grassland** - Less frequent mowing of some areas of the site would be beneficial for a range of insect, mammal and bird species, and would help to diversify the grass sward near the pitches. This could be done at a 1 metre width around the play area part of the site and elsewhere where feasible, and if left to grow longer, should be mown once a year in late August. Another suggestion would be to allow the dog walk area to grow up and cutting a meandering path through it for the summer season. Then cutting the entire area down in the autumn.

All cuttings should be removed. Margins of long grass can provide a valuable habitat for wildlife. Invertebrates, including the caterpillars of butterflies and

moths, feed on grasses. Long grass is also favoured by many small mammals, reptiles and amphibians which in turn will attract kestrels, owls and other predators. Bats frequently hunt for insects over long grass. A variety of lengths will produce a range of habitats and species assemblages. Keeping areas of longer grass also creates an important transition zone between the mature woodland and the short grass, creating a greater range of habitats and thus a greater diversity of plants, birds, small mammals and insects.

- **Nectar sources for butterflies and flying insects** - Amongst the more formal planting around the fences and borders on site, species such as buddleia and honeysuckle could be added. These will attract butterflies and moths and also smell pleasant in the evenings whilst people are sitting outside. Stonecrop (*Sedum telephium*) is an attractive plant that provides excellent cover, and is a favourite of butterflies such as small tortoiseshell, red admiral, painted lady, and peacock.

- **Further surveys:** Bats –there is anecdotal evidence of bats using the site

Appendix 1 - Pipistrelle Bats

Certain species of bats may use the site for foraging (flying insects) and some may roost in convenient trees on the site or nearby. These will probably be Pipistrelle Bats.

The common pipistrelle is the smallest British bat with a wingspan of about 20cms and weighing around six grams. It is the most abundant and widespread bat throughout the UK and have suffered large losses in numbers over the last twenty years.

Although it remains the most abundant and widespread bat species in the UK, the pipistrelle is thought to have undergone a significant decline in numbers this century. Estimates from the National Bat Colony Survey suggest a population decline of approximately 70% between 1978 and 1993. The current pre-breeding population estimate for the UK stands at approximately 2,000,000.

Females form maternity roosts of up to several hundred adults from May, often in house roofs but also in woodland. They give birth to a single live young in July. Males are much more solitary. Hibernation takes place from November to March. Pipistrelles forage for small insects in varied habitats but woodland edges, hedgerows and waterways are particularly important.

The pipistrelle bat is listed on Appendix III of the Bern Convention, Annex IV of the EC Habitats Directive and Appendix II of the Bonn Convention (and is included under the Agreement on the Conservation of Bats in Europe). It is protected under Schedule 2 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations, 1994 (Regulation 38) and Schedules 5 and 6 of the WCA 1981. It is also a priority species listed in the UK and Kent Biodiversity Action Plans.

Current threats to bats:

- Exclusion from roosts by human intervention
- Destruction or damage to roosts as a result of building work/development
- Barn conversions and modifications to buildings such as security lights
- Toxic effects of remedial timber treatment in roofs and other parts of buildings
- Loss and damage to natural habitats such as woodlands and older trees with crevices and cavities.

Appendix 2 - Birds

In Britain all wild birds are granted legal protection under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, the Bern Convention and the EC Birds Directive. This legislation protects the birds, their eggs and nests whilst being built or in use. Such protection makes it an offence to intentionally kill, injure, take or have in possession any wild bird or egg. It is also an offence to intentionally damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird whilst it is being built or in use. Any vegetation clearance and tree works should preferably take place outside of the bird-nesting season to minimise disturbance. The nesting season varies from year to year, according to the weather conditions but generally begins in March, peaks during May and June and continues until August.