

HABITAT BIODIVERSITY AUDIT

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Welford-on-Avon Parish Council
The Headland
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Welford-on-Avon
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*Our ref: SP15F1
Site name: Cress Hill*

Date: 23/05/2013

Dear Vanessa Lowe

Local Wildlife Site survey results – Cress Hill

You may recall we carried out a survey on this land to examine the nature conservation interest in July 2012. The survey found sufficient features of interest to qualify the land for selection as a Local Wildlife Site and I am pleased to enclose a copy of the description and map.

Why are LWS's important?

LWS's represent the most important wildlife sites outside Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), they are selected against written criteria that have been agreed between Natural England, Warwickshire Museum, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and the Local Authorities. LWS's are of regional and local importance and their conservation is very critical if we are to maintain a landscape rich in wildlife.

Do LWS's restrict the way I manage the land?

LWS's do not carry any formal legal protection and do not restrict the way you manage your land. They are a means of identifying places with important nature conservation features and are recognised as such, by the planning authority which would take them into account when considering planning applications that may affect the land.

Specific Management Recommendations

Semi-improved calcareous pasture grassland such as this site is an increasingly rare habitat in Warwickshire and nationally. It is vitally important that the site remains sensitively managed. It would be very detrimental if close-grazing was resumed or if it

Project Partners

Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, Warwickshire County Council, Coventry City Council, North Warwickshire Borough Council, Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council, Rugby Borough Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, Stratford-on-Avon District Council, Warwick District Council, Natural England, Environment Agency

is left unmanaged. Suggested management includes cutting the tow meadows for hay once a year in late summer, which should improve species diversity particularly in the upper field. There is also a need to open up the dense scrub woodland and gradually convert it to Ash-Hawthorn woodland by selectively removing or coppicing the Hawthorn, leaving glades to help the spread of ground flora. Some scrub control would also be beneficial as some is spreading in the upper meadow already.

What help can I get?

LWS selection also provides an opportunity to inform landowners and managers that they have an important conservation area and to provide advice to help maintain the habitat. Selection may also be helpful in enabling qualification for grant-aid such as the new Environmental Stewardship scheme from DEFRA. Should you wish to know more about the selection of LWS's or would like to discuss the scientific basis of the site's selection as a LWS please do not hesitate to contact me.

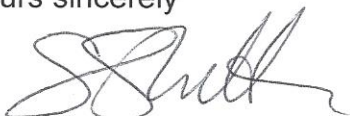
Further Information

I have enclosed the following information which I hope you will find helpful:

- Contacts for advice and support
- Wildlife Trust Local Wildlife Sites brochure
- Habitat specific management advice sheet
- Species identification sheet

Please do get in touch with me if you would like to discuss any aspect of LWS selection or the site's conservation value and management.

Yours sincerely



Sarah Shuttleworth
Wildlife Sites Surveyor

Enclosures: LWS boundary map
LWS citation
Contacts for advice and support
Wildlife Trust Local Wildlife Sites brochure
Habitat specific management advice sheet
Species identification sheet

Local Wildlife Sites Evaluation Form

Site Name: Cress Hill

Site Ref: SP 15F1

Grid Ref: SP140514

Local Authority Area:

Stratford-on-Avon DC

Date Selected:

Site description:

Suitably managed: No

Area: 2 ha

The LWS comprises a small block of community-owned land situated on the south side of the River Avon LWS, about 0.5km south-west of Welford-on-Avon. Although of limited size this area contains a number of habitats including two small semi-improved meadows, one containing relict calcareous grassland, areas of tall herb and an area of scrub woodland; all situated on a steep north-facing slope dropping down to the river. The scrub has developed on a particularly steep river cliff which was originally sheep pasture, but which appears to have been used as a tip for a while in the early post-war period, possibly infilling a small quarry. The small meadows to the west are on a slightly gentler slope and were also once used for sheep grazing. The larger upper meadow was still close-grazed at the time of the previous survey in 2007 but has now been unmanaged for several years and is becoming rank. This field displays a series of lynchets as well as numerous ant-hills. The smaller lower meadow is of fairly recent origin having been divided from the main one by a new hedge and ditch. This is also rank but has been occasionally mown in recent years.

The LWS is bordered by the River Avon on the north side, by sheep pasture to the west, by a large silage field to the east which was formerly orchard land, and by the Welford-Barton road above to the south which contains a few scattered houses.

The site rises steeply from below 35m ASL at river level up to 55m ASL on the southern boundary. The underlying geology comprises calcareous Lower Lias Clay.

There is public access to the whole site apart from the upper meadow where the only access point has become overgrown. Several public footpaths cross the site, including the long distance Avon Valley footpath, while the two leading up to the road pass up flights of recently cut steps. These have been provided by the parish council who have also provided benches and a small picnic area, which is regularly mown.

Habitats

There are three main components to the site.

1) Lower Meadow.

This is a small rectangular low-lying piece of semi-improved grassland in the north-western corner of the LWS, which is occasionally cut for hay. The grassland is rather rank and covered with tussocks of False Oat-grass and Cockfoot, but is locally dominated by Common Bent, Red Fescue and Meadow Foxtail, with locally abundant Yorkshire Fog, Meadow Barley and Yellow Oat-grass. The grassland type is not easy to define using the National Vegetation Classification (NVC), but it may have affinities to the MG4 *Alopecurus pratensis-Sanguisorba officinalis* meadow community, which was once widespread in river valleys across the region but is now rare and threatened. Great Burnet has been recorded from here in the past (WBRC). In addition to the above grasses, Perennial Ryegrass is dominant along the well trodden public footpath, while a variety of other common species include very locally frequent Meadow Fescue.

Forbs are still unusually diverse for such a small piece of grassland despite local invasion of the ranker parts by tall herb such as Common Nettle, Creeping Thistle and particularly Cow Parsley and Hogweed. The dominant herbs include Hedge Bedstraw, Lady's Bedstraw, Meadow Cranesbill, Meadow Vetchling and Germander Speedwell, with locally frequent Common Knapweed, Common Mouse-ear, Cut-leaved Cranesbill, Field Scabious, Oxe-eye Daisy, Ribwort Plantain, Meadow Buttercup, Common Sorrel, Red Campion and Red Clover. Among more occasional species are Yarrow, Agrimony, Welled Thistle, Pignut, Musk Mallow, Lesser Burnet-saxifrage and Goat's-beard. The meadow is bordered on the south side by a low relatively modern Hawthorn hedge, which also contains patches of Wild Privet, Blackthorn, Dogwood and Dog Rose. On the river side of the public footpath is a belt of tall inundation vegetation dominant by Common Nettle, with frequent Great Willowherb, Hemlock and Meadowsweet. This habitat grades into marginal aquatic swamp along the River Avon nearby which includes Common Club-rush, Reed Sweet-grass, pond-sedge, Common Reed and Branched Bur-reed, although these areas are within the River Avon LWS. Pockets of scrub are spreading on the river bank, with Hawthorn, Elder, Osier and Crack Willow, being augmented by deliberately planted young trees and shrubs (not all native) such as Pedunculate Oak, Red Oak, Cherry, Guelder-rose, Field Maple and Lombardy Poplar.

2) Upper Meadow

This larger meadow occupies a steep slope in the south-western quarter of the LWS. It has been unmanaged for several years after having been damaged by over-grazing and is now overgrown with False Oat-grass. However below this upper sward there is still abundant Meadow Foxtail, Common Bent, Red Fescue and Yellow Oat-grass, with locally frequent Sweet Vernal-grass, Meadow Fescue, Yorkshire Fog and Smooth Meadow-grass. Of special note are several grasses characteristic of calcareous grassland, with Tor-grass very locally dominant in the north-west corner, very locally frequent Meadow Oat-grass along the bottom of the meadow and rare Downy Oat-grass, present on an ant-hill. Again it is hard to classify using the NVC criteria but on the steeper slopes it may represent a degraded form of the county threatened CG5 *Bromus erectus-Brachypodium pinnatum* grassland, which was once widespread on the Lias Limestone sheep pastures, this grading into MG4 at the bottom. Forbs include abundant Hedge Bedstraw, Lady's Bedstraw, Meadow Vetchling and Germander Speedwell, with locally frequent Common Mouse-ear, Ribwort Plantain, Bulbous and Meadow Buttercups, Common Sorrel and Pepper Saxifrage. Agrimony and Meadow Cranesbill are occasional. At the top of the meadow near the road is a belt of open and closed scrub dominated by Elder, with frequent Hawthorn and Bramble. This is gradually extending into the meadow accompanied by extensive areas of Hogweed and Common Nettle. There is also some recent Blackthorn invasion on the south side.

3) Secondary scrub woodland

The eastern half of the LWS is dominated by mature Hawthorn scrub which forms a closed canopy over much of the area. There is also occasional-locally frequent Field Maple, Elder and Wild Privet, while Wild Plum forms the dominant component of the unmanaged hedge running down the eastern border of the woodland by the eastern flight of steps. A hedge on the western border consists largely of Hawthorn, Elder and Hazel and this is regularly trimmed. There is a fringe of scattered mature Sycamore, Ash and Wild Cherry trees in the proximity of the eastern steps and along the top of the site by the road, where there is a single mature Pedunculate Oak in the hedge. This hedge bordering the road is relatively species rich, being dominated by Hawthorn and Dogwood, but with occasional Field Maple, Hazel, Wild Plum, Dog Rose, Elder, English Elm and

Wayfaring Tree. Some of these are also present in low density within the scrub woodland, while others include rare Holly and Wych Elm, with Crack Willow by the river. There is much regeneration of existing species. A medium-sized Yew and a few planted trees including Bird Cherry, Garden Privet, Whitebeam and Rowan are present in the vicinity of the picnic area. The ground flora beneath the scrub is fairly limited over much of the area due to the absence of light, and mainly dominated by either Common Nettle or Ivy. Other species are limited to the vicinity of clearings and the footpaths where there is more sunshine, with False Brome, Greater Burdock, Nipplewort, Herb Bennet, Common Male-fern, Herb Robert, Ground-ivy, Wood Dock and Red Campion are all frequent to locally abundant. Of note is locally abundant Sweet Violet by the eastern steps, while rare-occasional species include Tor-grass, Hairy Brome, Bearded Couch, Wood Millet, Primrose, Cuckoo Pint, Rough Chervil and Wood Forgetmenot. The most diverse area is along the main diagonal path which occurs within a cleared ride.

Below the riverside path adjacent to the river in the north-east corner, but within the woodland, is an open area of tall herb and rank grasses dominated by Common Nettle and Bramble but with frequent Hogweed and occasional Meadowsweet and Hemlock. Within this area there is also frequent Hedge Bedstraw, Lady's Bedstraw and some Agrimony, suggesting that this area was grassland until recent years.

Fauna

Despite its small size there is a surprisingly good variety of birds breeding on site. Amongst these are Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Spotted Flycatcher, both now very local within the county. Reed Warblers nest in the fringing reed beds along the river. Other birds, mainly associated with the scrub woodland and willow carr include Sparrowhawk (breeding), Buzzard, Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers, Song Thrush, Common Whitethroat, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Treecreeper and Bullfinch. Other birds recorded include Yellow Wagtail, Lesser Whitethroat and Raven. Moorhens breed beside the river, and Mallard, Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail and Grey Heron all visit.

Mammals noted include Fox, Otter and Mole, while Grass Snake was recorded on the survey. Butterflies, mainly Meadow Browns, skippers and Ringlets but including a few Marbled Whites, are numerous in the meadows; while Speckled Woods occur in the scrub woodland. Other species include Red Admirals, Commas and Small Tortoiseshells. Odonata are also numerous, particularly Banded Demoiselles, and also Blue-tailed, White-legged and Common Blue Damselflies. There are large colonies of Yellow Meadow Ant in the upper meadow.

Phase 1 Habitats present:

Semi-improved grassland, tall herb, hedgerows, dense continuous scrub and secondary deciduous woodland.

Evaluation against the criteria

Habitat criteria applied: Grassland and marsh

SCIENTIFIC CRITERIA	Elements of the criteria applying to the site						COMMUNITY CRITERIA	Elements of the criteria applying to the site				
	1	2	3	4	5	6		1	2	3	4	5
Diversity	√	√	√	√			Physical & Visual Access	√	√		√	
Rarity	√	√					Educational Value		√	√		√
Size							Community & Amenity Value	√	√			
Naturalness	√						Aesthetic Appeal & Landscape	√	√	√	√	
Fragility	√		√				Geographical Position		√			
Typicalness	√	√					Recorded History	√				
Ecological Position	√	√	√				Continuity of Landuse	√	√			
Significant Populations												
Potential Value	√											

Why this site qualifies as a Local Wildlife Site: Summary of assessment

Cress Hill qualifies as a Local Wildlife Site with 15 scientific and 16 community criteria applying, of which the following are considered to be the most important.

Diversity

Despite the relatively limited extent of the site there is a very good diversity of habitats, with besides the moderately calcareous semi-improved grassland, there are areas of tall herb, both dense closed and open scrub, secondary woodland and hedgerows associated with it, plus marginal areas of fen-like vegetation bordering the river. Sub-habitats within this area are also varied and include areas of rank grassland and invading young scrub, tall herb and Bramble within the grassland, steep slopes, areas of ant-hills, mown grassland and a broad ride. The adjoining river and its associated marginal swamp is also an important component and directly influences the biodiversity of the site. The grassland areas have a high biodiversity of plant species characteristic of this habitat, and include Agrimony, Common Knapweed, Meadow Fescue, Lady's Bedstraw, Field Scabious, Meadow Cranesbill, Meadow Vetchling, Pepper Saxifrage and Yellow Oat-grass. The grassland contains a good population of butterflies, including a small population of Marbled Whites, while the associated scrub is an important local habitat for breeding birds.

Rarity

Semi-improved calcareous pasture grassland is a very uncommon and decreasing habitat now in Warwickshire, with most of it now ploughed up or improved. The grassland holds several county notable or uncommon species, namely Tor-grass, Meadow Fescue, Meadow Oat-grass, Downy Oat-grass, Field Scabious, Lesser Burnet-saxifrage and Pepper Saxifrage. Another county notable plant, Wood Millet, was recorded from the scrub woodland. Several nationally red-listed birds (in the BTO/RSPB's *Birds of Conservation Concern 3*) are associated with the scrub woodland and riverside trees, notably Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (which is now on the national Rare Breeding Birds Panel) and Spotted Flycatcher. Otters occur along the adjoining river and presumably use the site at times.

Fragility

The grassland area within the site will quickly lose its species interest if close-grazing is revived or if it is left unmanaged. Scrub is already spreading in the upper meadow.

Ecological Position

The grassland is linked directly with other semi-improved sheep pasture along the south side of the River Avon between here and Barton, although much of this is now species-poor due to over-grazing and improvement. The scrub woodland area and associated riverside scrub is part of a county important wildlife corridor of similar habitat running along the borders of the entire River Avon LWS system.

Potential Value

The parish council has plans to manage the site for wildlife. This should include cutting the two meadows for hay once a year in late summer, which should improve species diversity particularly in the upper field. There is also a need to open up the dense scrub woodland and gradually convert it to Ash-Hawthorn woodland by selectively removing or coppicing the Hawthorn, leaving glades to help the spread of ground flora. The removal of some of the scrub will also open up some magnificent views down the Avon valley.

Physical and Visual Access

Most of the LWS is open to public access and much enjoyed by local people, the exception being the upper meadow which is at present inaccessible except to the eye due to the growth of scrub and nettle-beds. The public footpaths up the steeper slopes have been made easier by cutting flights of steps.

Community and Amenity Value

The site is owned and maintained by Welford-on-Avon parish council, and is much used by villagers for dog-walking, picnicking and general enjoyment. The lower meadow is appreciated for its display of wild flowers.

Aesthetic Appeal and Landscape

The site is characteristic of the lower Avon Valley, and contains elements of the traditional landscape such as low-lying flower-rich hay meadow and riverside willows. The scrub woodland, although dense, offers attractive internal views from the two sets of steps and the sloping footpath.

Continuity of Land Use

The site has presumably been under sheep pasture for many centuries, although now partly overgrown with scrub. The upper meadow contains some strip lynchets on the steeper slopes.

Sources of Information : Recorder Site No: Ecosite No: 42/15

Survey Details:	Survey Type & Area:	Surveyors:	Location of records
Date:			
12/07/12	Phase 2	J J Bowley	HBA
2-3/7/07	Phase 2	J J Bowley	HBA
	Phase I	I Tanner	HBA
1975-2000	General records	P J Copson et al	WBRC

Any Other Information:

The site was originally surveyed in 2007 but was rejected due to the small size of the surviving grassland. The present survey was requested by the parish council and includes a larger area of grassland, with the addition of the upper meadow where over-grazing has ceased with the departure of the tenant. Pyramidal Orchid was found in the lower meadow in 2000, while the nationally rare and declining Birthwort (*Aristolochia clematitis*) was seen here in 1975 (PJ Copson). This has never been recorded in the vice-county of Warwickshire, the LWS being situated in the vice-county of Gloucestershire.

Completed By: J. J. Bowley
Date: 04/12/12

Map attached: yes Species list attached: yes

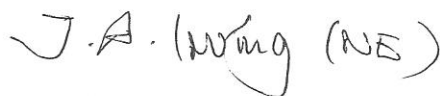
Passed by Sites Selection Panel: Yes / Further survey required/pLWS (circle as appropriate)

Signed:

 (WCC)


(IAN TANNER)


(CWWT)

 (NE)

Date: 13/12/12

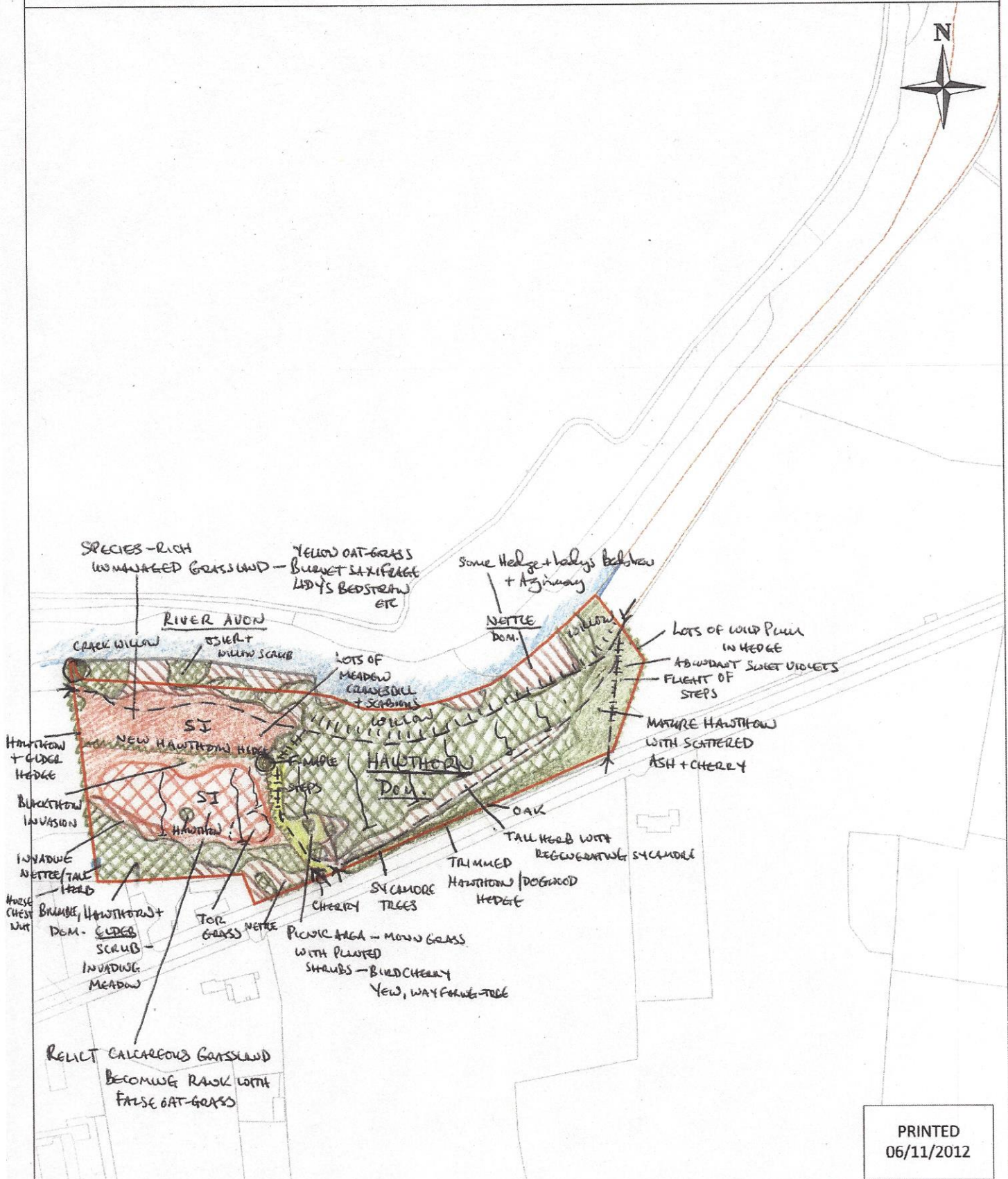


HABITAT BIODIVERSITY AUDIT
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CRESS HILL SP15F1

Surveyor(s) : JJB
 Date (s): 12/07/2012

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2 HECTARES APPROX

STRATFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

