

Summary of the ecological findings site visit on Monday 9th April, Anna Swift, Echolocation

Habitats

Thelsford Brook appeared to have a good range of bankside vegetation included numerous old pollarded willows, mature ash and occasional patches of dense scrub and piles of deadwood, including very large log piles. It is deserving of its Ecosite status and has the potential to support foraging and roosting bats and otter. It should be buffered by 20m to minimise issues with run-off and protect the integrity of the aquatic corridor.

The grassland within the site was all heavily sheep-grazed at the time of survey. Even though it's previous use for growing trees did not appear to be agriculturally intense, the impact of grazing sheep is likely to severely limit the botanical diversity of the sward and the habitat is not of significance nor worthy of designation.

Hedgerows - the hedgerows to the north of the access track all qualify as Important under the Wildlife & Landscape criteria of the Hedgerow Regulations - this means they should not be removed without due consideration. My understanding is that if there is an overriding public interest, the hedgerows could be removed but there is a presumption in favour of retaining them. I would retain them with a minimum 5m buffer either side to protect the integrity of the hedgerows, their standard trees and the corridor they provide. I've also attached a summary of what qualifies as an important hedgerow as this also notes the historical criteria, which you might find interesting.

In-field trees - I viewed these with binoculars and believe them to be mature ash. They had at least moderate suitability for roosting bats. They may well be worth keeping in their own right and it's worth checking whether they are subject to a TPO (ask Warwick DC tree officer about this).

Species

Water vole and white clawed crayfish - no evidence along the brook.

Bats - moderate to high potential for bats to roost in trees along the watercourse (ash and pollarded willow) as well as in-field trees. Bats (probable pipistrelle) are also known to roost at Seven Elms and will likely use the hedgerows for commuting and the brook for foraging. We can't determine whether there are bats roosting in the in-field trees as we have no access and we'd need to stand next to the trees and do dusk and dawn surveys. What we perhaps could do is leave static bat detectors at the site for a week or so each month over the summer to gather some data as to the likely numbers of bat passes as well as the range of bat species passing around the perimeter of the site. If the hedgerows or brook are used by a rare bat, or perhaps by really large numbers of bats, we could argue their importance and perhaps look for a slightly bigger buffer to the hedgerows than 5m.

Otter - no confirmed evidence of otter along the brook but there are many records of otter spraints at the nearby Thelsford Bridge - I didn't check this at the time of survey. However the length of the brook has potential for otter couches (rest sites) and holts (breeding sites) as it is relatively undisturbed and clearly the records at the nearby bridge indicate otter are regularly in this area. If a couch or a holt is present we would recommend a buffer of 50m in which no mechanised operations took place. To establish if a couch or holt is present we could deploy our trailcam for a few months to see if we can catch any otters on film, check the frequency and number of individuals to give us an idea of any otter hotspots and where to look for a possible holt or couch along the brook. If no couch or holt is detected, a buffer of 10-20m would likely be sufficient.

Great crested newts - there are records of this species in the pond at the NW corner of the site (just outside the site at the junction of two ditches). It appeared suitable for use by breeding newts and I see no reason why they wouldn't still be there. We would always recommend retaining such ponds and buffering by 50m as 50m around a pond constitutes core newt foraging and sheltering habitat. However, the developer could fill in the pond if they were minded to provide two ponds nearby or in a suitable strategic area that the county has identified for promoting newt conservation, which may not be in the immediate locale. It would be helpful to know how many GCN there are in this pond and in neighbouring ponds to get an idea of newt numbers and distribution but that is an expensive exercise and surveys tend to go out of date within 2 years. Moreover, the developer could develop the Glebe Farm site and not the site to the north and get round the 50m buffer issue by providing a much greater buffer to the north (to offset any loss in the Glebe Farm site), and this doesn't help your cause. The newt question can't be answered without detailed plans and timings of development.

Birds - I heard a skylark singing in the grassland closest to your house during my site visit. This is a Red Listed bird by the RSPB so has a threatened conservation status but one pair is not enough to make a difference to overall recommendations. If you kept your eyes and ears open for these birds over the next couple of months you may notice more singing males and this will increase the value of the site to birds which just helps with the overall picture of the site and its value to biodiversity.

No evidence of any other protected or notable species at the time of the visit.