

**The current avifauna use of Land Parcels
K019, KO21 and K023
and an assessment of their inclusion in
the Knowsley Park Site of Biological Importance
(SBI 40) Designation**



Produced for the Knowsley Estate

by

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1. Background

The three land parcels K019, 21 and 23 (see attached map Appendix 3) are adjacent to and out with the northwestern part of the walled Knowsley Estate. Land parcels K019 and K023 have been specifically included, by Knowsley Council, as 100% within the boundaries, of the Knowsley Park Site of Biological Interest (SBI 40).

Their inclusion was based on a partial, relatively incomplete, biodiversity evaluation (see attached appendix 1) of the 1182.5 hectares of the Knowsley Park Estate, which concentrated almost entirely on a Phase One Habitat Survey and a survey of the plant life. Additionally, brief comments are given on the Birdlife in two further guideline-only appraisals (B3) (B4) and one on Mammals (M1). The evaluation was undertaken by Merseyside Environmental Advisory Services in 1995 (part) and revised in July 2003.

As part of that revision, Land Parcels K019 and K023 were determined as being 'buffer zones to the wildlife interest of the Knowsley Park Site of Biological Interest' and also as '(winter) feeding grounds for the Pink-footed Goose'. However, no specific evidence of such is given on the revised Knowsley Park SBI 40 Designation Sheet in support of these statements.

We have been asked to give an independent and up-to-date assessment as to whether the designations of the respective land parcels is currently appropriate.

2. Introduction & Methodology

Two two-hour fieldwork surveys were undertaken to the three relevant land parcels at 0700-0900 and 1700-1900 on September 15th and September 22 respectively. The observer is an experienced field worker, who is extensively involved in ongoing research for both the British Trust for Ornithology National Breeding & Wintering Bird Atlas and the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Lancashire & N Merseyside*.

Additionally, over 30 hours of ongoing breeding and wintering bird surveys of Tetrads SJ49H (Knowsley Village), SJ49L (Knowsley Hall) and SJ 49M (Knowsley Park), which almost entirely encompass the Knowsley Estate and specifically include the land parcels concerned, have been undertaken since 2010. A recently updated, annotated checklist of the current and past status and distribution of the Knowsley Estate's bird life is also available. (See appendix 6 attached).

Research and investigation of local, regional and national avian databases and other local birdwatching resources were also undertaken, so as to obtain an even more accurate evaluation of the birdlife using the specified land parcels, with particular reference to their current use by Pink-footed Geese.

3. Key Findings

3.1/ Buffer Zones – the three land parcels are designated and demarcated in maps within Appendix 2 of the Knowsley Green Belt Parcel Summary Sheets (please refer to appendix 6 attached).

The overall status/summary of each is given as ‘Severely Restricted’ for K019 and K023 and as ‘Few or No Constraints’ for K021. All are coded in the Phase One Habitats Survey as J1.1 (Arable Land), with small patches of plantation mixed woodland (A1.3.2) in land parcel K023 only.

As further, detailed ecological surveys of these land parcels have not been undertaken, the inclusion of the two land parcels (K019, K023) on the basis that they act as ‘buffer zones to the wildlife interest of Knowsley Park Estate (within the walls)’ appears to be based primarily on the assumption that their wildlife value relates entirely to their location - that is being immediately adjacent to the Knowsley SBI 40 (proper).

In fact, ongoing atlasing and bird surveying shows that that the significantly important avian biodiversity and bird populations of the Knowsley Park Estate overwhelmingly relates to its extensive mature woodland and aquatic habitats. These habitats are some distance from these land parcels and well within the estate’s walls. The mature woodlands and lakes at the heart of the estate hold locally important populations of the following species, with 2012 estimates shown in brackets:-

Great Crested Grebe (six/eight pairs breed) **Grey Heron** (c.20 occupied nests)
Sparrowhawk (six pairs) **Common Buzzard** (nine pairs);
Eurasian Hobby (one/two pairs) **Oystercatcher** (one/two pairs);
Lapwing (>12 pairs) **Woodcock** (10 territories and > 100 birds in winter)
Eurasian Cuckoo (one/two calling males) **Kingfisher** (> three pairs usually present)
Skylark (>12 territories) **Barn Swallow** (> 18 pairs throughout the estate)
House Martin (> 12 pairs nest at the Rhino House)
Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Blackbird, Song Thrush (important local resident and winter populations)
Grasshopper & Sedge Warblers, Blackcap, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff (important summer migrant populations)
Goldcrest, Blue Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit (important local resident and winter populations) **Willow Tit** (very important local population of c three/four pairs)
Nuthatch. Treecreeper, Great Spotted Woodpecker and **Jay** are also abundant woodland residents.

The Spotted Flycatcher has declined throughout the UK by some 50% over the last 25 years and is now ‘red listed’ as being of urgent conservation concern. Now very rare anywhere in lowland Lancashire, the Knowsley Estate has been home to singing territorial males for two of the last three breeding seasons.

None of the species listed has important concentrations in the three land parcels concerned, neither do they regularly utilise the areas for feeding and/or roosting. There were also no records of North Merseyside Biodiversity Action Plan (NMBAP) bird species specifically identified for Knowsley, namely; Corn Bunting; Grey Partridge; Lapwing; Skylark and Song Thrush and apart from a few overflying House Martins and Starlings from known Knowsley village populations, threatened urban BAP species were also absent.

Previous visits to the three areas concerned for ongoing breeding and wintering bird surveys have produced little of avian interest, except that is for the large populations of gamebirds, pigeons and corvids, utilising the edge of the areas when shoots are in progress within the estate.

For example, the principal avian biodiversity interest on Saturday September 15th 2012 was 145 Woodpigeons, 19 Feral Pigeons, 23 Carrion Crows, 35 Jackdaws, seven Magpies, 72 Pheasants and 36 Red-legged Partridges. Four soaring Common Buzzards, a single Sparrowhawk, one Great Spotted Woodpecker and a small party of migrating Meadow Pipits over to the south, were the only other avian sightings of interest.

Throughout ongoing bird surveys conducted since 2010, the three land parcels have all suffered from frequent and sustained disturbance from dog-walkers, joggers and small children, who all roam freely over the areas concerned. Accordingly, almost all of the 'wildlife interest' is restricted to the linear corridors adjacent to the estate walls. This uncontrolled disturbance makes the presence of Pink-footed Geese extremely unlikely, especially when 'chased' by dogs. Brown Hares were also absent, probably for the same reasons.

Although not exhaustive, a selection of local residents with properties overlooking the land parcels was also interviewed as to their individual 'observations' of geese using the fields. Apart from occasional 'Canadian Geese' flying over to roost at Mizzy Lake, within the estate, their answers were, unsurprisingly, negative.

Thus the designation of two of the three land parcels, as 'buffer zones to the wildlife interest of Knowsley Park', would seem to principally benefit those released game species seeking temporary refuge and certainly the open fields of poor grassland and cereal stubble are not attractive to the vast majority of indigenous 'wild' birds.

The woodland and scrub adjacent to and within the estate walls however do provide 'wildlife refuges/corridors' especially with respect to land parcel K023 which contains two woodlands with ponds (Knowles's Pits and Howard's Pits) plus several mature hedgerows, (see app.7)

The Green Belt Summary Sheet for land parcel K019 is also incorrect, in that a public footpath does border the northern edge of the fields. Again most 'wildlife interest' is contained within the narrow linear strip adjacent to the estate walls.

Land Parcel K021 is the principal dog-walking 'arena' for the local urban area and any 'wildlife interest' is again restricted to its edges and to bordering woodland and gardens. Thus the inclusion of the two land parcels K019 and K023 as 100% part of the Knowsley Hall Estate SBI 40 designation on the basis that they are 'buffer zones to the wildlife interest of the SBI - is considered inappropriate, under the current conditions of unrestricted public access and land use.

Conversely, appropriate sustainable development of these land parcels to include 'green infrastructure, wildlife corridors and stepping stones', would undoubtedly enhance Knowsley Borough's overall biodiversity, especially with respect to its threatened urban bird populations. (Please refer to the attached appendix 4 - 'Green Infrastructure Guide' published by the Town & Country Planning Association and the Wildlife Trusts, July 2012).

For example, the fortunes of four declining, urban, NMBAP bird species; Common Swift, House Sparrow, Starling and House Martin, would be greatly improved by incorporating a variety of low-cost, high-impact initiatives into any development (such as installing internal nesting boxes at eaves/sofits level). Additional, eco-effective initiatives could also be considered, to benefit a wide variety of other urban species, such as garden birds, bats, amphibians, invertebrates and wild flowers.

3.2/ Feeding areas for Pink-footed Geese (*Anser brachyrhynchus*)

One of the reasons for including land parcels K019 and K024 within the boundaries of the overall Knowsley Hall SBI 40 was on the basis that the then arable fields were used for feeding by the Pink-footed Geese.

The Pink-footed Goose arrives in SW Lancashire from its breeding grounds in Iceland and Greenland from the first week of September and by end-October, SW Lancashire area can support a thriving population of up to 50,000 birds. Many of these birds remain throughout the winter, but an increasing proportion move on to East Anglia, where leftover sugar beet residues attracts them; before they return through our area again in February/April, on return migration to the Arctic Circle (*Lancashire Bird Reports*).

Their principal wintering/feeding areas in Lancashire are a mixture of salt marsh, pasture, grassland, cereal stubbles and potato/carrot remainders, where safe and undisturbed feeding is available (*The Birds of Lancashire & N. Merseyside*). These specific habitat requirements are met on the North Fylde and on the extensive mosslands of SW Lancashire, particularly around and inland of Southport.

The nearest regular assemblages of feeding Pink-footed Geese to the land parcels concerned are those that frequent the extensive farmland and former mosslands north of the East Lancashire Road. For example, on 22nd September 2012, some 3,000 birds were noted feeding on adjoining fields from The Old Coach Road (*per C Davies*) and since 2005, up to 5,000 birds have regularly roosted overnight on the peat workings known as White Moss (formerly Simonswood Moss), some 7 km north of the Knowsley estate (LBR)

Almost daily observations (2009-12) by a local birdwatcher (*per A.Spottiswood*) have resulted in only two recent records; that of 23 birds overflying the car park at Knowsley Safari Park on 23rd September 2011 and 38 flying north over the Safari Park on 27th September 2012. The estate gamekeepers also do not record Pink-footed Geese landing or feeding within the estate nowadays, only recording this species in occasional, overflying skeins.

They were also not recorded using any of the 'Knowsley' tetrads (see 2 above) during surveys for the BTO/Lancashire Atlas projects. Undoubtedly, birds do overfly the area en-route to other local feeding areas and/or East Anglia, but this also applies to most of southwest Lancashire & North Merseyside.

The current status of the Pink-footed Goose, in the immediate environs of the Knowsley Park Estate, is that of 'an uncommon winter visitor; usually in overflying skeins and mostly to Prescot reservoirs' (*Birds of Knowsley Hall Estate – an annotated Checklist*, updated Sept 2012 –see appendix 6). Its former occurrence on the land parcels concerned may have been otherwise, but these areas are now totally unsuitable for Pink-footed Gees.

The Pink-footed Goose is a known opportunistic feeder, as shown by the recent rapid increase in the East Anglia sugar beet areas, but it also returns each winter to well established, traditional feeding grounds '... returning to a relatively limited number of feeding sites to which they will readily resort, provided they are free from disturbance and contain suitable food' (*Birds of Lancashire & North Merseyside*).

A Spatial Planning Guide compiled by the RSPB and the Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester & North Merseyside was published in July 2008 (see appendix 5 attached). Three 'wintering bird species' in Lancashire were assessed for their sensitivity to potential disturbance to on-shore wind farm development, including the Pink-footed Goose, and their 'sensitive wintering areas' were mapped accordingly.

All three relevant land parcels are not included as 'sensitive areas' and indeed the entire Knowsley Hall Estate SBI (40) is similarly and correctly, not included within the mapped 'areas of sensitivity', which ends on the north boundary of the East Lancashire Road. Unrestricted public access, and the close proximity to existing urban development combined with packs of dogs running free, results in frequent and ongoing disturbance, which is not readily tolerated by wildfowl. Even the semi-tame 'feral' Barnacle, Greylag and Canada Geese from within the estate have not been noted using these land parcels over the past three years. Most certainly 'wild' Pink-footed Geese will never do so under the current land use and access arrangements.

Thus the inclusion of the two land parcels K019 and K023 as part of the K024 Knowsley Hall Estate SBI 40 designation, as 'being utilised as feeding areas by Pink-footed Geese' is now considered entirely inappropriate.

4. Conclusions

The designation of three land parcels (K019, 21 and 23) was assessed as to their current relevance and appropriateness based on their current use by local bird species, but with particular relevance to NMBAP species and the Pink-footed Goose.

Unrestricted public access and their close proximity to existing urban areas has resulted in constant disturbance, so much so, that their current designation as 'buffer zones to the wild life interest of the Knowsley Hall SBI 40' is now considered inappropriate.

Their supplementary designation as 'used as feeding grounds by the Pink-footed Goose' is also entirely inappropriate, nowaadays.

References

Lancashire Bird Reports (annually 2000 – 2011), Lancashire & Cheshire Fauna Society.

The Birds of Lancashire & North Merseyside (2008), Lancashire & Cheshire Fauna Society.

Good Practice Guidance for Green Infrastructure and Biodiversity (2012), Town and Country Planning Association/ The Wildlife Trusts.

Green Space Strategy 2010 -2014, Knowsley Council.

Biodiversity Information Report 383: Knowsley Safari Park (2011), Merseyside Biobank

Knowsley Park Site of Biological Interest (No 40) (1995/2003), Merseyside Environmental Advisory Services

Wind Turbines, Sensitive Bird Populations and Peat Soils - a Spatial Planning Guide (2008)
RSPB/ Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester & North Merseyside.

A Litte Rough Guide around the Hedges, Campaign to Protect Rural England