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Winter bird survey at Nea Meadows Local Nature Reserve, Highcliffe, Christchurch, Dorset

CGO Ecology Ltd

Christchurch

13th October 2025

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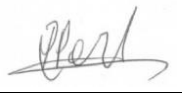
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Non-technical summary

Introduction

CGO Ecology Ltd (CGO) was instructed by Highcliffe and Walkford Parish Council (the Client) to conduct a winter bird survey at Nea Meadows Local Nature Reserve, Highcliffe, Dorset (the Site). The Ordnance Survey grid reference is SZ 2023 9381. The survey is to inform an updated Management Plan. The Client manages the Site on behalf of BCP Council, which is the owner and Local Planning Authority. Some British birds are legally protected outside the nesting season.

Methods

CGO conducted three survey visits, on 9th December 2024, 24th January 2025, and 3rd March 2025. On each visit, the surveyor walked a transect covering all areas of the Site to within 100m. They recorded all birds seen or heard, using a simplified version of the standard British Trust for Ornithology notation. Methods and effort levels were in line with accepted guidelines. Bird positions and flight-paths were marked on a paper plan, then digitised.

Results

A total of 21 bird species were recorded over three visits, represented by 64 to 79 individuals per visit. Herring gull, a 'red-listed' species (severely threatened), produced the highest count (23 individuals), albeit all of them flying overhead. Seven species are 'amber-listed': black-headed gull, greenfinch, mallard, moorhen, wood pigeon, and wren. Of these, mallard had the largest on-site count (13) of all species. The other 13 species are green-listed (low threat status), and none of the 20 species are strictly protected by law. No non-native species were recorded.

Conclusions and recommendations

The species list is typical for an urban/suburban coastal location comprising woodland, wetland, meadow, and amenity areas. There are a few notable absences from the list, such as house sparrow and starling (both threatened), and kingfisher (known to be present). Winter visitors like fieldfare and redwing also might have been expected. Counts for species which are less conspicuous outside the breeding season, such as wren, were probably under-recorded. The low diversity of wetland species is striking, but not unexpected.

The chief consideration now is: what can be done to encourage more species and greater numbers of birds to the Site, especially threatened species?

Berry and seed food sources are a great draw for birds during winter, and planting more food-rich shrubs and trees could draw over-wintering and resident species.

The wetland habitats on Site are currently suboptimal in condition and diversity. Significant tree removal will be required to enhance riparian habitats, and improve water quality. Dredging would also be beneficial as part of a holistic package of works.

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1. Introduction

CGO Ecology Ltd (CGO) was instructed by Highcliffe and Walkford Parish Council (HWPC, the Client) to conduct a winter bird survey at Nea Meadows Local Nature Reserve (LNR), Highcliffe, Dorset (the Site). The Ordnance Survey grid reference is SZ 2023 9381. The survey is to inform an updated Management Plan. The Client manages the Site on behalf of BCP Council, which is the owner and Local Planning Authority.



Figure 1 – Extent of Nea Meadows LNR.

All nesting birds and active nests are protected in the UK by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). Some species have additional protection under the same Act. Rarer and/or more threatened species are strictly protected by the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) (the Habitats Regulations). An LNR is a statutory designation under Section 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949.

2. Methods

The aim was to gather a baseline dataset on the presence of bird species during the winter months, which would inform an updated Management Plan for the Site.

CGO conducted three survey visits, on 9th December 2024, 24th January 2025, and 3rd March 2025. The surveyor was Dr Chris Gleed-Owen BSc (hons) PhD MCIEEM, Director and Principal Ecologist of CGO, ecological consultant since 2008 (17 years), and suitably-qualified and experienced surveyor.

On each visit, the surveyor walked a transect covering all areas of the Site to within 100m. The surveyor recorded all birds seen or heard, using a simplified version of the standard British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) notation. Method and effort levels were in line with online guidance from the Bird Survey & Assessment Steering Group (2025) (https://birdsurveyguidelines.org/). For commercial surveys, the standard effort level is four monthly visits, but given the nature of this survey, three visits were deemed sufficient. This can be augmented and updated in future.

Bird positions and flight-paths were marked on a paper plan, then digitised by CGO GIS Officer Jack Parker.

V	Date	Times	Sunrise	Sunset	Weather
1	09/12/2024	10:30-11:20	07:57	16:02	8ºC, 100% CC, 78% RH, W 2-3NE, showers
2	24/01/2025	12:45-13:20	07:53	16:45	11°C, 100% CC, 67% RH, W 3-5SW, bright
3	03/03/2025	11:30-12:15	06:46	17:52	8°C, 0% CC, 60% RH, W 0-1NE, sunny

Table 1 - Survey visit information. Abbreviations: V = visit number, ºC = air temperature, CC = cloud cover, RH = relative humidity, W = Beaufort wind speed and direction.

3. Results

A total of 21 bird species were recorded over three visits, represented by 64 to 79 individuals per visit. See Table 1 below.

Species recorded	Scientific name	Visit 1 09/12/2024	Visit 2 24/01/2025	Visit 3 03/03/2025	Peak count
Blackbird	*Turdus merula*	4	4	1	4
Black-headed gull	*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*			2	2
Blue tit	*Cyanistes caerulea*	10	8	6	10
Buzzard	*Buteo buteo*	1			1
Carrion Crow	*Corvus corone*	4	2	7	7
Dunnock	*Prunells modularis*			1	1
Feral pigeon	*Columba livia*			1	1
Goldfinch	*Carduelis carduelis*		4		4
Great tit	*Parus major*		4	3	4
Greenfinch	*Chloris chloris*			4	4
Grey heron	*Ardea cinerea*	1			1
Herring gull	*Larus argentatus*	8	6	23	23
Long-tailed tit	*Aegithalos caudatus*	5			5
Magpie	*Pica pica*	3	9	11	11
Mallard	*Anas platyrhynchos*	13	6	1	13
Moorhen	*Gallinula chloropus*	1	1	4	4
Nuthatch	*Sitta europaea*	3	1	1	3
Robin	*Erithacus rubecula*	2	6	6	6
Siskin	*Spinus spinus*		3		3
Wood pigeon	*Columba palumbus*	7	9	7	9
Wren	*Troglodytes troglodytes*	2	1	1	2
	Total	**64**	**64**	**79**	

Table 2 – Bird species recorded, and counts of individuals compared between survey visits.

One species – herring gull - was ‘red-listed’ (severely threatened) in the seabird addendum of the fifth Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC5) (Stanbury *et al,* 2024). It produced the highest count (23 individuals), albeit all of them flying overhead.

Seven species were ‘amber-listed’ (moderately threatened) in BoCC5 (Stanbury *et al,* 2021): black-headed gull, dunnock, greenfinch, mallard, moorhen, wood pigeon, and wren. Of these, mallard had the largest on-site count (13 individuals) of all species. The other 13 species were ‘green-listed’ (low threat status) by BoCC5. No non-native species were recorded.

None of the 21 species are listed on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), Annex I of the Birds Directive 1979, or otherwise strictly protected under the Habitats Regulations.

Species recorded	Birds Dir Ann I	WCA Sch 1	BoCC5 Red	BoCC5 Amber	BoCC5 Green
Blackbird					
Black-headed gull					
Blue tit					
Buzzard					
Carrion Crow					
Dunnock					
Feral pigeon					
Goldfinch					
Great tit					
Greenfinch					
Grey heron					
Herring gull					
Long-tailed tit					
Magpie					
Mallard					
Moorhen					
Nuthatch					
Robin					
Siskin					
Wood pigeon					
Wren					
Number of species			**1**	**7**	**13**
Percentage of species list			**5**	**33**	**62**

Table 3 – Threat status and protection levels for the bird species recorded.



Figure 2 – Results of the first survey, on 9th December 2024.



Figure 3 – Results of the second survey, on 24th January 2025.

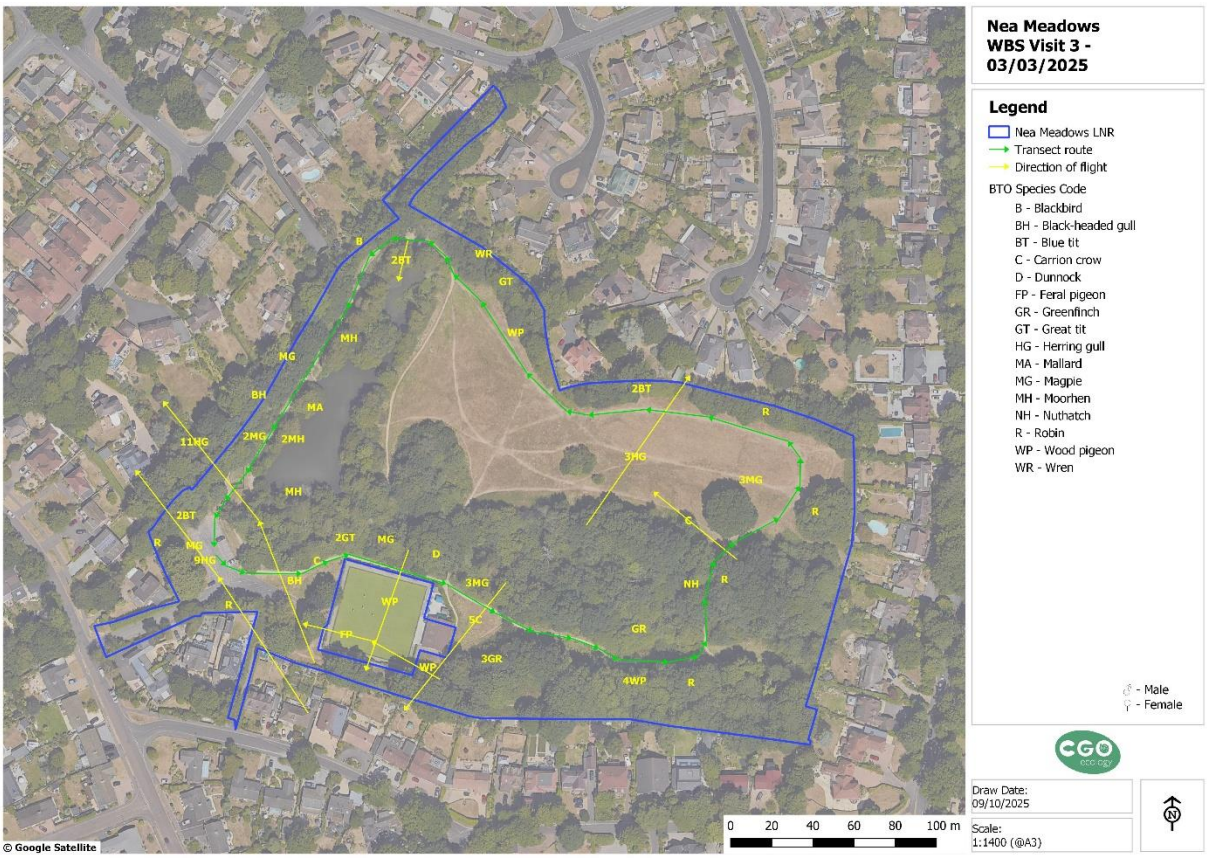


Figure 4 – Results of the third survey, on 3rd March 2025.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The species list is typical for an urban/suburban coastal location in the BCP Council area, and represents the range of habitats present at Nea Meadows: woodland, wetland, meadow, amenity grassland, shrubs, hedges, and individual trees.

There are a few notable absences, such as house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) and starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), which are red-listed (Stanbury *et al,* 2021). A few other species which are known to be present on Site, such as kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*), were not recorded. This can be attributed to the WBS effort level of only three visits.

Other species which might have been expected include winter visitors such as fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*) and redwing (*Turdus iliacus*). Attracting these species should be seen as an opportunity for enhancement, and a target for future management.

Counts for some species, like wren, were probably also under-recorded because they are less conspicuous and call less outside the breeding season.

The low diversity of wetland species is also striking, but not unexpected given the excessive tree shading and anaerobic wetland conditions. Again, this is an opportunity for enhancement.

The chief consideration now is: what can be done to encourage more species and greater numbers of birds to the Site, especially threatened species?

Berry and seed food sources are a great draw for birds during winter, and planting more food-rich shrubs and trees could draw over-wintering and resident species.

The wetland habitats on Site are currently suboptimal in condition and diversity. Significant tree removal will be required to enhance riparian habitats, and improve water quality. Dredging would also be beneficial as part of a holistic package of works.

5. References

Bird Survey & Assessment Steering Group (2025) *Bird Survey Guidelines for assessing ecological impacts, v.0.1.0.* https://birdsurveyguidelines.org

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