

Practical solutions for managing wildlife

Ecology Consultancy works closely with the rail industry to ease the process of working with protected species on site

With the growing number of rail infrastructure projects in the pipeline there are bound to be a significant number that will impact on ecology and wildlife. With good ecological management and advanced planning, whether for an embankment or a rail depot, this needn't be a constraint.

Typical wildlife on site

The nooks and crannies provided by construction materials, debris, vegetation and soil on railway embankments make them particularly attractive habitats for wildlife. On any one site you may find a selection of reptiles, nesting birds and small mammals, and possibly badgers, great crested newts and bats, all of which are listed as protected species.

Then of course there are plants such as Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed, which are both common to embankments and can spread like wild fire if not properly managed. Japanese knotweed is particularly aggressive and its removal is controlled by legislation to reduce the risk of infecting surrounding areas. If it spreads it can be difficult and expensive to eradicate and there could be restrictions on movement around the site until it is cleared.

Any protected species found on site must be handled with care to minimise impact on habitats and breeding cycles. In some cases they may need to be relocated temporarily and replaced at the end of the project. In others, such as the discovery of badger setts on site, contractors may have to find a way to work around them. The team of ecologists at Ecology Consultancy are specialists with extensive experience in the field and are licensed to deal with all protected species. As part of their commitment to working with the industry they all have the necessary safety and trackside training.

The importance of planning

To prevent any surprises down the line it is clearly in the interest of the contractor, on a development or maintenance project, to be fully aware of the wildlife on site as soon as possible. Ecology Consultancy has been working with rail engineering contractors and consultancies, on major rail and infrastructure projects for years. They work closely with the client to conduct all the necessary surveys, provide practical solutions, and reduce the risk of surprises.

Recent work conducted on the site of a proposed rail freight depot proved the value of bringing in early ecological expertise on what was a potentially difficult site. Although the site was on contaminated land, it was considered likely to have populations of protected species such as reptiles, bats and wintering birds. It was also on the edges of the Mersey estuary, an internationally important site designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Protection Area and a Ramsar site. It was therefore important to ensure that there were no indirect impacts from the project on the habitats or special interest features of the estuary.

Ecology Consultancy's managing director, John Newton, explained "We were brought in to conduct habitat and protected species surveys of the site. As a result we were able to make practical recommendations for cost-effective mitigation measures of the important habitats and species found.... As we were brought in at an early stage, we were able to identify issues while they could still be effectively managed, and it was much easier to incorporate practical solutions into the project."

He said, "At the end of the day, the sooner a contractor knows what they are dealing with on a site, the sooner we can help them to put the proper measures in place. Not only does it save them time, in the long run, it can also save them money." ■

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