

Supporting Statements:

Reprofiling of land to create ephemeral wet areas and the provision of an osprey nesting platform

Blashford Lakes Nature Reserve,
Ellingham Drove, Blashford

Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust
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INTRODUCTION

Blashford Lakes is a series of former gravel pits that have been restored to provide valuable habitats for a diverse range of wildlife and are surrounded by grassland and willow, birch and alder woodland. The Dockens Water stream flows through the reserve and is bounded by ancient woodland of oak and beech. The restoration and management of the Lakes is carried out under a project between Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, Sembcorp Bournemouth Water, New Forest District Council and Wessex Water. The lakes are managed as a nature reserve by the Wildlife Trust, and also provide an educational and informal leisure resource for visitors of all ages.

DESIGN & ACCESS STATEMENT

Proposal

This application is composed of two parts:

- 1) the provision of an osprey nesting platform;
- 2) minor reprofiling of an area of rough grassland and rushes to allow the development of larger ephemeral wet zones than presently exist.

Location and Site Characteristics

Osprey nesting platform

The osprey nesting platform is to be located on the north-east shore of Ibsley Water, to the north of the Lapwing hide. This area is largely grass, with elements of scrub, as shown in Figure 1. It can be readily viewed from our Lapwing Hide and more distantly from the Tern Hide so making it ideal for educational purposes as well as providing a much needed nest site for osprey.

Figure 1: Photograph of site of proposed osprey nesting platform from the south



Reprofiling works

The reprofiling work is to be undertaken in area of uneven ground to the south of the proposed osprey platform, and southwest of our Goosander Bird Hide. As can be seen from Figure 2, this area of land is already very uneven and the presence of rushes indicates areas that are typically wetter. At present, small areas in the ruts created by past vehicular movements usually fill with water during wet months, providing a valuable habitat for mudwort, mud snail, amphibians, dragonflies and other invertebrates. As the area has only been managed at a low level, areas of scrub have developed in the drier zones.

Figure 2: Photograph of site for proposed minor reprofiling



Design and Layout

Osprey nesting platform

The proposed osprey nesting platform is of a standard design, as first developed at Rutland Water in 1996 as part of the programme to reintroduce breeding ospreys to England. The platform is a simple square of wood measuring 1.2 m by 1.2 m, supported by a 6 m high pole, and topped with twigs and small branches and filled with heather bale to encourage ospreys to visit the platform and nest. Figures 3 and 4 provide an example of the appearance of the platform.

The platform is proposed to be sited in this particular location as it is considered it offers the most beneficial set of circumstances to encourage ospreys to nest here. When new breeding pairs arrive in the UK from Africa they must find a new nest location as existing breeding pairs usually return to the same location each year. The sites likely to be selected by breeding pairs are those within 3-5 km of open water, set within an open landscape to allow easy landing on the nest. Tall trees with an open, flat structure at the crown are commonly used where available, but where these are not available ospreys have been found to readily use man-made structures, which is why the platforms have proved particularly successful around the country.

In terms of ground area, the platform will require very little disturbance to the site. A pit measuring approximately 0.5 m x 0.5 m will be dug, and back-filled to provide a long-term, stable base in which to sink the pole to support the nesting platform.

Figure 3: Example osprey nest platform



Figure 4: Osprey nest platform detail



Reprofiling works

It is not possible to say what the exact appearance or layout the reprofiling work will take until work commences. The Location Plan indicates the area within which reprofiling will take place and Drawing 3 (Typical Profile), provides one example of what an area may look like, but due to the unknown factor of what will be found beneath the surface across the whole area that is as far as a description can be taken. As can be seen in Figure 2, the land is already very uneven. The overall appearance will be only minimally affected, and most noticeable immediately after the work is complete and until vegetation naturally recolonises. The main difference will be that instead of the random lines formed by old ruts, the depressions will be somewhat larger, whilst maintaining irregularity in shape and depth. Once vegetation has recolonised the area the final appearance will be very similar to what is currently there.

It should be noted that what is proposed is not substantial in scale. There will not be large bunds of earth formed. The ground is already very uneven and the works will simply require the movement of soil around the reprofiled area to create areas which have a slightly lower profile than the current surface levels.

Landscaping

Osprey nesting platform

In order to increase the success of the platform as a nesting opportunity for ospreys, it is necessary to site it in an open landscape close to open water. As such, no landscaping is proposed to conceal the pole and platform, as this would be likely to discourage use of the platform by ospreys and so negate the purpose of providing it. However, the scale of the platform and small overall 'bulk' means it will be unobtrusive in the wider landscape. Distant views of the platform may be possible from small breaks in the hedgerow/treeline along the A338 adjoining the lakes, particularly during winter months. However, from the road the platform will be viewed against a backdrop of trees further beyond, and it is considered the combination of distance and existing vegetation around and within the reserve will provide sufficient screening from the main road.

A number of residential properties are present along Mockbeggar Lane to the north of the proposed nesting platform, and those on the south side of the road have less screening within their property and consequently will have clearer views of the platform, though still at some distance. The Trust is currently consulting with neighbouring properties to allow opportunity for discussion and explain the rationale behind the proposed siting. The proposed location is shown in figure 5 and 6.

Reprofiling works

The area of proposed reprofiling is not visible from outside of the site, and will not result in a substantial change in the appearance of the landscape either locally or across the Reserve. Consequently, no landscaping works are proposed. Given the desired outcome to create ephemeral wet areas it would not be appropriate to plant any screening vegetation or to artificially seed the area as this would prevent the establishment of local native species that would otherwise readily recolonise the reprofiled area.

Access

The Blashford Lakes Nature Reserve is easily accessed by car and bus (there is a bus stop at the entrance to Ellingham Drive). In addition to surfaced permissive paths, a number of public rights of way cross the Reserve, and the Avon Valley Long Distance Path crosses and passes around the Reserve. All routes across the reserve are clearly waymarked, and most are flat and have benches at regular intervals. A permissive path passes immediately adjacent to the proposed reprofiling works, which will allow visitors an excellent opportunity to observe the establishment of this important wet habitat and its colonisation by new species.

The Trust actively seeks to engage the public with wildlife, and at Blashford we are pleased to provide two all-terrain "Tramper" mobility scooters for visitors in need of assistance. Kissing gates can be bypassed by means of a RADAR key obtained from the Education Centre for disabled visitors and those with large pushchairs.

ECOLOGY

Existing value, potential impacts and mitigation

The site of the proposed osprey nesting platform falls within the Avon Valley Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Protection Area (SPA), and Ramsar.

This unit of the Avon Valley SSSI has been designated primarily for standing open water and canals, and does not relate to the area of grassland that has developed following cessation of mineral extraction works. Therefore, there will be no adverse effect on the features of interest of the SSSI arising from the proposed osprey nesting platform.

The SPA designation has been applied for populations of Annex 1 Bewick's swans and for gadwall. Neither of these species will be directly or indirectly adversely affected by the provision of the osprey nesting platform.

In respect of the Avon Valley Ramsar, this designation encompasses a wide range of habitats over the entire Avon Valley, including fen, mire, lowland wet grassland and small areas of woodland. The Avon Valley Ramsar also supports a diverse assemblage of wetland flora and fauna. No features for which the Ramsar has been designated will be adversely affected by the provision of the nesting platform.

The installation of the platform will take less than half a day and timed to have very little or no impact on bird species using the lakes. To further reduce this, and to ensure the platform is in place ahead of osprey migration to the UK, the works will be carried out at the end of the summer or early autumn.

In respect of the reprofiling works, these are adjacent to, but fully outside of the areas designated for nature conservation and as such there will be no direct adverse impacts to the features for which the designations have been applied but will provide suitable habitat for species for which the area has been designated. The land to be reprofiled is already screened from the lake by an existing bank, vegetation and the Goosander bird hide, so disturbance is highly unlikely. Nevertheless, the works will be carried out in early autumn to minimise disturbance to birds and damage to surface vegetation.

Enhancements

Both the provision of the osprey nesting platform and the reprofiling works form part of ongoing ecological enhancement works carried out over the Blashford Lakes Nature Reserve.

No further ecological enhancement works are proposed as part of the osprey nesting platform works.

By creating larger areas that will fill with water during wet months through the reprofiling works, it is hoped this will result in the natural establishment and spread of species characteristic of this rare habitat thereby increasing the total resource.

TREES

There will be no direct or indirect impacts to trees as a result of either the osprey nesting platform or the reprofiling works.

ARCHAEOLOGY

The Blasford Lakes Nature Reserve has been heavily disturbed as a result of relatively recent mineral extraction works. Consequently, no features of archaeological importance will be affected by either the proposed osprey nesting platform or the reprofiling works.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The Trust actively engages with visitors to the Reserve through direct interaction and the provision of numerous notices within the bird hides, at strategically located interpretation panels and at the Education Centre. The Trust also has a strong volunteer base that regularly works around the site. As part of the process behind this application, the Trust is providing information by direct interaction with the public and through notices in the hides and at the visitor centre to raise awareness of the proposals and their importance. Members of the public have opportunity to discuss the proposals with Trust staff and learn more about how both aspects will bring about enhancements in biodiversity.

The Trust is also in discussion with neighbouring properties along Mockbeggar Lane.

METHOD & TIMING OF WORKS

The osprey nesting platform site will be prepared by digging a hole approximately 0.5 m x 0.5 m in area, and 1.5 m deep.

In respect of the reprofiling works, as explained in previous sections of this report it is not possible to pinpoint exactly where or how the area will be reprofiled. However, the presence of plant species associated with wet areas will be our primary guide to where to create depressions as these areas will naturally be more likely to fill with water during wet months and create the desired outcome.

The land will be reprofiled using a 360 degree excavator machine and by hand. Access to carry out the works will be via the main car park to the nature reserve off the north side of Ellingham Drove then along the south and then east shore of Ibsley Water, the ground is already very compacted being the route of a former haul road. The works will be carried out in early autumn to minimise disturbance to birds and damage to surface vegetation.

FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF SITE

No specific management requirements will be necessary for the provision of the nesting platform, beyond periodic cleaning of the platform to prevent disease. The land to be reprofiled will continue to be managed at a low level to prevent excessive scrub encroachment, as part of the Reserve management plan agreed with Natural England.

FLOOD RISK

The osprey nesting platform does not fall within any flood zones as identified by the Environment Agency maps. Part of the area to be reprofiled is identified on the Environment Agency flood maps as at risk of flooding from rivers. However, this is part of the reason the site has been selected, as this flooding will help create the ephemeral wet zones that are sought by carrying out the work. The minor extent and nature of reprofiling works will not increase the flood risk elsewhere. There may be a small increase in the capacity the overall site to accommodate flood waters, so at most there would be a minor positive effect in reducing flood risk elsewhere.

GEOLOGY

The site is a former gravel working currently in restoration; as such there is no remaining natural geology or features of interest.

SOIL MANAGEMENT

The soils are all the result of the distribution of over burden following restoration. A soil plan for the site has been prepared as part of cross compliance for the Rural Payments Agency.

MINERALS OPERATIONS

There are no minerals operations in this proposal.

BUILDINGS AND PLANT

There are no buildings or plant on the site.

HIGHWAYS

No additional issues arise from this proposal, the site is well away from the highway and access is via the established reserve entrance.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

The works will be conducted so as to avoid spreading invasive alien plants and any fuelling of machinery will take place away from the site and water bodies.

CONCLUSION

The proposed osprey nesting platform will provide what could become an important nest site for this migratory species in a good location to support a breeding pair and their offspring. The platform is to be located so that visitors to the Reserve will be able to observe any nesting ospreys from the existing hides, and so learn more about this species and help with publicity about national campaigns to protect this species.

The proposed reprofiling work will benefit a number of specialised species that utilise ephemeral ponds; a habitat feature for which south-west Hampshire is especially important.

Overall, these minor works will provide good gains for wildlife as part of ongoing works to improve the biodiversity of the area following mineral extraction works, and the Trust respectfully requests that permission be granted to enable these important works to go ahead.