

Brynmawr – Garnlydan Cycle Route

Breeding Bird Survey

Introduction

It is proposed to construct a cycle route, SE-105, Brynmawr High Level, between Intermediate Road, Brynmawr, and Garnlydan to provide a link to existing routes, in order to promote sustainable travel and wellbeing¹. The route proposed follows an existing dirt track across Beaufort Common which is an area of grazing pasture, currently used by horses and cattle, and open access land. Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council has stipulated a requirement for a breeding bird survey to be undertaken in support of the planning application.

Beaufort Common has a range of habitats, with unimproved rushy grassland predominating. There are also mixed woodland plantations and several small ponds. The common has been a traditional breeding site for Lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus*. Lapwing has been an iconic bird on the Heads of the Valleys and used to breed in large numbers. The Gwent Atlas of Breeding Birds published in 1987, based on records compiled between 1981 and 1985, shows confirmed breeding in the tetrad containing Beaufort Common but noted that, in the Gwent upland area, more than one or two pairs in any tetrad was unusual². This, though, has been contradicted by subsequent surveys that identified concentrations of breeding birds in preferred locations³. Breeding numbers have declined across the UK by 42% between 1995 and 2016⁴, with the species on the Red List of birds of conservation concern. The decline has been particularly dramatic in the local area, prompting the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) to fund a project between 2007 and 2011 with a view to restoring and creating Lapwing breeding sites in the Heads of the Valleys area.⁵ This surveyor contributed by monitoring Beaufort Common: birds were breeding in the area between the proposed cycle track and Beaufort Ponds in 2008, grid reference SO 176123, but not subsequently. The RSPB identified breeding failure as the reason for the decline, caused by human-related disturbance, predation and habitat loss. Along with Foxes, Carrion Crows, Magpies and Buzzards are considered to be the principal predators of eggs and small chicks, with the availability of watchpoints, such as fence posts or pylons, being a factor. All these species are abundant locally with the added threat from colonies of Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls that nest on nearby factory roofs.

Beaufort Common also provides habitat for nesting Skylarks, *Alauda arvensis*. Although Skylark is also Red Listed as a bird of conservation concern, it is a common breeding species on the moors in the local area (though it is absent during the winter). The results of the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) Breeding Birds Survey for 2017 show that it declined by 20% across the UK between 1995 and 2016 but increased by 1% over the same period in Wales, albeit within very wide confidence limits.

The bird survey is required to determine the presence of Lapwing and Skylark in the vicinity of the cycle route in order to assess the potential impact of the construction and the use of the route⁶. The survey is also to identify other species breeding in the area that could be affected.

¹ Sustrans SE-105 Feasibility Study January 2018

² Tyler S, Lewis J, Venables A, Walton J 1987 *The Gwent Atlas of Breeding Birds* Gwent Ornithological Society

³ Venables WA and others 2008 *The Birds of Gwent* Christopher Helm

⁴ The Breeding Bird Survey 2017, BTO Research Report 706.

⁵ RSPB Heads of the Valleys Lapwing Project Brochure

⁶ Sustrans email 17.03 2 March 2018

Methodology

The approach adopted has been to map the whereabouts of individual birds along the lines of the BTO's old Common Bird Census. This provides more detailed information than the current Breeding Bird Survey which generates aggregated data for statistical analysis. The survey is undertaken by walking the route slowly from end to end, recording all registrations of birds on the map using BTO notation, including whether individual birds are singing, calling or merely flying over. The risk of missing birds has been reduced by returning along the same route to note anything not recorded previously.

As with the Breeding Bird Survey, two visits have been undertaken with the first in April and the first half of May, and the second at least a month later and before the end of June. This maximises the likelihood of recording both early and late breeders while reducing the possibility of incorrectly categorising birds on passage. Although the survey has been designed to map breeding bird sites no attempt has been made to pinpoint nests, as to do so would cause unwarranted disturbance.

Results

Survey visits were undertaken on 6 April and 12 May 2018. Weather conditions on both occasions were dry but not particularly warm and with light winds. The detailed results are shown on the maps⁷ with a summary of the birds recorded tabulated below.

Although no Lapwings were noted on Beaufort Common, there is strong evidence that they are continuing to attempt to breed in the local area. Three birds were in fields to the east of Garnlydan Reservoir, grid reference SO 179132, on 1 April and 14 May, with a displaying bird in the area between the new and old Heads of the Valleys roads, grid reference SO 171126, on 12 May, during the second survey visit. Three birds were seen by other members of the project team in this latter area during a site visit. A visit on 3 June confirmed the presence of three adults. Although no chicks were seen, the adults' behaviour, standing on sentry and then flying about in response to potential avian predators, was a strong indication of chicks nearby, hidden in the dense rushy vegetation.

Species	Visit 1	Visit 2	Remarks
Mallard	3		
Buzzard		1 overflying	
Lapwing		1	Breeding SO 171126
Herring Gull			Overflying
Lesser Black-backed Gull			Overflying
Coot	2		
Woodpigeon	Overflying	1	
Collared Dove		1 overflying	
Swallow		overflying	
Skylark	2 singing	1 singing	
Pied Wagtail	1		
Willow Warbler		5 singing	
Blackcap		1 singing	
Robin	5 singing	5 singing	
Blackbird	5	3	
Dunnock	2 singing		

⁷ Google Earth SewBRec habitat overlay map dated 24 January 2018

Wren	1		
Great Tit	1	1	
Blue Tit	1		
Coal Tit	2	2	
Starling		1 overflying	
House Sparrow	1 singing	1 singing	
Bullfinch	Pair		
Chaffinch	2	2	
Greenfinch	1		
Goldfinch		2	
Siskin	2 overflying		
Carrion Crow			Not counted
Magpie			Not counted
Jackdaw			Not counted
Raven	1 overflying	2 overflying	
Reed Bunting		1 singing	

Analysis

A total of 32 species were recorded between the two visits. Of those, 5 are on the UK Red List and a further 4 on the Amber List. The following section of the report assesses the potential impact of the cycle route for each species of conservation concern.

Mallard Birds were recorded on or around the small ponds on Visit 1 only. Mallard is a widespread breeding bird locally, with nests concealed in dense vegetation close to water. Changes to the cycle route will have no impact.

Lapwing Lapwings are breeding in the area between the old and new Heads of the Valleys roads about 100 metres to the west of the western end of the cycle route where it joins an existing route that continues to Garnlydan. The new route would be in dead ground to the presumed nest site(s) and should therefore not cause any appreciable disturbance. As there are no Lapwings presently on Beaufort Common the cycle route overall would have no impact on their breeding success. It is possible that they might choose to return. At this point, the level of usage of the cycle route might prevent them from using otherwise suitable adjacent habitat. However, the common is already used by walkers, many with dogs, and suffers from a degree of illegal off-road motor cycle activity. The marginal impact of the cycle route is therefore likely to be negligible and, in any case, could not readily be mitigated.

Skylark There is one Skylark territory on Beaufort Common near the west end of the route and a second possible territory a little to the east. Their nests are likely to be hidden in the rushy ground cover in that area and are at little direct risk of disturbance by passing cyclists. As with Lapwing, there is ample suitable habitat on the common that would be unaffected by the cycle route.

Willow Warbler A common breeding bird locally, Willow Warblers were found in wooded areas. Although some were very close to the route, increase in its use should have negligible impact.

Dunnock A ground-feeding insectivore that nests in dense undergrowth, Dunnock is a common garden bird that is tolerant of human activity. There are probably two territories very close to the route but they are unlikely to be affected by increased usage of the route.

Starling Nesting in holes in trees or buildings, breeding Starlings will not be affected by changes. A single record of an overflying bird is a reflection of the species' decline locally in recent years.

House Sparrow Birds are breeding in the housing in Brynmawr next to the east end of the route. Although UK Red-listed, numbers have held up across Wales and the bird is abundant locally. The proposed change should have no impact.

Bullfinch A pair was present in the scrubby woodland at the east end of the route on Visit 1 and probably breeds in this area. The cycle route might have some impact on their choice of breeding site although there is ample suitable habitat available.

Reed Bunting One singing male was recorded on Visit 2 close to the route. Reed Buntings are not, despite their name, dependent on reedbeds and will nest in wet undergrowth, as is found around the ponds on Beaufort Common. They are unlikely to be affected by the development of the route.

Conclusions

Although the cycle route would impinge on breeding areas for several species of conservation concern the impact is likely to be very low as the birds have ample suitable habitat further from the route. The following measures are recommended to minimise disturbance:

- Construction should take place outside the breeding season
- The area of ground affected by construction should be minimised
- Every effort should be taken to avoid damage to wooded and scrub areas along the route
- Access points should be designed to prevent illegal ingress by motor cycles/scooters

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