

Guidance for afforestation proposed on or near nationally important upland breeding wader areas

Purpose

This guidance has been jointly produced by the Forestry Commission and Natural England to help ensure that proposals for afforestation identify and avoid important breeding wader sites i.e. those sites that are capable of supporting breeding waders and where breeding waders are present. This note pools current knowledge on habitats used by these species and is provided to aid early screening of site suitability and does not replace full assessment¹ of sites submitted for afforestation. An awareness of the essential features and associated management necessary for breeding waders should help to ensure important sites are managed appropriately. Note there are other species which breed or forage on unenclosed habitats e.g. ground nesting raptors, dunlin, ring ouzel, twite etc. which could be impacted by afforestation. This guidance note concentrates on species (curlew, lapwing, redshank, oystercatcher, snipe and golden plover) associated with upland farmland and moorland.

Background

England's upland grassland and moorland breeding waders are in serious decline, with evidence showing that populations are becoming increasingly restricted to fewer, key sites, with losses accelerating in the wider countryside.

Conservation status of breeding waders

Curlew and lapwing are Section 41 priority species². Lapwing and curlew are UK Red-listed³ Birds of Conservation Concern; redshank, snipe and oystercatcher are Amber-listed. Lapwing, Curlew and Oystercatchers are recorded as 'Near Threatened' on the international IUCN Red List⁴ of Threatened Species.

Nationally Important Areas for Upland Breeding Waders

Upland waders breed in a variety of habitats including farmland and moorland. Several habitat data layers available on MAGIC (see www.magic.gov.uk) can be used to identify important areas for breeding waders. These layers used in combination with other layers available on MAGIC i.e. protected areas, priority habitats and agri-environment targeting areas can be overlaid to provide an indication of where breeding waders need to be taken into consideration when developing proposals for afforestation. Natural England have also produced a new mapping layer available in MAGIC which identifies grassland targeting areas for upland breeding wader assemblages. This new layer in conjunction with land above the moorland line shows the higher priority areas for breeding waders where strong efforts are being made to proactively target suitable

¹ <https://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/BEEH-AMDDDB3>

² <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/16/section/41>

³ <https://www.bto.org/science/monitoring/psob>

⁴ <http://www.iucnredlist.org/>

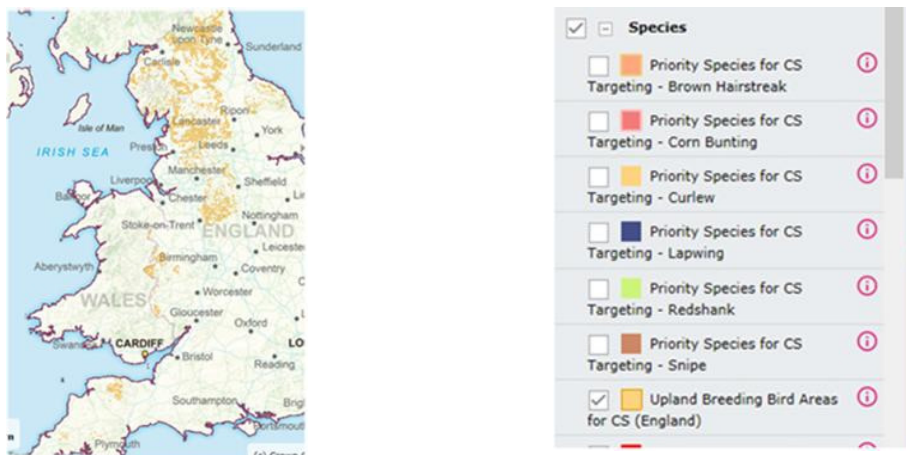
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holdings for beneficial management under Countryside Stewardship. Importantly, there will also be outlying holdings, not in these target areas, that warrant bespoke management for breeding waders.

How to find out if a proposed afforestation site is likely to be an important site for waders

STEP 1- Check MAGIC to see whether afforestation proposals fall within:

a) **Upland Breeding Bird Area for CS (England)** or



Note: there are some localised gaps in coverage indicated by square holes or straight lines which will need to be taken into consideration.

b) **Moorland Line** or



c) **Priority Habitat** In addition to the above layers, check whether the site is mapped as Priority Habitat in MAGIC. If yes, reference should be made to the principles contained in

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Operations Note 043, Principles for afforestation on or near priority habitats⁵. If proposals do not fall in the above areas (a & b) or comprise priority habitat (c), the site is unlikely to be an important site for upland breeding waders. **Note:** there may be some circumstances where sites out with these areas are being used effectively by breeding waders. The Forestry Commission will provide advice in such situations having consulted with the relevant local consultees and it may be necessary for the applicant to assess the site for the features identified below.

Sites that are indicated in MAGIC (STEP 1) to fall within an upland breeding bird area for CS (England) or above the moorland line or comprise priority habitat should be individually assessed under **STEP 2** - to check whether the essential site features and necessary management for waders are present or not.

Land should:

- be open, with any surrounding hedges less than about 2 m high;
- experience minimal disturbance (from footpaths or other public rights of way);
- ideally have no overhead pylons or power lines; have no in-field trees (except willows that can undergo regular pollard management or cutting);
- have extensive mosaics of short and tall vegetation
- have enough water from 1st March to 1st June inclusive, to provide wet features (e.g. scrapes, shallow pools, gutters (foot-drains), rills and flushes and/or high water tables that maintain surface water and/or damp field conditions throughout the breeding season

If the above criteria are met and you wish to develop a proposal for afforestation, proceed to STEP 3.

STEP 3 - If the habitat looks suitable for breeding waders you will need to gather and provide evidence that the afforestation proposals will not have a significant detrimental impact on an important population of breeding waders. Local sources of information, such as Local Record Centres, local bird clubs, conservation volunteers and local land managers, can help identify areas where breeding waders are regularly observed. In protected landscapes (e.g. National Park, AONB or World Heritage Site) advice should be sought at an early stage from the relevant authority on the importance of the site for breeding waders. The Forestry Commission will seek advice from Natural England, as the Government's statutory adviser on the natural environment to determine whether the afforestation proposals will have a significant detrimental impact on a population or assemblage of breeding waders of regional⁶ or national significance⁷.

In addition, advice (and consent) must be sought from Natural England on all afforestation proposals affecting the following protected sites:

⁵ [https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/ON043.pdf/\\$FILE/ON043.pdf](https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/ON043.pdf/$FILE/ON043.pdf)

⁶ Refer to the specific County Guidelines for Selection of Local Wildlife Sites.

⁷ See http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/SSSI_Chptr17_Birds2015June.pdf for site threshold index values.

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- Site of Special Scientific Interest/Special Area of Conservation/Special Protection Area
- RAMSAR site
- proposed designated site⁸ notified for a protected species (e.g. Important Bird Area, proposed SPA)

You should check MAGIC to see whether afforestation proposals fall within a Protected Site or Protected Landscape. Where there are no current records or existing information the applicant should look to have a wading bird survey undertaken by a suitably experienced or qualified person⁹ to determine the presence or otherwise of any protected species. Surveys should involve visiting the site at least three times between April and June. Wader species and their behaviour should be mapped and an assessment made of the significance of the species present and an estimate of the number of breeding territories. This information will be necessary to help inform where afforestation proposals should be located to avoid or reduce adverse impacts on important breeding wader sites. **Note:** The Woodland Creation Planning Grant (WCPG)¹⁰ contributes towards the costs of gathering (including bird surveys) and analysing the information land managers need to consider to ensure their proposals for productive multi-purpose woodland take account of any impacts on: biodiversity (including waders), landscape, water, the historic environment and local stakeholders.

Specific notes on Eurasian Curlew

Curlews breed widely from Europe to central Siberia, and breed and winter in internationally important numbers in Britain. They nest and forage in a wide range of habitats, including upland heath and bog, wet meadows and unimproved and semi-improved pastures, lowland heaths and arable farmland. Curlews have declined greatly in Europe (-48%, 1995-2014), most probably due to habitat loss and degradation and poor breeding success, and are classified as globally Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. The UK supports one of the largest national breeding populations of curlew, yet declines here are amongst the steepest recorded throughout the curlew's range. Curlews are unusual amongst breeding waders in Britain in that large numbers utilise both unenclosed moorland habitats and adjacent semi-improved grassland pastures and meadows, with adult birds and chicks often moving from one habitat to another during the breeding season. Land adjacent to forests and woodland is less suitable as evidence shows that breeding productivity in such areas is unsustainably low due to nest predation by foxes, stoats and carrion crows. Birds also avoid wind-farms. Particularly important areas for breeding curlews are in the Bowland Fells, the Pennines, the North York Moors and Northumberland.

⁸ List includes Potential Special Protection Areas, possible Special Areas of Conservation and proposed Ramsar sites. Sites identified, or required as compensatory measures for adverse effects on European sites, potential SPAs, possible SACs and listed or proposed Ramsar sites.

⁹ <http://events.cieem.net/ProfessionalDirectory/Professional-Directory.aspx>

¹⁰ <https://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/bee-h-auhmkk>