

WILDLIFE & HABITATS

Introduction

Biodiversity (the variety of life on earth) depends on a delicately balanced environment. Our own health and quality of life is closely linked with the well-being of the habitats and wildlife around us. In Hertfordshire, we are helping to maintain this variety through the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), which details actions and targets to preserve important species and habitats.

Indicator WH1: Population of Water Voles

The presence of water voles is an indication of good water quality and healthy river bank-side habitats. To implement the BAP we need to find out where water voles occur and how abundant they are. Threats to water voles include habitat loss, population fragmentation, fluctuations in water levels, persecution, predation and pollution. A register of 100 sites to be monitored on a regular basis has been established by the Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre (HBRC); the aim being to survey 25 stretches of river bank for water voles each year.

In 1999/00, evidence of water voles was found at 21 of the 25 sites investigated. Only one of the 4 negative sites, Batford Springs, had previously supported water voles. Mink are known to travel along the River Lea in this area and there has been an increase in brown rats and waterfowl in recent years. Predation and disturbance are the likely factors accounting for the disappearance of the water voles at this site.

Indicator WH2: A Sample of Key Bird Species

The British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) Breeding Bird Survey data collected in Hertfordshire is able to contribute information on bird population changes in the county. The following changes have been recorded between 1994 and 1999.

Skylark (illustrative of changes in farmland, particularly arable landscapes)

The Skylark remains on the national Red List of birds of conservation concern, produced by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). Nationally there has been a steep decline in numbers, with a 12% drop in population between 1998 and 1999 alone, and an overall 16% decline since 1994. The 1998 figures for Hertfordshire showed an increase of 20% since 1994, but this did not continue in 1999, when 18% reduction in population was recorded from 1998 figures. The species has been declining steadily since at least 1976.

Song Thrush (indicative of the quality of especially urban and suburban areas)

The Song Thrush also remains on the national Red List of birds of conservation concern. Nationally the species is considered to be stable. In the East of England, however, there has been a decline of 33% between 1994 and 1999. In Hertfordshire, a decline of 6% has been recorded between 1998 and 1999, with an overall decline of 26% since 1994, despite last year's apparently better showing. This is of some concern when the damper summer of 1999, compared to earlier in the 1990s, ought to have resulted in greater food availability during the summer months. Poor late summer and winter survival seems to be the main cause of decline, particularly for young birds. The changing nature of garden and rural habitats, and the use of snail and slug pesticides especially in late summer may remain major causes.

Willow Warbler (indicative of woodlands)

In 1999 the Willow Warbler showed a slight, but welcome increase numbers. This goes against a substantial decline in the East of England since 1994, although nationally numbers have remained fairly stable. It is difficult to be certain of the causes of this situation, but the overgrowth of its preferred young scrub habitat, and the loss of marginal grasslands etc. with their patches of bushes, may account for its longer term position. Improvements in food supply from insects owing to a damper summer may have stabilised its position locally for the time being.

Indicator WH3: Number of Wildlife Sites in Hertfordshire

Only a small proportion of the county's wildlife resource is protected by statutory legislation. Whilst this covers the most important ecological sites in the county, it is insufficient on its own to maintain the full diversity of habitats and species surviving in Hertfordshire today. Non-statutory ecology alert sites have been mapped by HBRC since the early 1990s. Following completion of the County Habitat Survey in 1997, the Site Assessment Criteria were updated. Using all ecological data available, sites were then assessed to identify sites of at least district importance. These are known as County Wildlife Sites and are regarded as being of critical natural capital (assets whose loss or damage would produce significant and irreversible changes for the worse).

The total number of Wildlife Sites identified in Hertfordshire at December 2000 was 1916. The number of wildlife sites in each district is shown in the graph.

INSERT WILDLIFE & HABITATS GRAPH A

During the last year a number of Wildlife Sites have lost their value. Of the 8 damaged sites across the county, 1 has been lost to development; 4 have been degraded by bad management including 1 damaged by tree clearance and 1 by over-grazing; and 3 sites are threatened with development proposals. There have been 154 new Wildlife Sites selected, mainly on the basis of new data coming into the Records Centre. The majority of these sites have been selected on the basis that they support protected species.

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