

Wildlife Report

Big Grounds, Willoughby



Willoughby

December 2010

1) Introduction – Big Grounds

The area known as Big Grounds (referred to in the planning application as Pear Tree Farm) is ridge and furrow greenbelt grassland of approximately 13 hectares which has remained unchanged since mediaeval times and is situated to the south-west of the village of Willoughby.

It forms between 15% and 20% of the farm land bordering Willoughby¹ and is, therefore, significant in its impact on the wildlife of the area.

Being adjacent to other fields, it also forms a corridor for wildlife migration and movement.

Mature, untrimmed hedgerows enclose the field and it is crossed, from north to south, by a public footpath.

The intact hedges enclosing the site are of significant ecological value. Contained within them are a range of woody hedgerow species which form part of a wider ecological network linking-up to surrounding fields. They provide a valuable habitat for invertebrates, small mammals and hedge nesting birds and a potential foraging and commuting habitat for bats.

Old maps of the field show two large ponds. These now appear, along with other smaller ponds, for substantial periods at various times of the year and are of high ecological importance as, once filled and with the absence of fish, are important breeding sites for amphibians such as frogs, toads and newts.



Example of Standing Water in Eastern Ditch

¹ The land considered is that to the west of the A45 as this main road forms a barrier for the majority of wildlife.

The surrounding area also contains many permanent ponds, situated in fields and gardens, and another important water course, Willoughby Brook, which runs into the River Leam, is across the country lane at the bottom of the field.



Pond on Eastern Edge of Big Grounds

The photograph on the cover sheet shows the view from the top of the field in a northerly direction towards Rugby. This view is magnificent and only marred by the blot on the horizon that is Rugby Cement.

It does, however, illustrate that the area where the crematorium is planned to be sited is visible from far and near.

This report makes reference to and, indeed, uses some information from the Extended Phase 1 Habitat Survey, Job/Report No: P396/1 Version One carried out by Birmingham based Land Care Associates which forms part of the supporting information for the planning application.

It also references the WCC Biodiversity Strategy which outlines how it, the Warwickshire County Council, can work with partners to protect and enhance Warwickshire's wildlife.

The residents of Willoughby are passionate about maintaining Warwickshire's wildlife and will partner with the WCC to protect and enhance this. Losing Big Grounds to development will seriously damage the WCC Biodiversity Strategy for the area.

2) WCC Biodiversity Strategy

Executive Summary

Warwickshire County Council's Policy for Environmental Sustainability recognises the important role played by Biodiversity in meeting the needs and aspirations of current and future generations. This is reflected in the Warwickshire Local Area Agreement, which includes the National Indicator to measure biodiversity (NI 197). A full audit of council functions has identified what is currently being done, and what more can be done, to benefit biodiversity. These benefits will contribute to county, regional and national biodiversity targets. This Strategy sets out our intentions and aspirations. It identifies five key strands through which Warwickshire County Council and our partners will protect, promote and enhance natural habitats and wildlife plus the wellbeing associated with them to create wonderful places for people to connect with wildlife. These strands cover data, regulation, management of our own estate, education and learning and community leadership. A sixth strand deals with reporting and review. The Strategy will be periodically reviewed and updated.

Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of this strategy is

“To work with partners to protect and enhance existing and future wildlife populations and habitats in Warwickshire, within a resilient landscape. We will achieve this by increasing the amount of land and buildings positively managed for biodiversity, averting local extinction of species and reducing the number of species on the danger list.”

Our Objectives are:

- To obtain, manage and share environmental data to inform decision-making and monitor changes.
- To ensure that WCC considers biodiversity in exercising all of its regulatory functions.
- To improve the management of land and buildings owned by WCC for biodiversity.
- To raise awareness, engender a sense of care and responsibility towards and promote opportunities for formal and informal learning about and understanding of the natural world.
- To act as an exemplar of best practice, by considering biodiversity issues when developing relevant strategies and during partnership working.

Warwickshire's Biodiversity

Warwickshire is situated in the heart of the country, with gentle rolling hills and flat valley floors. It has a varied geological make-up that continues to mould the ecological and cultural landscape either directly or through man's activities. It has two major rivers whose catchments meet in the centre and connect the north with the south. These are the Avon, which flows into the Severn towards the Irish Sea and the Tame/Anker that joins the Trent before entering the North Sea.

Warwickshire's wildlife, like its humans, migrate out of, into and through the county, yet there are some that never leave. There are “northern” and “southern” species that are resident in Warwickshire and many others that are seasonal visitors. Like humans they all need a place to stay. In recent years the impact of climate change is becoming more important with new species moving in extremely quickly. This plus agricultural changes and man's need for housing, energy and water all play a part in affecting the county's biodiversity.

Thus, sadly, there are species that are moving out and becoming extinct in the county.

In order to maintain a viable natural environment we must locate, protect and enhance the habitats and species we have. We must identify and fill gaps by restoring and creating appropriate habitats. We must provide a resilient, connected landscape that can adapt to known and unforeseen changes. We must maintain a Warwickshire where both wildlife and humans wish to live.

3) Recording Wildlife in Willoughby

Wildlife records held by the Willoughby Society date back to 1977 when Badgers were seen on Big Grounds at 8:20pm on 15th January. Since then numerous amphibian, mammal, bird and reptile species have been observed in and around Big Grounds.

In support of the WCC Biodiversity Strategy, these records are being shared with the Warwickshire Biological Records Centre. The WBRC currently has only limited ecological data of the area (see below), but this will be enhanced through the sharing of historical information and providing regular updates of wildlife observed in the area.

Map removed for web publication due to copyright restrictions

Although this report is only concerned with the fauna recorded in the area, the WBRC data search illustrates that Big Grounds and its surrounds are also important for other fauna, such as butterflies and insects and plants and trees.

4) Fauna

There is a considerable amount of information on fauna in Willoughby in general and specifically on Big Grounds. The species identified are varied and the main species are detailed below.

The report does not include insects or butterflies although there are, obviously, numerous species in existence in the area.

The hedgerows surrounding Big Grounds are an important habitat for invertebrates and a nesting and foraging site for certain birds and small mammals. They also provide a commuting and foraging habitat for bats and a linkage to the surrounding fields and hedgerows for wildlife in general.

4.1) Amphibians

The Village Pond, ponds in village gardens and ponds and ditches on Big Grounds are important breeding sites for amphibians such as frogs, toads and newts.

There are a multitude of sightings of various amphibians in the area throughout the breeding and feeding seasons.

Although the WBRC has only one record of a Great Crested Newt from the disused railway from Braunston and Willoughby Station to Willoughby Viaduct where wetland communities have formed in parts, there are numerous sightings of these creatures in garden ponds in the village and at Bath Farm adjacent to Big Grounds.

4.2) Badgers

Badgers have always used Big Grounds for foraging and as a latrine and, as previously mentioned, the first recorded sighting was on Big Grounds at 8:20pm on 15th January 1977.

Since then, numerous sightings have taken place both on Big Grounds and the surrounding areas.

Examples of these sightings are October 1990 in the Churchyard, 2008 on the Sawbridge Road, March 2009 at Flecknoe Station, September 2009 in gardens in the village and March 2010 on Longdown Lane.

In addition, there have been, unfortunately, many instances of badgers being run over on the A45.

There are currently badgers on Big Grounds as is evidenced by the following photographs taken in November 2010 showing highways onto Big Grounds and dung pits close to the footpath.



Badger Highway into Big Grounds (with Badger Hairs on Wire)



Badger Excavations and Latrine beside Footpath on Big Grounds

4.3) Bats

Two species of bat have been recorded, a roost site record for Pipistrelle and a feeding record for Daubentons Bat from the River Leam corridor.

Bats are, however, seen in the village and on Big Grounds in large numbers at dusk during the spring and summer months.

The hedges surrounding Big Grounds are considered to be a good potential foraging habitat for bats and connect up to the adjoining fields and hedgerows.

4.4) Brown Hare

The WBRC has a number of records for Brown Hare close to Willoughby with one of the sightings being reported from within Big Grounds.

In addition, there have been numerous sightings by village residents as far back as March 1977 and as recently as February 2010.

Sightings, as well as on Big Grounds, have been made on Moor Lane, in the village, on Bath Farm, on Woolscott Road and in Flecknoe.

4.5) Birds

There are comprehensive records of bird sightings on Big Grounds and in Willoughby.

The Bird List overleaf provides details of over 50 species seen in the area. Some of these are infrequent visitors with few sightings taking place but many are permanent or regular inhabitants.

Big Grounds provides a substantial piece of land for feeding and breeding, a resting place during migration and an unobstructed corridor for daily movement and flight.

Bird List for Big Grounds, Willoughby and its Environs

Mallard Ducks and Ducklings – Permanently on Village Pond and visitors to Big Grounds.

Swans and Canada Geese – Flying over and stopping on Big Grounds in winter months.

Hérons – Regularly on brook adjacent to Big Grounds and visitors to Big Grounds. Recent sightings in October and December 2010.

Moorhens and chicks – Permanently on Village Pond and visitors to Big Grounds.

Red Legged Partridges – Visitors to village with sightings in 2010.

Pheasants – Frequent sightings in village and on Big Grounds.

Crows – Permanent residents on Big Grounds.

Jays – Many sightings in village. Recent sightings in October 2010.

Skylarks - Infrequent visitors to Big Grounds.

Swallows -- Annual visitors to the village. Infrequent visitors to Big Grounds.

Magpies – Permanent residents in village and Big Grounds.

House Martins – Annual visitors to the village. Infrequent visitors to Big Grounds.

Blue Tits – Permanent residents in village.

Great Tits – Permanent residents in village.

Long Tailed Tits – Permanent residents in village.

Wrens – Permanent residents in village.

Bird List for Big Grounds, Willoughby and its Environs (Continued)

Lapwings – Frequent visitors to Big Grounds. Recorded sightings in 2009.

Tree Creepers - Infrequent visitors to Big Grounds.

Jack Snipes - Infrequent visitors to Big Grounds.

Fieldfares - Infrequent visitors to Big Grounds.

Goldcrests - Infrequent visitors to Big Grounds.

White Throats - Infrequent visitors to Big Grounds. Recent sightings in June 2010.

Thrushes – Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Redwings - Frequent visitors to Big Grounds. Recorded sightings in 2009.

Blackbirds– Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Robins– Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Pied Wagtails – Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Starlings – Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Black Headed Gulls – Winter migratory visitors to Big Grounds.

Kestrels – Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Buzzards – Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Sparrowhawks – Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Feral Pigeons, Wood Pigeons and Collared Doves – Regularly in village and on Big Grounds

Tawny Owls - Frequent visitors to village and Big Grounds. Recorded sightings in 2009.

Little Owls- Frequent visitors to village and Big Grounds. Recorded sightings in 2008.

Barn Owls- Frequent visitors to village and Big Grounds. Recorded sightings in 2007.

Cuckoos – Heard and seen every spring.

Kingfishers - Frequent visitors to brook adjacent on Moor Lane. Recorded sightings in 2009/2010.

Greater Spotted Woodpecker – Permanent residents in the village.

Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers - Infrequent visitors to village and Big Grounds.

Green Woodpeckers – Permanent residents in village and on wood adjacent to Big Grounds.

Green Finches– Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Bull Finches– Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Chaffinches – Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Gold Finches– Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Hedge Sparrows– Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Buntings - Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Linnets - Permanent residents in village and on Big Grounds.

Siskins - Infrequent visitors to Big Grounds.

Great Grey Shrike – Seen in Grandborough in 2010.

Green Parakeet and Peacock – Seen in village in 2010.

4.6) Reptiles

Grass Snakes, a UKBAP species, are omnipresent in Willoughby and on Big Grounds during late spring and summer when they emerge from hibernation. They often hibernate, and have been found, in gardens in the village.

The Willoughby Brook adjacent to Big Grounds and the ponds on the site provide food, in the nature of frogs and toads for the grass snakes.

Sightings are recorded from 1984 to 2009 and in 2010 there are sightings on Big Grounds and a there was a dead grass snake, run over by a vehicle, on the verge next to Big Grounds.

4.7) Other

In addition to the above, foxes, rabbits, weasels, moles and grey squirrels have been seen regularly in Willoughby and on Big Grounds.

There have also been infrequent sightings of Otters on Moor Lane and in neighbouring Braunston and Deer on Big Grounds.

5) Summary

Big Grounds is a haven for wildlife with numerous species being sighted on regular and irregular bases.

The information contained in the Extended Phase 1 Habitat Survey, Job/Report No: P396/1 Version One carried out by Birmingham based Land Care Associates which forms part of the supporting information for the planning application is fundamentally flawed in two respects:

- 1) The Land Care Associates study quotes the Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation (2005) which sets out planning policies for the protection of biodiversity in the UK.
 - a. Development plan policies and planning decisions should be based on upto-date information about the environmental characteristic of their areas.

It does, however, rely on desk research which, as evidenced by the information held by the Warwickshire Biological Record Centre, is sadly lacking in any detail and is not up to date.

The information in this report provides an up to date record of the wildlife on Big Grounds and Willoughby residents will work actively with the WBRC to update these records to ensure a more accurate picture is painted of the wildlife on Big Grounds and within Willoughby.

- 2) The Land Care Associates study states that Mike Poulton carried out the surveys on Tuesday 31st August from 1pm until 3.30pm and Tuesday 7th September 2010 from approximately 11.30 until 15.00.

It also admits "This survey cannot, therefore, be considered to provide a wholly comprehensive account of the ecological interest of the site and it should be noted that this report does not constitute an Ecological Impact Assessment. The survey does, however, provide a "snapshot" of the ecological interest present on the day of the survey visit.

Wildlife does not all congregate on August and September Tuesdays in Big Grounds but varies throughout the year depending on season, weather, disturbance and many other factors

To provide an accurate picture of wildlife on Big Grounds requires an extensive survey covering all seasons.

This, together with the records held by the Willoughby Society will show the diversity of wildlife and provide evidence to support a strong objection to the planning application on this important area.