Nature conservation/Ecological assessment for planning proposal at Hazel Cottage, Aylton in the Parish of Putley.

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Introduction

The field where the proposed menege, conservation pond and field access gate is to be, is a 12 acre improved grass ley, species poor (in wildlife terms), used for grazing horses and silage production. The field is enclosed largely within a tall, mature mixed, native broadleaved hedgerow. Over half of the roadside hedge has been laid over the last 8 years or so while the remaining hedge is fairly tall and will be laid over the next few years.

Whilst the field itself is of very limited ecological value, the surrounding hedge is a valuable wildlife habitat, providing nest sites, food and shelter for many birds, small mammals and invertebrates.

Once the proposed work has been completed, the habitat available to wildlife will be greater than now due to the creation of a new wildlife pond and around 150m of new native hedgerow.

Protected Species

The western boundary adjoins a small paddock and copse planted around 20years ago. Within this copse is a pond where great crested newt (European Protected Species) eggs were found ((2006) by Nigel Hand (Herefordshire Amphibian and Reptile Team). Since this time the pond has become very shaded and lost most of the emergent vegetation needed by the newt for egg laying. The new owners of the property are keen to improve the area for wildlife and the newly formed Putley Wildlife Advisory and Action Group have begun to coppice trees around the pond in order to open the area up again.

The applicant (Kate Wollen) has been an active member of Herefordshire Action for Mammals (HAM) for many years, assisting in many dormouse, bat and other mammal surveys in the county. Kate has held her dormouse licence number 20100452 (take, disturb and possession) since 2005, and regularly trains local volunteers in dormouse handling and survey methods. Following Kate finding a dead dormouse (European Protected Species) near to Hazel Cottage, she organised a Parish dormouse hunt and 2 dormouse nests were found (2006-7) by members of Herefordshire Action for Mammals, in a hedge and young woodland, around half a kilometre from the field. Dormice and their nests have also been found incidentally in hedges in recent years in the village of Putley and reported to Kate who has passed the records on the HAM and the Herefordshire Biological Records Office.

Following these finds dormouse survey tubes were put in the roadside hedge in 2007/08 but no dormouse activity was found. Although no dormice or nests have been found in the surrounding hedge, sympathetic management such as laying, expanding the width of the hedge and hedge creation will provide habitat for a range of other species.

The proposed vehicle access gate

The creation of a new field gate in the roadside hedge will involve the removal of 7.6m of hedge, of which 6m of native hedge will immediately be replanted either side of the new access splays. Cuttings from the cut hedge will be laid as a low dead hedge, which whilst allowing visibility to the road, will provide a corridor for some wildlife to use while the new hedge establishes. No work will take place during the

main bird nesting season of 1st March to 31st July, as recommended in Natural England's Hedge Cutting booklet. Some birds can nest in August and September and therefore no work to the hedge will be undertaken until the end of September. It is proposed that all work will take place in autumn and winter 2011/12 to minimise disturbance to wildlife and allow trees to be planted during the planting season (October to March)

To minimise possible impacts on any great crested newts that may be in the vicinity, the best time to work on the hedge would be during the newt breeding season whilst newts are in ponds. However this would then have a detrimental effect on any nesting birds. Newts can use hedges to hibernate in winter therefore to encourage newts not to use the hedge for hibernation, newt refuges and over-wintering sites can be created on the boundary between the field and the neighbouring property near to where the new pond will be sited.

The gateway and gateposts will be 12 feet wide and therefore a gap of 12 feet only will be permanently made in the existing hedge. A new native hedge of approximately 115m will be planted to create a new field boundary once the access gate is installed, adding greatly to the wildlife habitat available. Tree and shrub species currently in the hedge are predominantly hawthorn and blackthorn with some field maple, dogwood, spindle. The new hedge will be planted as per the Herefordshire Council standard planting specifications, using all the species – Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Hazel, Field Maple, Holly, and Dog Rose but also to include Dogwood, Spindle and Alder Buckthorn to replicate the existing hedge and increase the biodiverstiy of the hedge. Mature oak trees are present in the hedge, including adjacent to the proposed gateway. No work however will have a damaging impact on the trees or the root systems(See below under Trees)

The proposed pond
The pond is to be sited in the western lower corner of the field, adjacent to the neighbouring copse and paddock. A tall hedge with bramble scrub borders the western side, the edge of which will be 8m from the pond. The actual construction will only involve disturbance to the grass ley only, no digging or spoil deposition will take place within a tree length of the mature hedge and therefore no trees or tree roots will be affected in any way:(See below under Trees)
The pond will be ideally constructed in September/October 2011 and allowed to fill naturally over winter.
 A footpath passes within 15m of the pond site and so will provide walkers an opportunity to view the aquatic habitat. The pond will ideally be allowed to colonise naturally and will provide additional habitat for a range of aquatic wildlife, including potentially the great crested newt.