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## How to assess the value of a wildlife site

The more that is known about a site, the greater the chance of it being protected.

Many of the best wildlife sites in Wales are recognised by a conservation designation. These tell you whether the site is internationally, nationally or locally important.

Local Planning Authorities are obliged to give a high degree of protection to nationally and internationally important sites, as well as to protected species. Most also have local policies that protect locally important sites. Even sites without a designation may be important for the wildlife they contain, but if you want to defend a site on conservation grounds alone, you may need to have a stronger case if the site does not already have a designation.

### Wildlife designations

Your first step should be to establish whether the site has any designation for its wildlife interest.

Internationally important sites carry designations such as Special Protection Area (SPA), Special Area of Conservation (SAC) or a Ramsar site and have the highest level of protection. These areas will be protected through the development plan (eg the Local Development Plan) even if they are still proposed or candidate sites (not yet confirmed).

Sites protected at a national level include National Nature Reserves, Marine Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

Local councils can designate sites that are important to local wildlife. These may be called Local Wildlife or Geological Sites, Wildlife Sites, Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation, Sites of Biological Interest or other names. Often a site has more than one type of designation.

Statutory conservation designations and other useful information can be found on the cross-government MAGIC website ([www.magic.defra.gov.uk](http://www.magic.defra.gov.uk)) which provides an interactive mapping facility to enables users to access, view and examine information about protected sites and other environmental designations.

If the site carries a designation find out the reason why it was designated and think carefully about whether these features of interest would be damaged by the proposed development. An SSSI for example could be designated because of its wildlife or botanical value, because of a specific habitat, or its geology etc.

Many of the descriptions of the features of interest date back to the 1980s or even earlier, so it is worth finding out whether the original features of interest are still present. The Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) is responsible for designating SSSIs, and you can search for SSSI details on their website ([www.ccw.gov.uk](http://www.ccw.gov.uk)), or by calling their Enquiry Line on 0845 130 6229.

Your local Wildlife Trust is often the best source of information for Wildlife Sites and many other local conservation sites. You can visit the Wildlife Trusts Wales' website ([www.wildlifetrustswales.org](http://www.wildlifetrustswales.org)) or call their helpline on 01636 677 711.

If a site does not have a designation, but you feel that it should, contact your local Wildlife Trust in the first instance to discuss the possibility of a designation. Please remember that the designation process can take months or even years, so is only an option for long-term strategic site protection.

If you are fighting a planning application, you may wish to present your evidence of the wildlife value of the site to convince the Local Planning Authority that even though the site does not have a designation, it is valuable enough to qualify, and hence should be protected from damaging development. Other factors, such as the role of the site in helping local wildlife adapt to climate change, may be relevant and could be supported by national and local policy (see our PDF *Addressing climate change through planning*).

### **The wildlife value of your site**

The next step is to determine what wildlife is present, and in what numbers. The main sources of such information are likely to be your local Biological Records Centre ([www.brc.ac.uk/links](http://www.brc.ac.uk/links)), your local Wildlife Trust, and specialist organisations such as the local bat group. Bird information may also be available on the BirdTrack website ([www.bto.org/birdtrack](http://www.bto.org/birdtrack)).

Gather information on everything that's of wildlife interest for the site, concentrating on the most recent surveys. Make particular note of those species that are considered important in either a local or national context.

In most situations, you will hear about a proposed development only when a planning application is lodged. The time allowed for comments is normally so short that you have to rely on existing information as evidence when presenting your case.

However, if time allows, and there are no traceable records for the site, you may wish to do your own survey.

### **Wildlife survey**

Try to monitor the site throughout the year – most plants and animals are strongly seasonal, and hence best recorded at different times of the year.

It is possible that the applicant has also carried out a wildlife survey, especially if an Environmental Impact Assessment is required for the development. Make sure that their

survey covers all the relevant species and habitats, and was undertaken at the right time of year.

The best time to survey for breeding birds or flowering plants is early spring to late summer in the early morning or evening. The best time to survey for insects depends on when they fly, and so you should carry out an insect survey three or four times during the summer months.

Soft ground, mud or snow cover can be good for footprints, which along with droppings can be useful to identify mammals.

Document how you obtained information on any of the animals you find. Did you see or hear it? Was it breeding on the site? Was it feeding, or did you find tracks? Try to record the following:

- the date, time, and location (Ordnance Survey grid or GPS reference) of your observations
- birds, in particular specially protected species such as barn owls and kingfishers
- butterflies and dragonflies
- mammals, especially badgers and bats, which are both protected species
- reptiles and amphibians
- ponds, streams and boggy areas, as they are normally rich in wildlife
- natural springs
- native woodland, particularly with mature trees
- big, bushy hedgerows, noting the presence of mature trees
- other notable habitat types and habitat features
- different types of plants.

Make sure you have the permission of the landowner before going onto any non-access land. You should take care when surveying the site not to disturb any wildlife. Disturbing some bird species while they are nesting is a criminal offence, as is handling protected species without the relevant licence from CCW.

You should also be aware of safety whilst undertaking the survey – it is a good idea to undertake a preliminary ‘risk assessment’ to check for potential hazards on site such as falling rocks/masonry, boggy ground, old mineworkings and other industrial remains.

See also our PDFs *Protecting birds from development* and *Protecting other wildlife from development proposals*.

#### **Hints and tips for surveying birds on a site:**

- Carry out breeding bird surveys in the early mornings from mid-April to mid-June if possible.
- Three visits spread at least two weeks apart should help record the fullest range of birds.
- Try to survey in warm, dry, still weather conditions.

- Try to cover the whole site in a single morning. If it is too big to cover alone, try to get some help and split the site up between you.
- Try to record all bird species seen or heard, the numbers involved, and any signs of breeding activity (eg singing males, adults carrying food for young, fledged young).
- Numbers of breeding birds could be recorded as a simple tally as you move around the site, or perhaps as symbols or letters on a large-scale map if you can get one.
- Some sites (particularly wetlands) are just as important for wintering birds as breeding birds, so consider whether it would be appropriate to carry out counts in migration or winter periods (September to March).

### **Using your data to assess the value of a site**

Gathering data is important, but how do you use it to assess the value of your site? The value of a wildlife site is a measure of its importance in a wider context - the local area, your county, a wider region of Wales, or even the country as a whole.

One way to determine a site's value for wildlife is to look at overall species richness. You may not have any species that are rare or scarce in their own right but the sheer diversity of species in a small area might be so large that it stands out as special. Your local Wildlife Trust may be able to advise on the appropriate context or baseline for assessing species richness of your site.

You can also assess the value of a site in terms of populations of particular species. If you think you have something rare or scarce present on your site, try to find out what the local, regional or national population is, as well as its distribution. This can help determine what proportion of that population your site may hold. Alternatively, you might find a species that isn't particularly rare, but occurs on your site at the edge of its UK range.

Similar appraisals of richness and absolute importance can be made for most habitats, too. Your site may have a diverse range of habitats not often found together on a single site, or it may have a large percentage of the local resource of, say, ancient woodland or a particular grassland type.

Environmental Impact Assessments for proposed developments often present their findings in terms of whether there is a significant effect at local, regional and national scales. An impact on a local wildlife site might be categorised as locally significant, an impact on a Site of Special Scientific Interest as nationally significant, and so on. If you can gather and present your own data in a similar fashion, you may help the Local Planning Authority make a well-informed decision.