



## **Lochwinnoch Wetlands**

### **Habitat improvements to Barr Loch and Aird Meadow**

#### **Summary**

RSPB Scotland manages the Lochwinnoch nature reserve, situated just a short train journey from Glasgow city centre. The reserve, which is part of the Clydemuirshiel Regional Park, forms part of one of the largest wetlands in south-west Scotland and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). A key part of the reserve is the visitor centre which overlooks an area of land known as the Aird Meadow, and the Barr Loch and Castle Semple Loch provide habitat for breeding and wintering birds. Although rich in biodiversity, RSPB Scotland is keen to improve the wildlife value of the reserve's wetlands and create a system which functions in a more natural way, and we are proposing to undertake an exciting project to create additional wildlife habitat and an improved visitor experience at the reserve. This includes enhancing the viewing opportunities from the visitor centre, which currently does not meet RSPB Scotland's aspirations as a visitor attraction and educational resource.

#### **Background**

Barr Loch and Aird Meadow are part of a wetland system that includes a string of open water bodies (Kilbirnie Loch, Barcraigs Reservoir, Barr Loch, and Castle Semple Loch), surrounding wetlands and a network of inter-connecting watercourses, principally Dubbs Water, Roebank Burn, Millbank Burn, the River Calder and Black Cart Water. The system eventually joins the River Clyde near Renfrew. Castle Semple and Barr Lochs are designated as a nationally important Site of Special Scientific Interest for its nutrient-rich water bodies and an assemblage of breeding birds.

The area has undergone great changes in the last 200 years, brought about firstly by engineered drainage schemes that subsequently fell into disuse, and more latterly, installation of the Elliston Weir, which raised water levels throughout the site. These changes, combined with land use changes in the wider catchment, have left a legacy of impacts on the natural environment, and the wetland system in its current form does not deliver its full ecological potential.

RSPB Scotland's habitat improvement project aims to address these impacts in the following ways: enabling the wetland system to function more naturally; maintaining and enhancing the natural features for which the site is designated as nationally important; enhancing the biodiversity value of the wetland habitats within the Lochwinnoch nature reserve; improving the value of the Lochwinnoch nature reserve as a place for visitors to enjoy and learn about nature.

#### **Vision for the Lochwinnoch Wetlands**

Burns will follow their natural routes into the Barr Loch, reducing the threat from flooding and creating natural deltas as they enter the Loch. New wetland vegetation will thrive along the banks of the Barr Loch and Castle Semple Loch, improving water quality and creating habitat for a diverse range of wildlife. A channel of water through the Aird Meadow will bring wildlife closer to RSPB Scotland's visitor centre, enhancing the wildlife spectacle and providing improved opportunities for education.

### **Benefits for biodiversity**

With support from SEPA's Restoration Fund, RSPB Scotland commissioned a study to assess ways of achieving our aims and realising our vision for the reserve. Firstly, reconnecting Millbank Burn, Dubbs Water and Roebank Burn to the Barr Loch would help restore the natural wetland system, creating local deltas and encouraging wetland vegetation which would provide habitat for wildlife including wading birds and otters. Additionally, re-organising drainage in this way will also slow down the movement of water during periods of high rainfall, reducing flood risk in the area.

Secondly, enhancement of the Aird Meadow wetlands will create more feeding areas for waders and waterbirds and further encourage the formation of wetland vegetation. This will be achieved by creating a channel of water in the meadow, connecting the meadow to the Barr Loch, and re-profiling the edge of the meadow bund.

The project will create up to 4 ha of new fen habitat and will enhance approximately 34 ha, making up 3.5% of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan target. Upon completion of the works a habitat mosaic will have been created, which will enhance breeding and feeding opportunities for a wide variety of species of conservation importance, and other more common species including water vole, otter, water rail and breeding waders will also benefit. An artificial sand martin wall and otter holt will provide secure breeding areas for both of these species. Around 96 ha of nutrient-rich standing water will be improved and the project will contribute to achieving favourable condition status for this SSSI designated habitat feature.

### **Benefits for people**

RSPB Scotland's Lochwinnoch reserve visitor centre receives approximately 35,000 visitors per year, and is seen as a key focal point for the local community. The reserve offers an all-year-round attraction in terms of birds and other wildlife, making it an important site for introducing people to the outdoors and nature conservation work.

However, the visitor centre does not currently meet RSPB Scotland's aspirations as a visitor attraction and educational resource. One of the reasons for this is a lack of a strong bird spectacle from the visitor centre. A key attraction of the reserve is its waterbirds but there is currently some distance between the centre and the loch. Creating a wide channel in the Aird Meadow will attract a range of birds to within closer proximity to the visitor centre. Moreover, enhancement of the wildlife spectacle should result in more visitors and more time spent in the local area, with an anticipated benefit for local businesses.

### **What now?**

RSPB Scotland is very pleased to have secured £250,000 of funding from WREN's Biodiversity Action Fund, which will go a long way in paying for the project. The scheme will require planning permission and it is likely that the application for this will be submitted during November 2010. Your comments would be welcome in the meantime. For full details of the proposals, including Scoping Report and site maps, please contact us on the details below.

For further information please contact:

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