



Wildlife Trust for
**Beds, Cambs
& Northants**

Wild Places

**A Newsletter for Owners and
Managers of Wildlife Sites**

www.wildlifebcn.org

2023

Welcome to the twelfth issue of the Wildlife Sites Newsletter.

This newsletter is for owners and managers of wildlife sites in Bedfordshire. These can be County Wildlife Sites (CWS) or otherwise. CWSs are areas of land where species and habitats flourish because of past and current management and are the most important areas for wildlife outside legally protected sites such as SSSIs. There are 408 CWSs in Bedfordshire – these cover over 7% of the county’s area and create a network of habitats across the county. They do not have statutory protection and it is through the goodwill of their owners and managers that the sites are conserved and retain their wildlife value.

What We’ve Been Up To

During the last year, we have visited and provided advice to over 20 wildlife sites, including CWS’s, churchyards, ponds, woodlands and private estates.

During 2022 and 2023 we surveyed and completed a report on a golf course, which became the 408th CWS in the county, recognised for its high quality chalk grassland. We have also assisted in organising the grazing of a privately owned CWS.

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Legislation Progress

Biodiversity Net Gain

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is due to become a statutory requirement for developers in January 2024. BNG means that developers will be required to deliver an overall net positive outcome for the local environment of at least 10% when creating new developments. This is on top of existing requirements to avoid impacts on wildlife. This will be done through the enhancement, restoration or creation of new habitats and will preferably be done on the site of the development, but if not, they can be carried out at another site, and there are potential payments for the owners and managers of those sites. These will need to be managed and maintained for at least 30 years.

If done correctly BNG has the potential to have a positive effect on wildlife, but we believe that it does have its limitations. For example, the Wildlife Trusts advocate for 20% BNG to be managed in perpetuity. For more information on how BNG could be of benefit to land owners and managers, and on BNG in general, visit the following Defra blog: [BNG - Land use: policies and framework \(blog.gov.uk\)](https://blog.gov.uk/bng-land-use-policies-and-framework)

The Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS)

At the beginning of 2023 Defra published more details on ELMS and how they intend to make payments going forward. These include the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), the base level paying farmers to adopt and maintain sustainable farming practices; Countryside Stewardship plus (CS) which will pay for activities targeted at specific habitats and features; and Landscape Recovery, which will look at long-term, larger scale projects. Defra started accepting applications for SFI and CS plus this year.

As with BNG, the Wildlife Trusts believe that ELMS could be strengthened to provide landowners with greater incentives to protect wildlife, and we hope that this will be done as the scheme continues to develop. Updates on the status of Elms can be found on the [Defra farming blog](#).



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Species Focus - Slow worms

Easily mistaken for a snake, slow worms are actually legless lizards. This is given away by their ability to shed their tail when under attack and to blink with their eyelids. Their heads are also less pronounced than that of a snake, making it less distinct from the rest of their body.

They lost their legs through an evolutionary process, possibly to aid them when moving through loose soil and decaying vegetation.

Like other reptiles, slow worms hibernate during the winter months, generally from October to March, burrowing into the soil.

What do they look like? They have a notched tongue, not so deeply forked as a snake's. They are significantly smaller than snakes too, with adults generally reaching up to 50 cm in length. Males are a pale golden colour, occasionally with pale blue spots. Females are typically larger, with dark sides and a dark line running down their back. Juveniles can be just a few centimetres long and are gold and black. It's not possible to tell male and female juveniles apart.



Female slow worm



Head of slow worm

What do slow worms like to eat? They eat a variety of invertebrates, including earthworms, slugs, snails and spiders. Not being too fast themselves, they generally go for slower moving prey.

What habitats do slow worms like? They like to live in areas with plenty of dense ground cover. They can be found in woodland glades, on heathland, scrub and grassland. But they can also be found in urban allotments and gardens if they have suitable habitats.

Are they threatened? Slow worms are one of our more common reptiles, and possibly the one that you are most likely to see due to their relatively slow nature and disposition to areas such as wildlife friendly gardens and allotments. They are spread throughout the county, but populations in the UK are declining due to habitat loss and fragmentation. As well as their natural predators, such as badgers and birds, they are also susceptible to predation from domestic cats.

How can you improve your habitat for slow worms? Dense ground vegetation is key for them, so letting your grass grow long may be enough to attract them, and they are also attracted to compost heaps, which are fantastic for retaining heat. Having log piles can also help to provide shelter and food sources for their favoured invertebrate food.



Blow's Downs nature reserve. One of the many Wildlife Trust BCN nature reserves where slow worms can be found.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies

Nature Recovery – building a network

Nature is facing a multitude of challenges from climate change to development. Many of these challenges can seem overwhelming but we can help nature recover and improve the resilience of some of our most threatened species and habitats.

The Government have committed to developing the Nature Recovery Network (NRN) through the 25 Year Environment Plan, enacted in the Environment Act 2021. The NRN aims to restore and enhance our most important sites for nature. But it will also create new sites for wildlife to thrive by enhancing, creating and connecting habitats – increasing their resilience to the threats they face.

By helping nature, we benefit too. The natural world provides us with the vital services we need to survive such as clean water, flood protection and healthy soil. It provides us with health benefits through exercise and connection with the nature where we live.

In Bedfordshire, County Wildlife Sites are critically important. They help provide the vital connections and ‘stepping stones’ for wildlife, without which many species would be lost. As County Wildlife Site owners and managers, you are therefore playing a vital role, and your help in nature’s recovery is needed!

What are Local Nature Recovery Strategies

To help deliver the NRN, each county in England will have a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). These 48 strategies will set out the priorities for nature recovery across the country. They will highlight existing biodiversity in the area, identify priority actions to help nature recover and map areas that are important for nature or where new areas could be enhanced or created. The strategies will also identify where these actions can deliver benefits for people too.



© Paul Hirst, Greensand Trust

Female Black-tailed Skimmer, Cainhoe Lakes CWS

They will work with and build on existing strategies such as Local Plans and Biodiversity Action Plans.

Bedfordshire's LNRS

Central Bedfordshire Council are the responsible authority delivering the strategy for the whole of Bedfordshire. We will be working closely with Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership, Luton Borough Council and Bedford Borough Council along with a range of other stakeholders. These include environmental charities, landowners, government agencies and others. We will also be working with responsible authorities in neighbouring counties to ensure that administrative boundaries are not boundaries for wildlife.

How LNRS will be delivered

The final strategy will guide the actions of those with an interest in nature recovery. This will include government agencies, local authorities, environmental organisations, developers and landowners.

The new Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirement on developers and the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) for landowners will provide nation-wide mechanisms for enabling delivery of the strategies. Planning authorities must take account of LNRSs in their plans which will help protect the most important sites for nature and restore and create new ones.

How you can get involved

The Bedfordshire strategy is in its early stages, but we will soon be engaging with a wide range of stakeholders to understand our nature priorities. Landowners and those managing important wildlife sites will be vital partners in our understanding of priorities and proposed actions in Bedfordshire.

Richard James—Local Nature Recovery Strategy Project Officer

If you would like to find out more, please visit the Bedfordshire LNP website here.

[BEDS LNRS – Bedfordshire Naturally](#)

There is also further information on the LNRS process on the Government website [Local nature recovery strategies - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Habitat Focus - Floodplain Meadows

Floodplain meadows have developed over hundreds of years in the agricultural landscape to help farmers feed cattle, sheep and horses over the winter months. Farmers would cut the meadow in mid-summer and store the grass as hay, graze the animals on the land until it became too wet, and then feed the livestock on the hay during the winter. The mid-summer cut, followed by grazing helps to prevent tall, coarse grasses and herbs from dominating, resulting in the flower-rich swards that floodplain meadows can provide.

Due to the regular deposition of silt during flooding naturally replenishing the soil with nutrients, farmers found that they didn't need to add much in the way of extra fertilizer. The naturally high levels of nutrients are also what makes it possible for the grass to continue to grow well enough after cutting that it can be 'aftermath' grazed by livestock.

From a wildlife conservation perspective, high quality floodplain meadows can contain more than 40 different plant species per 1m², making them a vital resource for pollinators. In the spring and summer they can be important sites for ground nesting birds, and in the winter, especially after flooding, they can provide feeding grounds for wildfowl and waders.



Sawfly (one of the Tenthredo arcuata complex) on Devil's-bit Scabious

They are of course also an important flood mitigation tool, storing water during times of high flow, but they can also store significant amounts of carbon in the deep root structures of the plants.

What has happened to our floodplain meadows? It is believed that just 3000 hectares of species-rich floodplain meadows remain today, despite there being over 1.6 million hectares of floodplain in England and Wales.

Floodplain meadows have declined due to agricultural improvement, mineral extraction, urban development and hydrological changes made to river systems.

Can I create or restore a floodplain meadow? To know whether this is possible on your site, you will need to assess your soil type, it's fertility levels and the water regime. If the land appears to have suitable conditions, then switching to/introducing a mid-summer cut, followed by aftermath grazing or a late summer cut may be enough to produce positive results after a few years. However, using 'green hay' or spreading seed may be necessary.

For less suitable sites, actions may need to be taken to reduce the soil fertility and change the water levels.

If you are interested in creating or restoring a floodplain meadow, visit the webpage of the excellent Floodplain Meadows Partnership for more in depth advice: [Floodplain Meadow Partnership: Valuing, conserving and exploring our heritage | Floodplain Meadows Partnership](#)



© Wildlife Trust BCN

Fancott Meadow, a Wildlife Trust BCN reserve

Funding sources

- **Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS)** - This is aimed mostly at farmers, but can also apply to land managers in general. Details from the government can be found here: [Environmental Land Management \(ELM\) update: how government will pay for land-based environment and climate goods and services - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/environmental-land-management-elms-update-how-government-will-pay-for-land-based-environment-and-climate-goods-and-services)
- **Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)** - As with ELMS this was mentioned at the beginning of the newsletter. Coming into force in January 2024, if developers need to complete BNG 'off-site' this has the potential to pay for the improvement and creation of habitats for a 30 year period. See the following page for more details: [Biodiversity net gain - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/biodiversity-net-gain) as well as the blog mentioned on page 3.
- **Great Crested Newt District Level Licencing Scheme** - If you have an area of land where a pond can be created, or existing ones restored, that has the potential for great crested newts, then you could be eligible for this scheme. In Bedfordshire this is done through the Newt Conservation Partnership. Funding is for at least 25 years and can include suitable areas of land surrounding ponds. More information can be found here: [Newt Conservation Partnership \(freshwaterhabitats.org.uk\)](https://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk)
- **Anglian Water Invasive Non-native Species Fund** - Closing soon (1 February 2024) this can provide funding for the removal of invasive non-native species from specific aquatic and wetland habitats: [Anglian Water Invasive Non-Native Species Fund - Cambridgeshire Community Foundation \(cambscf.org.uk\)](https://www.cambscf.org.uk)

- **Farming in Protected Landscapes** - Funding to help farmers and land managers complete nature friendly works for land situated in protected landscapes. For Bedfordshire this applies to land situated within the Chilterns AONB: [Farming in Protected Landscapes | Chilterns AONB](#)
- **Tree planting support from Central Bedfordshire Council** - Offering a number of schemes to support community groups, and public and private landowners within the central Bedfordshire area, including: [Woodland Creation](#), [Community Tree Planting Grant](#), [Tiny Forests](#), and [Community Tree Giveaways](#). More information on each of the schemes is available at [Trees | Central Bedfordshire Council](#). You can email them at be-green@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk, or if you would like to speak to the dedicated New Woodland Development Officer, please call 0300 300 6407.
- Lastly, here is the governments general page discussing funding options for farmers and land managers: [Funding for farmers, growers and land managers - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)



© Henry Stanier

Corn Bunting

Contacts



The Wildlife Trust can:

- Conduct a wildlife survey of your site
- Provide advice on grants that may be available to you and apply for them on your behalf
- Provide 'whole farm' conservation advice

Website: [Bedfordshire | Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs & Northants \(wildlifebcn.org\)](http://Bedfordshire | Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs & Northants (wildlifebcn.org))

Tel: 01234 364213

Email: bedfordshire@wildlifebcn.org

Address To: Conservation Officer

The Wildlife Trust, Priory Country Park, Barkers Lane, Bedford, MK41 9DJ

Other Useful Contacts

Bedfordshire and Luton Biodiversity Recording and Monitoring Centre based in Bedford, has been set up to gather, store and share information on Bedfordshire and Luton's wild species, habitats and protected sites.

Email: brmc@bedsbionet.org.uk Website: www.bedsbionet.org.uk

Tel: 01234 355435

We hope that you have found this newsletter useful and interesting. General comments and suggestions for future articles are very welcome. If you would prefer to receive future newsletters via email, then please contact us at the above telephone number, email or address.

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