

Playford Mere

Landscape and Wildlife Evaluation

August 2019

Project No:	Report:	Date:
25/19	Final	07/08/2019
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DISCLAIMER

This report has been compiled in accordance with BS 42020:2013 Biodiversity - Code of practice for planning and development, as has the survey work to which it relates.

The information, data, advice and opinions which have been prepared are true, and have been prepared and provided in accordance with the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management's Code of Professional Conduct. We confirm that the opinions expressed are our true and professional bona fide opinions.

This survey was carried out and an assessment made of the site at a particular time. Every effort has been made to date to provide an accurate assessment of the current situation, but no liability can be assumed for omissions or changes after the survey has taken place.

It is our policy to submit any biological records to the Suffolk Biodiversity Information Service, in accordance with BS42020 (6.4.7). We will undertake to do this 3 months after the submission of this report. If you wish to discuss this, please contact us within this time period.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General introduction

This report should be read in conjunction with the Landscape and Wildlife Evaluation of Playford Parish carried out by SWT Trading Ltd in 2018 as part of the Playford Neighbourhood Plan. Following the submission of this document to the Parish Council in May 2019, SWT Trading Ltd were subsequently commissioned by the Council in July 2019 to carry out a wildlife assessment of Playford Mere because there had been no access to this site at the time of the original evaluation.

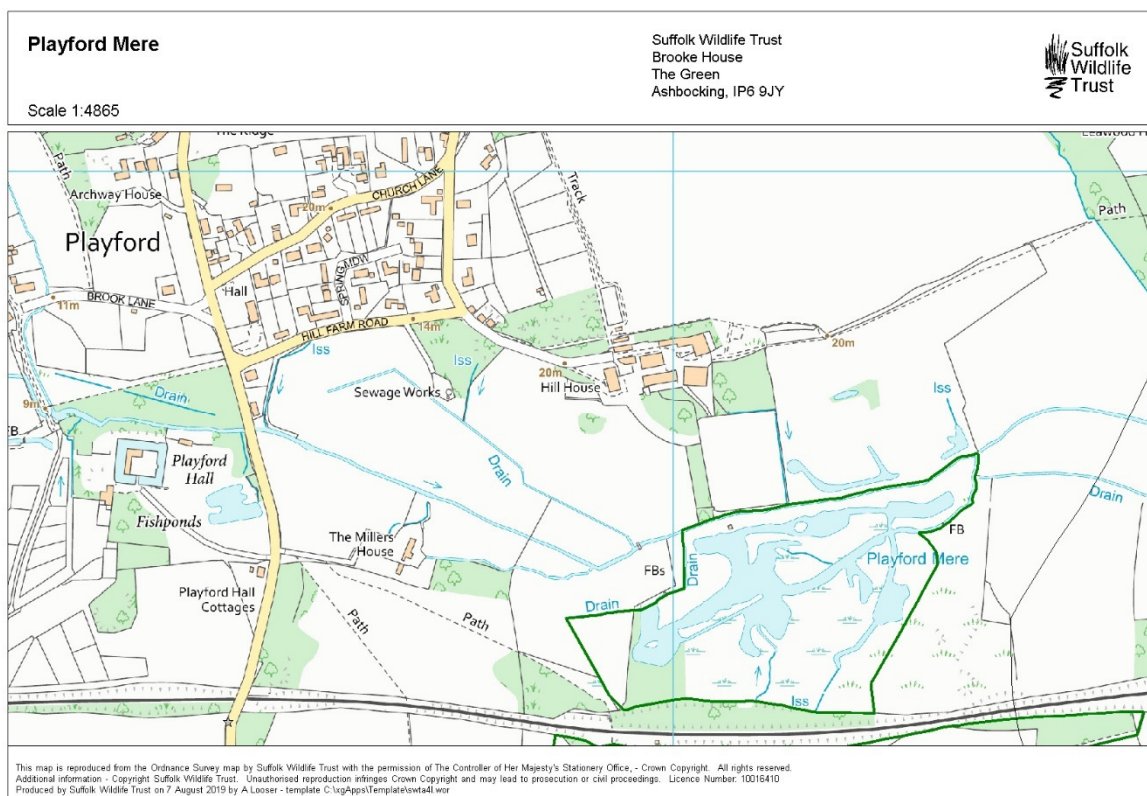
1.2 Location of site and relevant designations

Playford Mere lies within the Fynn Valley, east of the main Playford village settlement. The Fynn Valley is designated as a Special Landscape Area (SLA). The Special Landscape Area concept has to a great extent now been superseded by more recent assessments of 'landscape character'. These are based on more in-depth assessments than those used for the SLAs and have associated with them more precise prescriptions and guidelines in terms of development management and land management. They therefore complement, but significantly extend the concepts reflected by the River Fynn SLA. In 2008, Suffolk County Council completed a project to describe landscapes throughout Suffolk in detail and assess what particular character and qualities make up the different landscape areas of the county. This is known as the Level 2 Suffolk Landscape Character Assessment (LCA). The Suffolk LCA defines the Fynn Valley as 'Rolling Valley Farmland and Furze'. More details on this LCA type is available in the main report.

Playford Mere itself is designated as a County Wildlife Site. County Wildlife Sites (CWSs) are areas known to be of county or regional importance for wildlife. The designation is non-statutory but is recognition of a site's high value for biodiversity. Outside of areas with statutory protection (such as SSSIs, Local and National Nature Reserves), CWSs are the most important areas for wildlife in Suffolk and can support both locally and nationally threatened wildlife species and habitats, including UK Priority Habitats and Species. They complement the statutory protected areas and nature reserves by helping to buffer and maintain habitat links between these sites.

CWSs are implicitly recognised by the NPPF as having a fundamental role to play in meeting overall national biodiversity targets. In the NPPF 2018 they are described as ‘Locally Designated Sites’. CWS are not protected by legislation, but their importance is recognised by local authorities when considering planning applications. Under current planning policy there is a presumption against granting permission for development that would have an adverse impact on a CWS. More details on CWS designation is available in the main report.

Figure 1. Map showing location of Playford Mere County Wildlife Site



2. METHODOLOGY

A walkover survey of Playford Mere CWS was carried out on the 18th July by Alison Looser. The weather was cool and overcast with light rain. Features of interest and key habitat types were recorded in accordance with JNCC Phase 1 habitat survey (2010). Particular attention was paid to the potential for any Priority habitats and the likely presence of protected and Priority species, or nationally scarce species. Digital photographs were taken where appropriate and grid references were taken using a GPS accurate to within 5m.

2.1 Personnel

The field survey was undertaken by Alison Looser, SWT Ecologist. Alison is an experienced field ecologist with extensive experience of Extended Phase 1 survey, she is also highly competent at water vole, otter, badger, bat, great crested newt and hazel dormouse surveys (Natural England survey licences for the latter three).

The project was managed by Dr Simone Bullion MCIEEM, SWT Conservation Manager. Her specialist skills include management of a wide range of projects of varying size and complexity, protected species surveys, site assessment and extended Phase 1 surveys, ecological training and guidance. She is the author of several publications and holds Natural England survey licences for bats, hazel dormice and great crested newts.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Desktop

A desktop assessment of the whole Parish was carried out for the previous report. The following represents specific records for the Mere itself.

- Otter and water vole have both been recorded on the Mere in 2008 and 2005 respectively. Water shrew is also known at the site (historical record), as well as badger.
- There are many records of Priority bird species including hobby, barn owl, snipe, skylark, linnets and swift.

3.2 Site Description

The area defined within the County Wildlife Site boundary represents a mosaic of habitats. The Mere itself is a spring-fed open body of water and is the main feature of the site. The previous owner undertook restoration some years ago, creating a sinuous profile to the water body by creating a series of pools interlinked by channels. Areas of open water are interspersed with areas of tall fen vegetation, willow scrub and poplar plantation and areas of rough grassland. The mere represents a UK Priority Habitat - Eutrophic standing water as

does the associated Lowland Fen habitat. Its location at the bottom of the Fynn valley, means that Playford Mere is visible from footpaths crossing the higher ground to the south.

The River Fynn (UK Priority Habitat) runs along the northern boundary of the site. The River is narrow and fairly straight at this point and due to the drought conditions in the last few years has suffered from low flow and is consequently silting up and becoming choked by emergent vegetation, particularly branched bur-reed.

Outside but adjacent to the CWS is an exposed sandy cliff with an area of lichen heath on top and in front of it. This cliff was constructed by the previous owner around 2008. Lichen heath is a particularly rare habitat type in Suffolk and is an example of Lowland heathland UK Priority Habitat.

This site has excellent ecological connectivity. The Ipswich to Lowestoft railway line runs along the southern boundary of the site. It lies within the Fynn valley which represents a series of grazing meadows, hedges, woodland and ditches which extend along the valley bottom beyond Playford.

3.3 Flora

The fen vegetation surrounding the lakes included typical species such as common reed, branched bur reed, greater pond sedge, pendulous sedge, hard rush, soft rush, hemp agrimony, great willowherb, horsetail, creeping buttercup, curled dock, comfrey, field bindweed, creeping thistle, spear thistle, perennial sow thistle, greater birds foot trefoil, bittersweet, marsh woundwort, water mint and meadow vetchling alongside less common wetland species such as meadow rue, common fleabane and purple loosestrife.

According to a previous survey report the lakes were dredged in 2005 and one of the ponds was created in 2009.



Figure 2: View across the Mere

The trees and shrubs surrounding the site are typical of those growing in damp conditions including sallow, willow species, alder and poplar. In addition, some black poplar trees were planted around the edge of the Mere by the previous owner. In the drier areas blackthorn, hawthorn, elder, oak, sweet chestnut and sycamore are also found.

The areas of grassland surrounding the lakes are poor semi-improved grassland being dominated by grasses including false oat, cock's-foot and rough meadow grass with a few common herbs including bracken, nettle, hogweed, creeping thistle, spear thistle, curled dock, field bindweed, cleavers and yarrow.



Figure 3. Looking across area of poor semi-improved grassland

The river is narrow and straight at this point. The banks were dominated by false oat grass with great willowherb, field bindweed, comfrey, nettle and water figwort. The channel was dominated by emergent species, particularly branched bur reed.

Himalayan Balsam, which is an invasive species, was noted along the banks of the River Fynn.



Figure 4. River Fynn channel

The area surrounding the exposed cliff is composed of species associated with dry acid grassland/lichen heath. This area had a high percentage of mosses and lichens including *Cladonia* species. Grasses including common bent and timothy with lady's bedstraw, black medick, hop trefoil, hare's-foot clover, creeping cinquefoil, smooth hawk's-bit, common stork's-bill, sheep's sorrel, common cat's-ear, mouse ear hawkweed, ragwort, viper's bugloss, nodding thistle and false fox sedge.



Figure 5. Lichen heath on top of cliff.

3.4 Avifauna

The diversity of habitats on site provides a good range of opportunities for foraging, roosting and nesting birds. This site has the potential to support common, migratory (both spring and autumn) and overwintering birds. Although the weather and time of year were sub-optimal for recording, a number of birds were noted including sedge warbler, goldfinch, blackcap, linnet, song thrush, and kingfisher. A barn owl box is present and this is occupied every year. The habitat is suitable for hobby and they have been seen on the site in previous years. Some of the grassland areas flood in winter which provides excellent habitat for snipe and other

overwintering wildfowl. Other wildfowl species such as swans, ducks and geese will be present on the water bodies throughout the year.

The exposed cliff provides excellent habitat for sand martins and approximately 40 holes were observed in the cliff face.



Figure 5. Cliff with sand martin holes.

3.5 Invertebrates

This site will support a range of invertebrates. The water bodies provide good habitat for a range of aquatic invertebrates. Although the weather was sub-optimal for recording invertebrates a good number of butterflies were seen including meadow brown, gatekeeper, small skipper and ringlet. Banded demoiselle, red damselfly and emerald damselfly were also seen during the visit and the site will support a range of dragonflies. The site is also likely to support a good range of moth species.

The area of lichen heath has areas of bare ground which have potential to support various species of ground nesting bees and wasps. The sandy face of the cliff may also be used for burrowing by this group.

3.6 Herpetofauna

This site has the potential to support the three main reptile species found in this part of Suffolk. Grass snake are likely to be associated with the lakes and associated margins, slow worm could be present in the rough grassland and the grassland surrounding the sand martin cliff is good for common lizard. The presence of both the railway line and river corridor significantly increase the likelihood of reptiles being present. The lakes also provide good habitat for frogs, toads and smooth newt. Great crested newt is unlikely to successfully breed in the waterbodies due to the presence of fish.

3.7 Mammals

The diversity of habitats provides good opportunities for a range of mammal species. There are a few mature oak trees with cracks and crevices which have the potential to support roosting bats. The lakes and river corridor in particular will also provide good foraging for bats such as Daubentons. All Bats are included in the Suffolk Biodiversity Action Plan Grouped Plan.

Otter spraint was found under the bridge on the River Fynn south of Hill House. Water vole latrines were recorded along the banks of the Fynn and on a mink raft on the Mere during the visit. Both otter and water vole are UK Priority species. Mole hills and a fox scat were also recorded. The Mere has the potential for other common and priority species including common small mammals and harvest mouse (UK Priority species) and water shrew (Suffolk Character Species). The site could also support hedgehog (UK Priority species).

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the County Wildlife Site boundary is extended to include the sand martin cliff and associated lichen heath Priority habitat (See Figure 6).

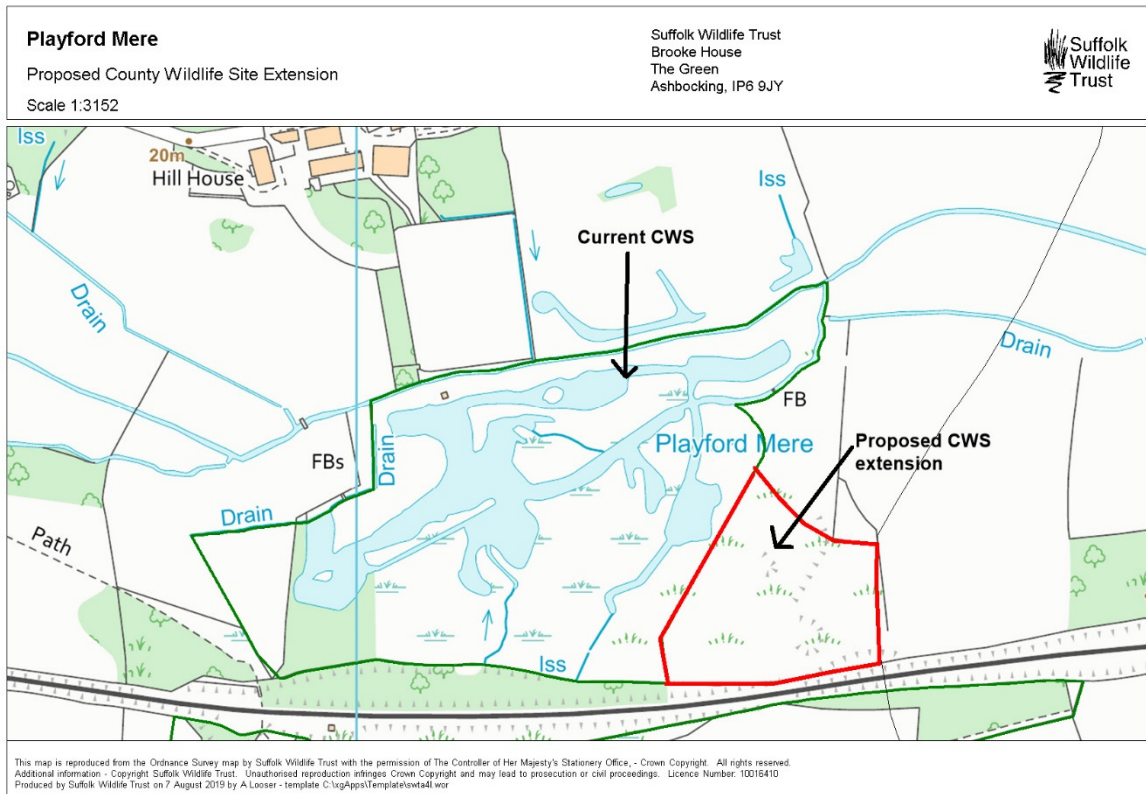


Figure 6. Proposed CWS extension

The sand martin cliff has started to become scrubbed up so during the winter it is recommended some of the scrub is removed and a thin layer of material is scraped back from the cliff face. This will improve the habitat for sand martins by reducing predation by small predators such as stoat.

Himalayan balsam was recorded along the banks of the River Fynn. This is an invasive species listed on Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). It is an offence to plant or otherwise cause to grow in the wild or encourage the spread of any plant that is included in Part II of Schedule 9.

Himalayan balsam is native to the Himalayas and is now a naturalised plant in the UK, found especially on riverbanks where it has become a problem weed. The seed pods open explosively when ripe and each plant can produce 1000s of seeds which are dispersed widely as the ripe seed pods shoot their seeds metres away. The plant tolerates low light levels and also shades out other vegetation, gradually impoverishing habitats by killing off other plants.

Once established along a river bank the seeds can be transported further afield by water. In dense infestations, strimming before they flower and set seed is the best method to remove them, but where there are only a few plants established it is possible to hand pull individual plants before flowering.

5. REFERENCES

SWT Trading Ltd (2018). Playford Neighbourhood Plan. Landscape and Wildlife Evaluation. December 2018.

SWT Trading Ltd (2009). Ecological Assessment Suffolk Coastal District Council County Wildlife Site Review 2009.