

27th November 2023



Cotswold Wildlife Surveys

Mr P Foster
c/o Philip Brown Associates Ltd
74 Park Road
Rugby
CV21 2QX

Dear Mr Foster

Land south of Widnell Lane, Arcott, Bicester, Oxfordshire, OX25 1AE – 2023 ecological update

Further to your instruction, an updated ecological survey has been undertaken at the above site in June 2023.

Background

In 2019 planning permission was granted at Appeal (Ref. APP/C3105/W/18/3209349) for the material change of use of land to use as a residential caravan site for six gypsy families, each with two caravans, including improvement of access and laying of hardstanding.

In 2020, a further planning application was made to increase the number of gypsy families to 12, each with two caravans, including improvement of access, laying of hardstanding and the installation of a package sewage treatment plant (Ref. 20/01122/F).

Permission was refused and an Appeal was made (Ref. APP/C1305/W/21/3272481). This was dismissed on 19th April 2023. One of the reasons for refusal was that the ecological reports about the site were deemed to be out of date, in particular information about Great Crested Newts *Triturus cristatus*.

As such, the aforementioned survey was carried out to provide an update on the current ecological status of the site.

Methodology

The site was re-visited by Andy Warren from Cotswold Wildlife Surveys on 16th June 2023 in overcast conditions with no wind.

During the visit a walkover survey was undertaken to re-assess the botanical interest and to check for signs of activity or presence of protected species, in particular Badger *Meles meles*, reptiles and amphibians.

In addition, a pond 96 m from the western edge of the application site (Fig. 1) was accessed, and water samples taken to confirm the presence or absence of Great Crested Newt eDNA. The samples were sent to SureScreen Scientifics for analysis.

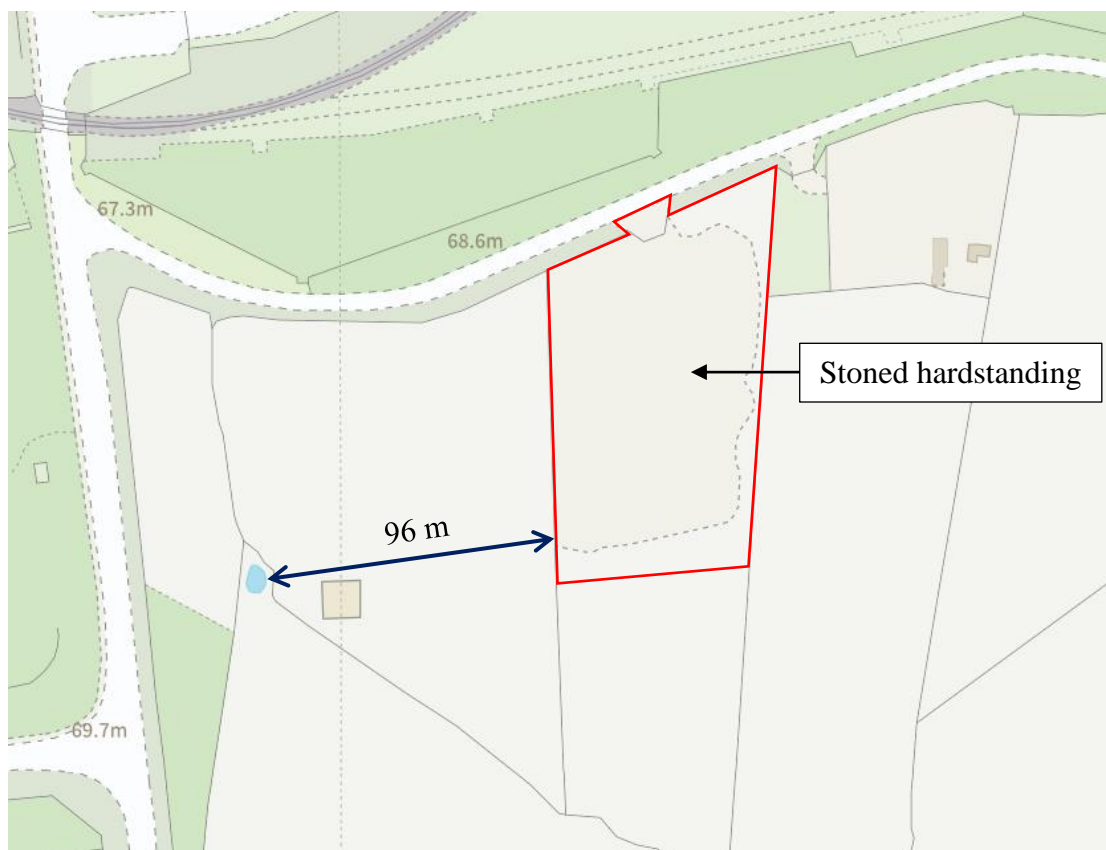


Fig. 1 Location of pond in relation to application site

Results

Following the original granting of permission at Appeal in 2019, some works were undertaken to secure the consent. This included the construction of the site access and the initial laying of stoned hardstanding (Figs. 2 and 3).



Figs. 2 & 3 Site entrance – 28th April 2021

Further stone hardstanding was subsequently laid to provide the base layer for the caravans, and at the time of the 2023 visit, pioneer plant species were starting to become established (Figs. 4 and 5). The extent of hardstanding is shown on the map in Fig. 1.



Figs. 4 & 5 Stoned hardstanding – June 2023

Species noted were typical of disturbed ground, including tall ruderals such as Creeping Thistle *Cirsium arvense* and Curled Dock *Rumex crispus*, along with Poppy *Papaver rhoeas*, Scentless Mayweed *Tripleurospermum inodorum*, Ragwort *Senecio jacobaea*, and Pineappleweed *Matricaria matricariodes* amongst others.

Away from the hardstanding the rest of the field and neighbouring fields were undisturbed, and the sward contained the same botanical diversity noted in May and June 2017 (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 Undisturbed ground



Fig. 7 Piles of road scalplings

There were no signs of mammal activity around the site or adjacent land, and there were no amphibian refugia or hibernacula within the development area, as the stoned hardstanding had been compacted. There were a couple of small piles of road scalplings, but these were unsuitable as places of shelter for small animals (Fig. 7).

The pond to the west of the application site lay at the junction of two hedgerows and was heavily overgrown with Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* branches, Bramble *Rubus fruticosus* and Dog Rose *Rosa canina* (Figs. 8 and 9).

The pond was quite shallow and covered an area of approximately 25 m².



Figs. 8 & 9 Pond to west of application site

Despite the dense scrub, the pond was accessible, and water samples were taken. These were sent off for DNA analysis and the results returned a positive test, indicating the presence of Great Crested Newts (Fig. 10).



Folio No: E18856
 Report No: 1
 Purchase Order: Widnell-GCN-01
 Client: COTSWOLD WILDLIFE SURVEYS
 Contact: Andy Warren

TECHNICAL REPORT

ANALYSIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL DNA IN POND WATER FOR THE DETECTION OF GREAT CRESTED NEWTS (*TRITURUS CRISTATUS*)

SUMMARY

When great crested newts (GCN), *Triturus cristatus*, inhabit a pond, they continuously release small amounts of their DNA into the environment. By collecting and analysing water samples, we can detect these small traces of environmental DNA (eDNA) to confirm GCN habitation or establish GCN absence.

RESULTS

Date sample received at Laboratory: 07/07/2023
Date Reported: 19/07/2023
Matters Affecting Results: None

Lab Sample No.	Site Name	O/S Reference	SIC	DC	IC	Result	Positive Replicates
4505	Widnell Lane Pond	SP 62810 17347	Pass	Pass	Pass	Positive	12

If you have any questions regarding results, please contact us: ForensicEcology@surescreen.com

Reported by: Chris Troth

Approved by: Lauryn Jewkes

Fig. 10 GCN DNA analysis report

No amphibians were noted at the time of the visit, and given the small size of the pond, the population of Great Crested Newts is considered to be small.

Irrespective of the population size, the land between the application site and pond consists of semi-improved grassland bordered by mature, mixed species hedgerows (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11 Land between pond and application site

These provide ideal foraging and sheltering habitat within the core zone for amphibians, unlike the stoned hardstanding on the application site which offers neither refuge nor food. As such, any Great Crested Newts unexpectedly encountered on the application site, would thus be commuting across it during their dispersal phase and not seeking a place of shelter.

Given the above, the mitigation strategy prepared for the original Appeal is considered valid for the additional works, and is reproduced here.

Mitigation strategy

In order to minimise the chances of encountering a Great Crested Newt during the preparation of the site, the following measures will be implemented:

- ❑ Prior to any works commencing, contractors will be briefed by an ecologist on the presence of the nearby population of Great Crested Newts, and what to do if one is unexpectedly discovered during construction;
- ❑ Ground clearance and excavations for the additional caravan pitches will then ideally be undertaken during the main amphibian active period (April to October), although the site is not considered to support hibernating animals;
- ❑ Vegetation to be removed will initially be cut down to a height of approximately 100 mm, so that the ground beneath can be inspected by an ecologist. If no amphibians are present, the remaining vegetation can be stripped, followed by removal of the turf and topsoil;
- ❑ If an amphibian is found, it will be carefully caught and relocated to a safe, undisturbed area of the site well away from the construction zone;

- If a Great Crested Newt is found, advice will be sought from Natural England on whether works can proceed without committing an offence;
- As soon as the footprint of the additional pitches has been declared free of animals by the ecologist, the excavations can be undertaken. These will be very shallow and only involve the removal of the turf and topsoil. A membrane will be laid in the cut and this back filled with crushed stone. There will be no requirement for escape routes, as animals will be able to climb out easily, and works will only take 1-2 days;
- Soil arising during excavation will be banded along the southern side of the site;
- Any other materials will be stored on pallets to prevent animals using these as refuges. This will be particularly important during the winter months (November to March) when newts seek hibernation sites;
- Since the risk of committing an offence is minimal, to reduce that risk further, working practices will be restricted to the daylight hours when amphibians are least active in the terrestrial environment;
- At the end of the construction process, all items will be removed carefully from site, checking for amphibians;

It should be noted that given the small scale of the works, there will be no requirement for a licence from Natural England. Furthermore, the construction site does not need to be fenced off with a temporary amphibian exclusion barrier provided the above measures are adhered to. The stone surfacing will not create an obstruction, and Great Crested Newts will not be prevented from moving across the site or around the wider area.

Conclusions

The proposed works to extend the number of pitches to accommodate 12 gypsy families will not result in a significant loss of semi-improved grassland, as the all the land around the development site consists of the same type of habitat and is being retained, as are the neighbouring fields which also contain semi-improved grassland.

The impact on Great Crested Newts will be negligible, as the works to create the additional pitches are minor and temporary, and the mitigation strategy will ensure that no amphibians will be harmed.

There will be no loss of core Great Crested Newt terrestrial habitat.

Yours faithfully



Andy Warren, Director
BSc (Hons), MA (LM), Tech Cert (Arbor A), MCIEEM, TechArborA