

Berkshire Ornithological Club Conservation Subcommittee

7.30pm Tuesday 20th October 2020 on Zoom

Notes of meeting

Present: Neil Bucknell, Fraser Cottington, Chris Foster, Lesley Staves (for Roger Frankum), Des Sussex. In addition, Adrian Hickman and Bob Lyle joined, in particular for item 5 **Apologies:** John Lerpiniere, Ken Moore.

1. **Minutes** of meeting of 11th February 2020: agreed.
2. **Matters arising** not covered elsewhere

Item 6 Biodiversity net gain projects: The opportunity for funding of projects creating a biodiversity gain has been reinforced by requests from a funder (Network Rail) and potential facilitators (local authority planners and planning consultants) for information on potential projects. Renton offered to help project proposers with the estimation of “net gain” using DeFRA methodology.

Item 11 Moor Green Lakes: A reply had been received from CEMEX assuring us that the development of the planned wetland reserve covering the New workings and Fleet Hill Farm was proceeding with the RSPB.

3. **Summary of main actions since the last meeting**
 - a. Nesting Little Ringed Plovers at Bucklebury Ford. The Conservation Fund had made a grant of £500 to a farmer as partial compensation for lost crop to protect a field on which two pairs of LRPs were breeding. Two broods, totalling seven young, were successfully fledged. Debby Reynolds and Tim Culley, who monitored the site and made the arrangements with the farmer, were congratulated.
 - b. Swift boxes: further 19 boxes had been delivered and distributed
4. **Lower Farm Lake, Newbury** Bob Lyle explained that the lake had been put on the market in the summer by Rivar Ltd, giving rise to concern that this prime wetland site near Newbury could be lost as a nature reserve (it has no protected status). The site has been withdrawn from the market for the time being, though this is expected to be a temporary reprieve. The NDOC look after a hide on the lake and have worked there on habitat creation and maintenance. have asked us for help in saving the site for nature.

As an initial measure, Local Wildlife Site designation could be sought. When the LWS criteria were reviewed in 2017, we estimated the scores for a range of Berkshire sites and Lower Farm scored above the threshold based on wetland habitat assemblage of bird species and a little below on wintering assemblage. The assessment would need to be reviewed by TVERC using recent years’ records and against the finally published criteria. Bob Lyle agreed speak to Gareth Ryman to establish whether West Berkshire Council has requested TVERC to do this and whether the present owner has agreed to Lower Farm being put up for designation.

Neil suggested that the site may have more value to Rivar as a biodiversity offset against other extraction plans than its sale value. Bob agreed to explore this with Rivar.

Fraser Cottington noted that the Friends of Lavell's Lake (FOLL) had been faced with a similar threat, the loss of Lea Farm Lake when the owners proposed to put it up for sale. In this case, a trustee bought the site and FOLL restructured itself as a CIO, Lavell's Wetland Trust, to enable them to take on ownership.

5. **Downs developments** (NJB/Des Sussex) Covid has held up the development of farmer "clusters" of farmers on the Downs, though Des and Neil had had a constructive meeting with the Jockey Club at Lambourn. Des noted that Yattendon Estates has entered into a number of HLS agreements and anticipated that they might welcome bird surveys. Neil has had preliminary discussion with West Woodhay and there will be a continuing demand for surveys for Beeswax. Neil anticipated a demand for up to 12 competent surveyors (we had only four active farm surveyors in 2019). It was agreed to make further calls for surveyors and offer training if needed. Neil would also contact potential surveyors from adjacent counties.

6. **Fobney Island Nature Reserve** A planning application is in development for large number of industrial units on 42ha of old landfill to the south of the Fobney Island Nature Reserve. The area is mostly rough grassland (a feeding area for Meadow Pipits, Stonechat and Barn Owl) and scrub on the reserve border that has had one or possibly two Nightingale territories in recent years. Currently there is a request for screening opinion (Reading Borough Council Planning Application 201238. The environmental consultant's report is at <http://documents.reading.gov.uk/AnitePublicDocs/00461222.pdf>). The Friends of Fobney are seeking help to stop or limit the development.

Neil noted that much of the proposed development was outside the development opportunity area indicated in the Local Plan and that development in the area north of Island Road "should include a strong undeveloped ecological buffer zone to the R Kennet..." (Renton to pass on to Friends of Fobney).

7. **Padworth Lane GPs update** (Renton) The Canal and River Trust have made no further progress with Harleyfords on the restoration plan for the site. We have brought to CRT's attention broken down fencing and incursions by anglers and motor bikers.
8. **Grebes survey:** The response to the survey has been disappointing. The great majority came in 2018, with only six in 2019 and two in 2020. Thirteen respondents gave details of 55 sites, 26 with Little Grebe present and 32 with Great Crested Grebe. Only four sites boasted both species and five sites neither. As found in the Atlas, Great Crested Grebes are predominantly found in the centre and east of the county, where larger water bodies predominate. One of Chris Foster's students is looking at the data and hopefully we will be able to extract some useful habitat relationships. Given the apparent lack of interest in this survey, it is proposed that we terminate it this year and extract what we can from the records available (Chris, Renton).
9. **Conservation Fund Summary 2003 – 2020:** The paper previously circulated was noted. The fund balance at the end of September was £34,473 with a further £2,000, restricted for conservation work on Fobney Island, to be transferred from the BOC's General Fund.

10. **Date of next meeting:**