



Higher Moors Accessible Hide Replacement Ecological Assessment

Ecological Appraisal

This survey report is provided by to support Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust's planning application for the replacement of the Stephen Sussex hide at Porth Hellick Pool, within the Higher Moors and Porth Hellick SSSI, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly. The application has been undertaken in-house by IoSWT as the organisation holds the appropriate expertise through their Chief Executive, Julian Branscombe; he is an experienced ecologist, and long-standing full member of the Chartered Institute of Ecologists and Environmental Managers.

The appraisal comprises two parts:

- Vegetation survey and wider habitat appraisal of the area around the existing hide to be disturbed by removal of the existing hide
- A statement to evidence the lack of impact on Protected Species.

Vegetation Survey

Introduction

The site was surveyed on 18th July 2024. The area of survey was the overlap between the Site Boundary and the SSSI designation as shown on the Location Plan, representing a small area (~80 m²) within the SSSI to be affected by the replacement hide and its viewing screen. This includes the area to be used for access for removal of the existing hide, and for bringing in the new hide sections.

It is adjacent to Porth Hellick Pool, which is an area of slightly brackish and reasonably eutrophic shallow water. The pool level varies due to groundwater levels, giving varying extents of exposed mud. Management work by Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust (three to five cuts a year, along with occasional rotovation, as consented by Natural England in the Management Plan for the site) keeps the north-west margin of the pool, in front of the hide location, more open, knocking back reed growth, and providing for bare mud, and smaller plants such as brookweed *Samolus valerandi* and ragged robin *Silene flos-cuculi*.

The rest of the freshwater to brackish wetland within the SSSI contains more extensive areas of wet woodland, reed bed and tall herb vegetation, with a very localised patch of greater botanical diversity with the character of acidic flushes. All of the habitat within the area to be affected is represented much more extensively around the rest of the SSSI.

Survey results

The survey area is a mosaic of tall wetland vegetation (with common reed *Phragmites australis* along with forbs such as purple-loosestrife *Lythrum salicaria*), along with some small bushes of willow *Salix cinerea*. A species list recorded during the survey on 18th July 2024 is provided below.

Vascular plants recorded

Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*
Creeping buttercup *Ranunculus repens*
Lesser spearwort *Ranunculus flammula*
Greater bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus pedunculatus*
Bramble *Rubus fruticosus* agg.

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Nettle *Urtica dioica*
Sallow (Grey Willow) *Salix cinerea*
Marsh bedstraw *Gaium palustre*
Purple-loosestrife *Lythrum salicaria*
Honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum*
Marsh pennywort *Hydrocotyle vulgaris*
Monbretia *Crocasmia x crocosmiiflora*
Common reed *Phragmites australis*

Evaluation and potential impacts

No species were found in the survey area are of conservation significance, in a national context (cf. pages 82-83 of Parslow & Benallick, 2017) or in a local (Isles of Scilly) context (*op. cit.*). All species recorded in this area are widely and commonly present around the rest of the site. Caution must always be taken in interpreting the results of a brief single visit survey, but it should be noted that the Wildlife Trust has long-standing knowledge of this well-visited spot within the SSSI, and there is no history of significant species interest in this area.

An area of 11.9 m² will be permanently taken up by the increased footprint of the hide, the viewing screen, the standing area behind the viewing screen, and the steps and very short path from the boardwalk approaching the hide to provide pedestrian access to the viewing screen. The vegetation to be affected represents two willow bushes and an area of tall herbaceous wetland vegetation of low to moderate species-richness. The Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust considers the replacement of this vegetation with this very modest increase in hide area and associated access (steps, path and standing area) to have no significance within the context of the site.

The remainder of the area of the SSSI to be disturbed is small (~80 m²). All access within the SSSI will be by foot, with hide sections and tools and materials being carried in from vehicles left outside the SSSI. However, there will be considerable ground disturbance in this restricted area (matching the survey area). There are no known features of particular species interest in this survey area, whilst the small extent of habitat is considered relatively insignificant in the context of the site. Most importantly however, this winter ground disturbance, and related temporary opening up of vegetation, is likely to lead to opportunities for an increase in biodiversity in this area during 2025.

This local increase in biodiversity will result from the creation of “regeneration niches” and the greater habitat diversity provided by the structural heterogeneity being created. This is likely to benefit smaller plant species already present such as marsh pennywort and lesser spearwort. It could also result in colonisation by other wetland plants which can take advantage of disturbed ground in wetlands, as has happened in the case of bog pimpernel *Lysimachia tenella* and ivy-leaved crowfoot *Ranunculus hederaceus* elsewhere around this site. Should such species appear as a result, the Wildlife Trust will act accordingly by adjusting its long-term management to limit the chances of these species being outcompeted in the future by vegetation succession, particularly the development of dense reeds or willows.

With no significant impact predicted within the survey area, and the possibility of the ground disturbance and resulting management changes providing benefit, it is most likely that the ecological impact of this works will result in a net benefit in this small area of the SSSI.

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Mitigation measures

Work will be undertaken over a brief period (estimated to be one week) between 1st November 2024 and 31st March 2025, thus principally outside the bird breeding season. Should work not be complete by 28th February, the two small willow bushes to be cleared before this end of February date, thus removing the only likely bird nesting habitat before it could be occupied by early nesting birds (e.g. woodpigeons, blackbirds or song thrushes).

Biosecurity measures will be taken to avoid bringing soil or viable plant fragments or propagules into the construction area. Construction will avoid the small area of monbretia at one corner of the survey area, to prevent its inadvertent spread within Scilly.

Protected Species

The Isles of Scilly support a limited range of protected species. For instance, the otter *Lutra lutra*, for which this location looks ideal, has never been known in Scilly. There are no protected species known from the survey area, apart from a range of bat species which are known from the general area.

Bats are European Protected Species, and they use this small survey area solely for foraging. The Wildlife Trust has erected bat boxes and created tree trunk cavities for bats in a number of locations within 100m of the survey area, but there are no features suitable for bat roosting within the survey area.

The only woody vegetation is represented by two small grey willows, and two alders. The alder trees both have a trunk diameter less than 30 cm, and are not large enough to support any bats. The existing hide has never been used by bats. It has single planking walls and roof, with no available cavities or crevices which are likely to be occupied. No bats have ever been recorded in the main void of the hide itself. Three of the Wildlife Trust's rangers are experienced bat surveyors, and they have also checked the hide for any signs of bat occupation, such as droppings or urine stains, and no signs have been found.

As a result, it can be said with confidence that this hide replacement project will have no impact on any protected species.

Reference

Parslow, R & Benallick, I (2017) *The New Flora of the Isles of Scilly*. Parslow Press.