

# PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT OF LAND AT BIRCHALL GARDEN SUBURB

## WATER VOLE SURVEY

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## **1.0 BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 Tarmac Ltd are in the process of formulating proposals for the development of land near Welwyn Garden City known as Birchall Garden Suburb.
- 1.2 As part of the development process, Tarmac commissioned Philip Parker Associates Ltd (who have undertaken other survey work for them at Panshanger Park) to undertake various surveys to provide baseline ecological information to assist in the Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) process.
- 1.3 As part of the initial internal scoping exercise for the site undertaken by Philip Parker Associates, water voles were identified as a species that could occur on the site and therefore further survey work was undertaken. This view was supported by a consultation response by the Environment Agency who suggested that water voles may be present on the site.
- 1.4 The report should be read in conjunction with Drawing 9.1.1 Ecological survey compartments and ponds.

## **2.0 LEGISLATION AND POLICY**

- 2.1 Water voles (*Arvicola amphibious*) and their habitat are provided full legal protection under Schedule 5 (section 9) of the WCA 1981 (as amended), which makes it illegal to intentionally kill, injure or take water voles and to damage, disturb or destroy their 'place of shelter', i.e. their habitat. The water vole is also listed under Section 41 and 42 of the NERC Act 2006. It is therefore a priority species and local planning authorities should consider such species when determining planning applications.

### **3.0 OBJECTIVES OF THE SURVEY**

3.1 The objectives of the water vole survey are as follows:

- To identify water bodies on the site that had the habitat features present that could support water vole;
- To undertake water vole survey to identify the extent of any water vole populations present.

## **4.0 SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Scope of the survey**

During the original scoping survey undertaken in March 2014 by experienced water vole surveyors Howard and Malcolm Hillier, most of the ponds present were considered to have very little water vole potential. Many of the ponds were isolated, recent in origin, heavily shaded or lacked suitable emergence and bankside vegetation. The exception to this was P10 which contained a range of suitable habitats. The ditches and drains on the site were considered unsuitable to support water voles. The drain running south of P13 was 100% shaded with no bankside vegetation that could support water voles and at times held only a few centimetres of water. Other areas of running water as shown on the habitat map were very shallow and at times little more than seepages.

4.2 On this basis, Pond P10 was subject to specific detailed survey on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015 whilst the other water bodies within the study boundary were sampled as part of undertaking the amphibian surveys between April and June 2014. This comprised a minimum of 4 visits (assuming water to be present). All water bodies were therefore subject to a good level of survey, accessing all banks and marginal vegetation.



**Figure 1** – Pond P10 contained features most likely to support water vole

### **4.3 Desk Top review**

A data search with HERC was undertaken in November 2014 and February 2016, then updated on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 2017. The latest search covers the site boundary plus an area of 2km beyond the boundary. This indicates 64 records within the area of search.

4.4 The various records are distributed as follows:

**Table 9.5.1 Existing water vole records**

Location of evidence	Distance from site boundary
1 record from the Commons LNR in April 1996 TL258108	70m
9 records from the River Mimram 1993 - 2012	690m – 920m
54 records other records including the River Mimram, Tewinbury SSSI/HMWT Nature Reserve	Between 1km and 2km

#### 4.5 Field Work

The survey was conducted in accordance with the Guidance given in the Water Vole Conservation Handbook 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Strachan 2011) and entailed walking the margins of the water bodies, where possible within the water, and searching the margins and banks for field signs, comprising any combination of the following:

- a) Burrows and bolt-holes in the banks, with diameters of 4 - 8cm;
- b) Footprints in any soft mud and silt at the margins
- c) Cylindrical, blunt-ended droppings, often deposited in 'latrines' to mark range boundaries or favoured spots close to burrows;
- d) Chewed lengths of vegetation, roughly 10cm long and deposited in feeding stations
- e) Trampled runways through bankside vegetation;
- f) Occasionally above-ground nests of finely shredded vegetation;
- g) Feeding 'lawns' around burrow entrances (typically most evident mid-late in the breeding season).

#### 4.6 Survey personnel

All water vole surveys were undertaken by Malcolm Hillier, a field surveyor with over 30 years experience in undertaking mammal surveys.

#### 4.7 Survey constraints

There were no significant constraints to the water vole survey.



## **5.0 SURVEY RESULTS**

5.1 No evidence of water vole was noted during any of the surveys.

## **6.0 SUMMARY**

- 6.1 A water vole survey was undertaken of all waterbodies offering suitable habitat on site (whilst undertaking amphibian surveys) between April and June 2014 whilst Pond P10 (the water body with the most potential habitat features) was subject to further detailed survey on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015.
- 6.2 No evidence of water voles was noted during any of the surveys and it is concluded therefore it is concluded that they are likely to be absent from the site. Despite this, it would be sensible to update the survey to any habitats likely to be disturbed prior to any development commencing.

## **7.0 REFERENCES**

**Dean M, Strachan R, Gow D, Andrews R (2016)**, Water Vole Mitigation Handbook (The Mammal Society Mitigation Guidance Series). Eds Fiona Matthews and Paul Chanin. The Mammal Society, London.

**Strachan R, Moorhouse T and Gelling M (2011)** Water Vole Conservation Handbook 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, Abingdon.

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